

CONFIGURATIONS OF BLACK AND BROWN RACIALIZATION IN SURINAME

In this paper I analyze and bring into conversation the racialized entanglements of the two largest ethnic groups of Suriname, the Afro-Surinamese and Hindustani communities. Having entered the former Dutch colony at different, successive historical moments, these communities have been the subject of a Dutch divide-and-rule policy, which has resulted in cultural and racial antagonisms between these two groups, under a system of white supremacy.

By problematizing texts written from the perspective of these two racial groups, I come to terms with the intricate ways that embodying processes of racialization have informed and continue to inform identities within a racial schema that have instilled a deep understanding that whiteness is not a racial category. Yet, people of color are still effectively "deviating" from a normatively operating whiteness.

For long, race has been an uncomfortable non-starter in the Dutch context - generating powerful forces of white fragility - but recent activism and scholarship have paved the way for a critical understanding of the crucial processes of racialization. I will bring into dialogue the analyses with theories formulated by George Yancy, Gloria Wekker, and David Goldberg & Philomena Essed, to contribute to an affective criticality, in order to further the field of Critical Race Studies.

INTRODUCTION:

When African and Indian Surinamese use racist slurs for one another, not only causes this disturbing for outsiders, but the vehemence with which such language is used, opens up questions about why people who have been subjugated to the same white supremacist doctrines and practices enter into using reciprocal vile language. The rather common use of racist epithets among Surinamese in Suriname and the Netherlands urged me to look deeper into the intricacies of what I refer to as entanglements of racialization of African and Asian people, in short: how black and brown subjectivities are enmeshed into racial bondage under a system of white supremacy that is operating profoundly now, as it has in the past 500 years.

In this paper I will unpack some of the processes that underlie the complicated and intertwined histories and contemporaneities of African and South Asian people in a particular, but not unique setting of a so-called postcolonial social environment. Zooming in from an analysis of global colonial movements onto the analytical level of the subjective, lived realities of black and brown bodies, my main concern here today is the question how white colonial supremacy has managed to not only keep black and brown people in a sustained stranglehold of racial subjugation that perpetuates white normativity, but more importantly what can be done to undo racial hierarchies that cause so much pain and suffering.

In order to do this, I will first sketch a brief history of African and South Asian colonial socio-epistemologies. Then, I will discuss some similarities, differences, and conflicts that arise from the co-construction of racializations of African and South Asian people in Suriname. The resulting racialized practices give rise to the particular configuration of what I call a white-supremacized black and brown matrix, and I will further analyze how a deep and affective embodiment operates within the hierarchical configuration that festers due to these racial-colonial machinations. Finally, I will move away from theory and into the realm of practical solutions and tools for activism, because as an activist-academic, I feel it is crucial to transform a theoretical criticality with practical tools for societal change. I would like to stress that I will use some disturbing texts and images, but I wholeheartedly believe that we can only overcome racial subjugation by coming to terms with our racist world order by investigating our own embodied

racializations and how this is woven into intersubjective, more specifically, interracial, constructs.

SECTION ONE : HISTORICAL ENTANGLMENTS

Suriname is a *so-called* postcolonial space in the Caribbean which has been subjected to 320 years of European colonial rule. A plantation economy was organized for which hundreds of thousands of black and brown bodies were transported to the colony from many parts of the world. This has resulted in the presence of large African and South Asian communities in the Caribbean country, each community comprising about a third of the population. Having gained formal independence relatively recently, in 1975, British and Dutch colonial politics have shaped many aspects of socio-cultural and institutional life. And hence: this paper investigates why there continues to be a profound tension between the two largest racial groups of Suriname, i.e. the African and South Asian community. It would perhaps seem that – because all non-white groups have suffered under the same white Dutch rule – a sense of solidarity would have emerged.

In this first section I briefly sketch the period of arrival of African captives and South Asian indentured laborers in Suriname. In total, it is estimated that the Dutch captured about 500,000 Africans in the period between 1519 -1863. Many of these enslaved people were taken to the plantations in Suriname, most of which produced sugar, coffee, and cotton. Importantly, I would like to stress that as in many other parts of the colonized world, rebellions against the terror on colonial plantations were widespread in Suriname. Some enslaved people were able to flee the plantations and reach the interior of the Dutch colony, where Marron villages were founded, that functioned as continuing sites of resistance.

When the end of slavery was looming, the Dutch organizers of what I would refer to as racialized colonial exploitation did not have to invent a new system to be able to proceed with profiteering in the colony of Suriname. For centuries, black bodies had been imported from Africa, but after the abolition of slavery, they could follow the example of their British counterparts in neighboring British Guyana to lure and import brown bodies from British India to work the plantations. And so, British and Dutch colonial authorities made an agreement to ensure the steady import of humans to the colony of Suriname. In 1873 the first ship carrying South Asians arrived in Suriname, marking the period of arrival of about 34,000 people.

Having arrived in Suriname, it should be stressed that the former slave-owning planters were still in charge of the plantations at which Asian contracted laborers arrived. Crucially, they were subjected to a series of measures that would ensure their obedience and make sure they would stay put. One could not choose to leave the plantation without a written permission, and some workers who rebelled, were shot and killed by Dutch soldiers. The Asian indentured laborers from British India thus entered a colonial power structure that was a continuation of the plantation economy under the authority of the Dutch since 1652, the year when they took over power from the British. Most Afro-Surinamese had moved away from the plantations as soon as slavery was abolished, de facto in 1873. A new generation was born outside of the plantation context, of which one particular Afro-Surinamese would gain international attention.

SECTION II: AFRO-SURINAMESE RACIALIZATION

This section will introduce Cornelis Gerhard Anton de Kom, who was born on 22 February 1898 in Paramaribo and died on 24 April 1945 in the German concentration camp Sandbostel. During his life, he developed a unique political ideology based on anti-colonial and class struggle perspectives, which made him into an extremely influential revolutionary force whose legacy is, one could argue, increasingly being remembered. The sole Surinamese university, ADEK, or Anton de Kom University, is named after him, and his historically and affectively significant book *Wij Slaven van Suriname* (published in 1934) has been reprinted nine times, and is due to be published in English in 2019. ^[1]As a young man, in his early twenties, he went to work in Haiti, where he came into contact with discourses of the local négritude movement. In 1921, he went to the Netherlands, where he became active in class struggle movements; most notably he made important connections with the Dutch communist party, the only party during that era that openly advocated the independence of all Dutch colonies. Also, he encountered Indonesian students, who helped him to develop his anti-colonial mindset that would stimulate him to return to Suriname. When he did so, in 1933, the local economy was already fraught with tension due to high unemployment. De Kom had become an outspoken critic of the Dutch colonial authorities, so much so, that his every move was followed closely by the Dutch police from the moment he arrived. After he had opened an advice bureau to learn about the grievances of laborers in Suriname, he was promptly arrested, and locked up for several weeks - without a trial. His

reputation was such that a campaign began to take shape, and crowds gathered at the prison to demand his release. On 7 February 1933, a large crowd in front that had gathered at a central square in Paramaribo was attacked by the police. Official reports note that 2 people were killed and 20 wounded by shots fired by police, but this number is disputed. According to Ludwich van Mulier, “confessions of present civilians indicated that there were more than twenty dead people.” In a booklet commemorating Anton de Kom, van Mulier continues to note that “the blood that had flowed was not the blood of two dead civilians. There were more than 100 wounded and they were carried by tens. The civilians were killed were shot in the back” (45-46). After this escalation, de Kom was extradited back to the Netherlands, where he again organized his passionate politics in revolutionary leftist groups and continued to write his book *Wij Slaven van Suriname*.^[1] As the Second World War broke out, de Kom became active in the underground resistance movement against the Nazi-occupation of the Netherlands. According to his children, interviewed for documentary films about his life, he was betrayed and consequently arrested in 1944. He was subsequently deported to German concentration camps, first to Oranienburg-Sachsenhausen, and from there to the Neuengamme satellite camp Sandbostel. A few weeks before the end of the war, Anton de Kom died of tuberculosis, and was buried in a mass grave outside of the camp. In 1960, his remains were brought to Loenen in the Netherlands, where he was reburied at the so-called Cemetery of Honours.

In order to introduce what I believe was a fundamental *condition* for colonial rule in Suriname – structural racialized violence – I will present one of many accounts from *We Slaves of Suriname*¹ in which de Kom graphically describes the practice of subjugation, torture, and death of enslaved people on the plantations of Suriname. As this chapter unfolds, I hope to elucidate crucial practices terror that existed at Surinamese plantations, a terror that was so instrumental in shaping racial, social, and political relations in the Dutch colony, and indeed in the Netherlands itself. These relations are indispensable when one wants to understand the historical and current antagonisms between Afro-Surinamese and Hindustani, and between these two groups and the white Dutch colonizers.

¹ Kom, Anton de. *Wij Slaven van Suriname*. Uitgevers-Mij Contact, 1934.

The text provides a perspective on Dutch colonialism in Suriname from an Afro-Surinamese perspective, which was unique and from the perspective of Dutch authorities, dangerous. They feared that his critique of the colonial system and its acts of terror on the plantations and beyond would ignite revolt. De Kom writes about injustice in an era when in many other places around the world revolutionary and anti-colonial movements were developing, and feels, it seems, compelled to make his contribution. Some quotes that will be analyzed are rather lengthy, but to get an understanding of de Kom's style and critical content, I wish to give his voice prominence in this book. Also, some of de Kom's descriptions could be seen as rather graphic, as are some of the images that I have decided to use:



Figure 1 shows one of the methods used to punish and subjugate enslaved people in Suriname. The image was made in the former Portuguese colony of Brazil, parts of which were once ruled by the Dutch. Many ties existed between the two colonies, one of which is the fact that more than a quarter of plantations in Suriname were once owned by Portuguese Jews who came from

Brazil. The ‘Spaanse bok’ technique used evokes powerful memories of the sustained terror among descendants of Afro-Surinamese. At certain central locations in Paramaribo, the practice of torture was perpetrated, partly to serve as a means to instill fear in Afro-Surinamese enslaved people who would be able to hear the screams as the torture was enacted. The image could be said to have a performative character, as the practice was such that the duration of the flogging could be quite extensive, which prolonged the agony and the horror that the enslaved person had to undergo. The image does not represent a singular moment in time but is historically and necessarily part of a process that is cemented in a matrix of pain and total subordination, and a show of colonial power. The racialized colonial power relation that brought the enslaved person in that horrific subhuman mode contrasts starkly with the perpetrator of violence who in this visual image is even more clearly highlighted due to the coloring of his garments. The enslaved person – as well as the black people in the background who seem to be engaged in a similar practice – through the dehumanizing configuration engenders the horror that was inherent to the system of slavery and which was engrained in a collective consciousness. Such practices have left enduring scars on the cultural history that was to follow in Suriname. Only relatively recently have such images been chosen to be on public display in Suriname, for instance in the museum at the Fortress New Amsterdam near Paramaribo.

Gradually, the Dutch realized that the vastness of the land and the subsequent geographical isolation of the Marron groups could not be won by a sustained military campaign alone, and so they initiated a politics that had at its tactical core a tried and tested recipe that been described already in Roman times:

“Divide and conquer. The greatest merit of Mauricius was, however, that he introduced a new tactic, based on the famous principle: divide et impera. The basis of this was that they had to deliver a major blow and totally destroy their villages. When the Marrons were left in confusion by this, it was attempted to broker a peace deal, and then attack the left-over Marrons together. Above all, he wanted to prevent that several rebellious tribes would unite. That is why he wanted to declare a part of them as independent and free, yes, to charm them with all kinds of compensations, in order to persecute those who were left out of the peace agreement” (76-77)

The governor Mauricius thus attempted to divide the Marron groups and was partially successful. Over the years, an additional division between Afro-Surinamese groups started to emerge, namely a rift between those Afro-Surinamese who remained on the plantations (and who, after abolition of slavery, partly went to live in Paramaribo), and the Marron groups in the interior. The derogatory and racist term “Bosnegers” (“forest negroes”) was used to designate the several Marron groups, which was also employed by some Afro-Surinamese people who were inculcated with Dutch terminology by attending Dutch education:

“Because the Mauricius divide-and-conquer politics bore fruit, and a division occurred, which will be difficult to bridge. When, during our youth, my father returned from the gold diggers camp, he often brought along *Djoekas*, and *Djoekas* came to visit our farm when they were in town. We, as kids, looked up to them with some fearful curiosity, as if they were savages who might do anything to us. When they talked, we did not understand their language. In school, we told about the news that *Djoekas* had been to our house. We mocked their ignorance. We felt greatly superior to the *Bosnegers*, because we had been taught how to read and write and because we wore European clothes. Yet still, this noble art to write only served to sign the hated *livrets* of the “Balata Compagnieën Suriname en Guyana,” whereby the worker de Kom or Bioeu or Lichtveld lowered himself to number x or y” (86-87)

This example indicates that a division between the Creole Afro-Surinamese and Marron Afro-Surinamese already was operating in de Kom’s lifetime. We can assume that because of the proximity and internalization of Dutch colonial norms and values, families like de Kom’s were geared towards mimicking cultural traits. Wearing “European clothes” and knowing how to write (in Dutch), then, become markers of “progress” and “civilization,” concepts that the Marron populations apparently lacked, and which instilled in de Kom the perception that he felt superior to the so-called “Djoekas.”

It should be noted that the names of Afro-Surinamese are to a large extent derived from names stemming from Dutch names of plantation owners and other Dutch figures in the colonial world. Sometimes, as one scholar once told me, names would be altered, switched around, which is what allegedly happened to the name de Kom, which is derived from the Jewish name Mok, which was arguably a name connected to one of the Jewish plantations in Suriname.

Yet still, we played as if we were our master's monkeys while wearing those European clothes. And the Wild-West films in the cinemas, the tinsel foil of the pleasures of the city, we just a cheap surrogate for the perpetual beauty of the wild nature where those despised Djoekas lived. And our own disdain was one of the strongest links in the chain that bound us to the Western mode of production. Only then, when the old slave mentality would be banished from our hearts, will the Surinamese be able to muster dignity" (86-87)

De Kom enters into a critical mode – in particular considering the era he was writing his texts, and being Afro-Surinamese - that questions a dominant Dutch epistemology and opens up a discussion which oppressive efforts colonialism had to make to be able to exert its power in the first place:

"A Dutch textbook about the history of a Dutch colony informs its readers. "After the slaves were finally and completely suppressed, a period of tranquility and prosperity seemed to have dawned." Tranquility and prosperity for whom ? Bought with how much blood, with how much cruelty, with how much destruction !" (89)

In the next section, the arrival of Hindustani is set against this backdrop of racial hierarchization. One prominent Hindustani figure will be highlighted to exemplify the emerging social and racial framework of these Asian newcomers.

SECTION III: HINDUSTANI RACIALIZATION

The novelist, essayist, journalist, and television host Anil Ramdas (1958-2012) continues to stir the imagination of Hindustani and non-Hindustani in Suriname and the Netherlands alike. Five years after his self-chosen death, a literary prize was named after him in the Netherlands, an event that was deemed 'controversial' by many who Ramdas had made his enemy. Because as one of the few Hindustani publicists and public figures of his generation, bitterly living the migrant experience, his outspokenness was a true euphemism. He wrote in an unconventional way, critiquing everybody, including his own cultural heritage and racial group, as well as mercilessly hammering on his own misconceptions, failures, and pity.

His discursive legacy proves to be an enormous wealth for anyone wishing to analyze and understand the many centuries of intertwined Indian, Surinamese, and Dutch history that he addresses. I have chosen his works as they signify to me a quintessential set of tools to decipher the multiple, overlapping, and conflicting cultural affiliations and identities, that constitute Hindustani subjectivity. Indian, Surinamese, and Dutch history, politics, cultures inform a hard to grasp and continuously changing amalgamation that forges a mindset and practices which, then, give rise to what many see as a perpetual in-betweenness, an evolving hy- or tribridity of cultural identity. It is of cardinal importance to come to terms with the issue that was touched upon the previous chapter, namely that the arrival of Hindustani in Suriname, inserted their cultural trajectory into an already existing racialized colonial hierarchy. Ramdas, in his typical and unconventional way, writes quite openly about the tensions between Afro-Surinamese and Hindustani, and offers a critique on what he sees as the hypocrisies of in particular progressive white Dutch people. Through a critical analysis of the texts written by Ramdas, a complex and at times explosive cultural configuration appears that seems to be enmeshed into Surinamese society, which struggles to come to terms with more than 300 years of colonial exploitation. Not only do the works of Anil Ramdas indicate in my opinion an importance to radically question contemporary historiography, they also give an impetus to re-evaluate the ways dominant colonial epistemologies have entered Dutch and Surinamese society. Memories of colonial history are too often forgotten, distorted, and instrumentalized for ideological reasons, yet younger generations of Hindustani have picked up Ramdas's critique on dominant Dutch, Surinamese, as well as Indian modes of addressing colonial history. New approaches evolve and are formulated, new ways of coming to terms with an often painful history that has left ongoing marks on Hindustani show that memory is a process, that it is deeply relational and social, and that the agentic energies of those who were 'forgotten' in the process of writing and practicing coloniality, now employ an agentic thrust, *seize the time*, and demand changes to alter perceptions on their own histories, and on Surinamese and Dutch society as a whole. This process of what I feel is an act of countering colonial amnesia could be seen as analogous to what Charles Mills has described as 'epistemologies of ignorance :

“Thus in effect. on matters related to race, the Racial Contract² prescribes for its signatories an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made, part of what it means to be constructed as "white" [the metamorphosis of the sociopolitical contract), part of what it requires to achieve Whiteness, successfully to become a white person (one imagines a ceremony with certificates attending the successful rite of passage: "Congratulations, you're now an official white person!"), is a cognitive model that precludes self-transparency and genuine understanding of social realities (18).

The very practice (a relatively recent phenomenon) of Surinamese and Surinamese-Dutch academics and activists, writers and artists, to begin to question dominant Dutch colonial histories (where a focus tends to be on the ‘Golden Century’ of Dutch global trade. i.e. the Seventeenth Century and its heroic explorers and tradesmen) as they write and act against the grain, thereby undoing Dutch epistemologies of ignorance. This process has only begun to materialize in recent years, and much decolonial work needs to be done to give voice to the perspectives of the formerly colonized peoples and their descendants.

Not only do the works of Anil Ramdas indicate in my opinion an importance to radically question contemporary historiography, they also give an impetus to re-evaluate the ways dominant colonial epistemologies have entered Dutch and Surinamese society. Memories of colonial history are too often forgotten, distorted, and instrumentalized for ideological reasons,

² Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract*. Cornell UP, 1999. In this seminal text, Mills defines the racial contract as “ The "Racial Contract," then, is intended as a conceptual bridge between two areas now largely segregated from each other: on the one hand, the world of mainstream (i.e., white) ethics and political philosophy, preoccupied with discussions of justice and rights in the abstract, on the other hand, the world of Native American, African American, and Third and Fourth World³ political thought, historically focused on issues of conquest, imperialism, colonialism, white settlement, land rights, race and racism, slavery, jim crow, reparations, apartheid, cultural authenticity, national identity, indigenismo, Afrocentrism, etc” (4).

yet younger generations start to pick up Ramdas's critique. Ramdas famously positioned himself in-between many worlds:

“Here I am colored, but not in Paramaribo. In Paramaribo I am Hindustani, but not in India. In India I am Western, but not in the Netherlands. In the pre-modern world these kinds of issues are not thrown up, because people did not travel such distances” (*De Papegaai* 168³)

Growing up in a small town, he then moved to the capital city Paramaribo, where tensions between racial groups became more apparent, as the city was a site of interracial encounters, exemplified by an interview that a Hindustani researcher made some years ago:

“Go Pran’Alesi. “When the children in school said: “What are you doing in school. Go pran’alesi (*Go and plant rice*). Then I answered: “San, mi o prani dan yu e go vreet. Go prani yu srefi.” (*What, I plant and then you go and devour it. Go and plant yourself*). I was brave. I defended other Hindustani children because they were too mellow and afraid. Hindustani children were teased often, but were not tough enough to stave others off. I then said: “Muhavá kánha ná khole he ?” (*Why don't you open your mouth ?*). The Hindustani of later generations were such cowards, I tell you. But the Kalkatiyás: they were courageous and proud people ! They knew how to fight for their rights. Some of those city children could not stand it that Hindustani also went to school and were good pupils. We had to stay on the countryside and do agricultural work, as if we could not do anything else. The dark-skinned Creole girls were not that bad, but those maratthins (*mulatresses*), they were the real bitches ! There was one girl named Michelly who used to pull on my braids. Of course out of jealousy, because she did not have straight hair and an ugly skin colour, and looked down upon us, at us children who were darker skinned” (Mrs. Rudrani) (296)

The interviewee Mrs. Rudrani is clearly very outspoken and criticizes the generations who came after the first generation of *Kalkatiyas*. It is difficult to portray an image of the period that she

³ Anil Ramdas, *De Papegaai, de Stier, en de Klimmende Bougainvillea*. De Bezige Bij, 1992.

narrates about, because there are very few sources. From personal contact with Chan Choenni, I learned that it was already difficult to find Hindustani who could narrate what they had heard from their parents, who had arrived in Suriname, as the last official ship arrived in Suriname in 1916, now more than 100 years ago. Yet, the amount of uprisings, and most notably the Mariënborg uprising in 1902, indicates that many of the rebels must have been of the first generation.

What is also striking is the language of *colonial racialization* that she employs, when she speaks about “the girl Michelly.” Already present in British India, powerful dynamics of a racialized hierarchical schema can be said to have been imposed onto that society, which had repercussions on the local population there, in terms of how they came to perceive the matrix of skin color and power/prestige. This racialized hierarchy, then, was taken to Suriname, where it was fused with another white European self-image and projection, namely that of the white Dutch self. Within that racialized hierarchy, white Dutch people occupied the upper echelon, and it could be argued that the newcomers from Asia – Chinese, Javanese, and Hindustani – could, due to their post-slavery status, assume a position *in-between* the racial schema that had already developed in Suriname for more than 200 years during the era of slavery. Following Kendi’s⁴ analyses of the genealogy of racist ideas in the U.S., I argue that racist ideas should be blamed for the denigrating remark on Michelly, as opposed to a labelling of Mrs. Rudrani as being *racist*. Kendi defines a racist idea as “any concept that regards one racial group as inferior or superior to another racial group in any way” (13). This view, I believe, should be seen as related to but different from a more general definition of racism that I employ (cf. DiAngelo⁵), whereby racism refers to the systemic unequal power relations between one racial group and another, from which racial disparities arise. This, then, refers in the colonial context to white racism, and cannot be equated with the societal positions of Afro-Surinamese and Hindustani in Suriname. As

⁴ Kendi, Ibram X. *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*. Nation Books, 2016.

⁵ DiAngelo, Robin. *White Fragility: Why It’s so Hard for White People to Talk about Race*.

Beacon Press, 2018.

mentioned, the racial power relation, the hierarchical power structure posits the white Dutch racial group at the top in that hierarchy, hence the ongoing operations of white normativity. As a preliminary model of racial hierarchization in Suriname, I would like to pose that white supremacy as a system has left its racializing legacies in Suriname in the sense that a color scheme is operative in which darker-skinned people occupy the lowest positions in that hierarchy. Personal experiences and contact with many members of several racial groups in Suriname has led me conclude that Marrons (darker-skinned than Creoles) are very much looked down upon by many in Suriname. And within some racial groups, such as the Hindustani one, powerful colorism differentiates between lighter-skinned Hindustani (sometimes associated with the highest, Brahmin caste) and darker-skinned Hindustani. And although some Creoles might be lighter-skinned than some Hindustani, there seems to be a powerful derogatory notion about Creoles among many Hindustani. Such assumptions are obviously controversial but rely on observations and conversations with Surinamese people over many years. Many racial epithets are still common, such as the word ‘kafri’ used by Hindustani for Afro-Surinamese people, and the word ‘coolie’ used to negatively point to Hindustani people.

A more elaborate research trajectory, however, is necessary to establish how genealogies and entanglements of racialization have operated and continue to operate in Suriname, and, consequently, in the Netherlands. A recent study that is about to be published in Suriname will shed more light on the perceptions of the four largest racial groups in Suriname, namely the Hindustani, Creole, Marron, and Javanese Surinamese. In a paper that I will publish at a later stage, I will incorporate some of the data and analyses of this particular sociological study that was undertaken in 2019 in Suriname. For the discussion here, the complexities of the colonial Surinamese society urge us to at least observe the differences in status that were produced by differing histories and societal positions. The racial disparities that came into being by the construction of a racial hierarchy that was imposed onto Hindustani, resulted in the overtly racializing (i.e. stemming from a racist idea, and then being internalized ‘from the outside inwards’) phrase Mrs. Rudrani uses, when she employs the term “an ugly skin color.”

In images and particularly films about Hindustani people – most clearly seen in the commercial Indian cinema of Mumbai (‘Bollywood’), a reflection of a colorized schema comes to the fore. Immensely popular in Suriname as well, such films were shown in small cinemas, and the many ‘fair-skinned’ actors and actresses arguably feed into the perceptive and self-perceptive mental

processes that inform how people see the world and themselves. If a continuous image is being portrayed whereby heroes, heroines, gods, and goddesses have what is viewed as a light skin, the lower end of the color scheme is then, as I contend, taken by those with a darker complexion. In other words, a more *melanined* appearance is affiliated with the opposite of what “an ideal” aesthetic should be, and consequently Hindustani people and many Afro-Surinamese are then set on a lower stage than those with less melanine. To accentuate the racialized power relations on the plantation, I introduce a still from a film that will highlight this key issue.



Figure 2: Mariëburg Uprising depicted in the documentary/fictional film "Het geheim van Mariëburg - Cry of a cursed plantation" (2013).

Figure 2 displays a still from a film about the Mariëburg uprising. What this particular image radiates and feeds into a collective memory of Hindustani is an enactment of colonial power relations in Suriname. The white Dutch man on horseback and the vantage point of the camera could be said to symbolize the systemic oppressive nature of the colonial relation. The hierarchy that is often sidelined by dominant narratives foregrounding “improved labor relations” on the plantations, seeps into consciousness and give rise to the idea that labor conditions were

premised on the immanent use of force. Employees did not simply sign a contract as workers endowed with certain rights. Certainly, laborers were paid for their work, yet a constant threat of punishment informed the colonial relationship. It can be deducted from the tension in the image, that moments of solidarity among the workers and attempts to confront Dutch authority laid the very inequalities that were inherent to the plantation economy. It should be noted that the race relations in the still – exemplified by white authority versus brown subservience – was integrally taken from the colony of British India and inserted in the Dutch colony of Suriname. As can be seen, a complex racialized hierarchy became operative in Suriname. In the next section, I will elaborate on some theoretical underpinnings.

SECTION IV: DISCUSSION ON WHITE/BLACK/BROWN RACIAL EMBODIED-ENTANGLED CONFIGURATIONS

In an article written by Essed and Goldberg⁶ an important notion is discussed which arguably is central for the development of racialized subjectivities, namely the process of cultural cloning. They argue that:

“Cloning is widely considered only to be a biological discourse. Few, however, have paid attention to the cultural contexts that have made cloning conceivable. The relation between the biological and cultural considerations of cloning are revealed by the anxieties conjured up by the prospects of cloning human beings. By cloning we understand the reproduction of sameness which is deeply ingrained in the organization and reproduction of culture. The ease with which cloning has been taken up in contemporary thinking has been made possible by the widespread saturation of the normative assumption of socio-cultural sameness underpinning much of mainstream modern thinking around politics, law, education, management, aesthetics, the military and processes of production. We consider the cultural considerations regarding the reproduction of sameness and the implications of cloning for issues of social injustice” (1066).

6. Philomena Essed & David Theo Goldberg (2002) Cloning cultures: the social injustices of sameness, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 25:6, 1066-1082, DOI: [10.1080/0141987022000009430](https://doi.org/10.1080/0141987022000009430)

Building on the Surinamese colorist hierarchy that was complicated by the arrival of Hindustani in Suriname, the ‘reproduction of sameness’ solidified differences between racial groups in Suriname and conditioned a societal structure whereby groups were willingly and unwillingly marked and set onto a pyramid-like social stratification. Sameness and difference become strengthened in particular because of the strong geographical and spatial distribution of racial groups in Suriname. The Other then becomes a phenomenon that is fed with a wide range of prejudiced notions, and a white self continues to emerge as the non-plus-ultra within the racial hierarchy.

The particular Dutch colonial context that frames the previous section, should be seen in light of a typical Dutchness that was elaborated by Gloria Wekker in her groundbreaking book *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race*⁷, in which she argues:

“Forgetting, glossing over, supposed color blindness, an inherent and natural superiority vis-à-vis people of color, assimilating: those are, broadly speaking, the main Dutch models that are in operation where interaction with racialized/ethnicized others is concerned. Persistently, an innocent, fragile, emancipated white Dutch self is constructed versus a guilty, uncivilized, barbaric other, which in the past decades has been symbolized mostly by the Islamic other, but at different times in the recent past blacks (i.e., Afro-Surinamese, Antilleans, and Moluccans) have occupied that position” (15).

My argument is that a powerful construction of an innocent white Dutch self – a whiteness that is not named - is comfortably instrumentalized to wholly negate racialized dynamics that are fueled by visual and bodily markers that bind people into racial categories. Sara Ahmed has elaborated on the workings of racial embodiment, in particular how the white gaze operates⁸. Bodies, she explains, become “the object of the hostile white gaze. In this sense, [and she analyzes Fanon here], “race ‘interrupts’ the corporeal schema. Alternatively, we could say that ‘the corporeal schema’ is already racialized; in other words, race does not just interrupt such a schema, but

⁷ Wekker, Gloria. *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race*. Duke UP, 2016.

⁸ Sara Ahmed, ‘A Phenomenology of Whiteness’ *Feminist Theory* 8(2) (154).

structures its mode of operation.” She concludes that because of the ubiquity of such processes, “...bodies are shaped by histories of colonialism, which makes the world ‘white’, a world that is inherited, or which is already given before the point of an individual’s arrival. This is the familiar world, the world of whiteness, as a world we know implicitly. Colonialism makes the world ‘white’, which is of course a world ‘ready’ for certain kinds of bodies, as a world that puts certain objects within their reach. Bodies remember such histories, even when we forget them. Such histories, we might say, surface on the body, or even shape how bodies surface. Race then does become a social as well as bodily given, or what we *receive* from others as an inheritance of this history” (154).



Figure 3 shows a picture that I took while visiting Delhi, India. Many hundreds, of these advertisements could be seen all over the city and most probably many thousands more all over the South Asian subcontinent. Such advertisements are an example of what I believe is a growing trend (partly because of the rise of social media networks) of the consumption of products that are focusing non-white people throughout the world. Powerful visual images of what an ‘ideal human being’ should look like are thus disseminated globally. Whiteness, I argue, is elevated to a norm that figures in a globally constructed consciousness, and which builds on hierarchies of white superiority that have been constructed by European colonial politics and discourses.

What is striking, I note, is that in a society like Suriname, where white people now only constitute about percent of the population⁹, structures seem to be in place that were carved up by colonialism and continue to reflect what I would call white-supremacized entangled-embodied racial configuration. When we recall Yancy’s famous elevator moment, perhaps we can think of *societies as elevators*, whereby space has become a reflection of white identities and entitlement. Whiteness, then, following Yancy’s analysis¹⁰ of an account DuBois gave us, becomes an “expansive modality,” that is “lived with epistemic certainty” forging a “readymade sacrosanct site that defined and excluded differences.” Embodiment, following this analogy, is “itself a site of white racist dramaturgy, an enactment of a role, which actually differentially valued and exaggerated differences,” prompting “an always already sense of entitlement.” And through these processes, white bodies attain “a corporeal entitlement to spatiality” (55). I see many so-called post-colonial spaces as fundamentally “racially carved it up, as it were, distorting it,

⁹ See: <https://web.archive.org/web/20141113144057/http://www.statistics-suriname.org/index.php/statistieken/downloads/category/30-censusstatistieken-2012?download=125:ressorten-per-district-naar-etnische-groep-census-8>

See: <https://www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/nl/sr/sr002nl.pdf>

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¹⁰ Yancy, George. *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race*. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2008.

marking it with [her] white presence. Yancy uses a DuBoisian account of arrival of a white girl to understand racial embodiment: “Embodying space in this raced way, she demarcated her immediate lived space as clean, untouchable, privileged. Her refusal, although clearly disclosed, simultaneously involved a process of concealment. In other words, there is a white racist dominant history of knowledge production that established her white identity as secure. Having unconsciously internalized what it means to be “normal” (that is, white), her identity was sealed, “leak-proof”; she had become a site of a monadic structure who came to believe that her identity and her whiteness were nonrelational. Of course, to remain ignorant of the dynamic relational basis upon which her white identity was actually predicated functions as the desideratum of whiteness. Indeed, she has come to live her whiteness, her identity, as an unconditioned state of being.” This state of being, I contend, is perpetuated in so-called post-colonial contemporary race relations, where a white unconditioned socio-ontological entitlement has not ceased to exist, structuring mindsets and perspectives.

Yancy continues to argue that: “White identity, in other words, constitutes a site of value-creating force that elides the historical contingency of such values.”

Societies have become sites that animate “white racist scripts on cue, because they have become habituated modes of bodily enactment.” These modes, then, “...enact particular somatic responses characteristic of white bodies that transact with nonwhite bodies within normative spaces that are designed to demarcate and create a wedge between normative white bodies and “anomalous” nonwhite bodies. Like the white woman in the elevator, she lives her body through inherited legitimation narratives and unconscious habits” (56). To transpose these processes, again, to Surinamese society, one has to imagine that even now, almost two generations after independence, Dutch is the only official language, and the judicial, administrative, and educational system are basically copies of the old Dutch colonial ones. A social and physical geography, in other words, has been shaped and continues to shape what Yancy refers to as an “preestablished axiological and ontological cartography that imposes fixed coordinates that both reward and punish. The white order of things appears to place categorical demands on human reality” (58).”

Despite an attempt by the Surinamese government to create an overarching “Surinamese identity,” the frameworks of whiteness in which racial groups meander and collide, have not

been disrupted. As mentioned in my introduction, racial slurs dominate many conversations and even more so structure people's mindsets. An urge to construct a wonderful rainbow future, reflecting the myth of economic progress as a healing force, has not subsided the practices that align black and brown people against one another. I would even argue that the white body - resulting from the dissemination of white cultures throughout the world - continues to be the apex of human aesthetic beauty, as the hypes of skin-whitening, hair-bleaching, and wearing colored lenses, I contend, indicate. Far beyond Suriname and India, a practice of "becoming white" and adjusting to white standards of beauty, have gained much traction.¹¹

Since the arrival of European colonists in Suriname in the 17th Century, ethnic groups have - as we have seen - been racialized, attributed characteristics based on the visual/bodily appearance

¹¹ At this point I would like to bring in a comedian who arguably has been at the forefront of a decolonial turn. During a show titled "Fear of a Brown Planet" he argues that there can be no such thing as reverse racism and highlight the practice of skin-bleaching, hair-bleaching, and wearing colored contact lenses: "I could be a reverse racist, if I wanted to, all I would need would be a, uh, time machine, right? And, uh, what I'd do is I'd get in my time machine, I'd go back in time to before Europe colonized the world, right? And uh, I'd convince the leaders of Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Central and South America to uh, invade and colonize Europe, right? Just occupy them, steal their land, resources; set up some kind of like, I don't know, trans Asian slave trade where we exported white people to work on giant rice plantations in China — just ruin Europe over the course of a couple centuries so, all their descendants would want to migrate out and live in places where black and brown people come from.

But of course, in that time, I'd make sure I set up systems that privilege black and brown people at every conceivable social, political and economic opportunity, and white people would never have any hope of real self-determination. Just occupy them, steal their land, resources; set up some kind of like, I don't know, trans Asian slave trade where we exported white people to work on giant rice plantations in China — just ruin Europe over the course of a couple centuries so, all their descendants would want to migrate out and live in places where black and brown people come from.

But of course, in that time, I'd make sure I set up systems that privilege black and brown people at every conceivable social, political and economic opportunity, and white people would never have any hope of real self-determination.

Just every couple of decades make up some fake war as an excuse to go and bomb them back to the Stone Age and say it's for their own good because their culture's inferior. And then just for kicks, subject white people to colored standards of beauty so they end up hating the color of their own skin, eyes and hair.

And if, after hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years of that, I got up on stage and said, "Hey, what's the deal with white people? Why can't they dance?" That would be reverse racism."

The YouTube video featuring Aamer Rahman can be seen here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dw_mRaIHb-M&t=57s

which then became internalized and inform the subject itself. A pattern that can be observed in many parts of the colonized world was and is still visible in Surinamese society, a pattern that has been described by Getachew¹² in the second chapter of her illuminating book on self-determination and postcoloniality as follows: “ In setting the stage for the history of anticolonial worldmaking, this chapter establishes the problem of empire as racialized international hierarchy and destabilizes the idea that the universal principle of self-determination had Wilsonian origins” (10). And like in other, often critical and ‘neo-decolonial’ analyses of racial configurations in the so-called postcolonial world, a move towards establishing a primacy of the link between colonialism and race can be observed:

“International racial hierarchy facilitated the domination of black and colored colonial subjects through alien rule. And this system of domination, according to Du Bois, ought to be understood as a form of enslavement. The colonial subject could “justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery” for the benefit of the “white people of the world.”

This dual critique of empire as a form of enslavement and international racial hierarchy emerged in the context of renewed interest in the history of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery among black intellectuals” (79-80). The long history of white racial-colonial domination in Suriname, then, urges us to think about how to undo racial hierarchies that work beyond the arbitrary dates of ‘decolonization’ such as the year 1975 in the case of Suriname.

The section of this paper has tried to show how powerful racializing forces perpetuate a racial dynamic, which is visible to this present day. This is in contradiction with the Surinamese Constitution (based on that of the Netherlands), which states that:¹³

“The Republic of Suriname stimulates the struggle against colonialism and racism, an analysis of race relations indicates that racial hierarchies remain firmly embedded in the Surinamese society.” However, discursively, racial characteristics are reproduced. A recent study performed by the Anton de Kom University, which was designed to investigate race relations between the largest ethnic groups of Suriname (Creoles, Hindustani, Marrons, and Javanese) clearly indicates

¹² Adom Getachew. *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination*. Princeton UP, 2019.

See: <https://www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/nl/sr/sr002nl.pdf>

a wide array of racial designations for one another. The outcome of the 400 respondents are being analyzed further, and personal with the contact principal investigator has resulted in a preliminary conclusion that the constructed ‘national unity’ of Suriname, based on mutual respect between the ethnic groups, is largely shattered by the results. Interestingly, the vantage point of the study are not the concepts of race/racism, but of ethnicity/ethnocentrism. Again, in the latter case, following critical race theorists such as Yancy and Martín Alcoff, ethnicity refers to cultural traits, and race to the bodily/visual. The daily encounters in Suriname, I argue, are precisely based on the question to which racial group one belongs, and this is entirely based on visual markers. Inextricably intertwined with the visual, then, a life-long discursive history and all its historical and social associations are then mobilized, consciously and unconsciously, which, I contend, continues to co-construct a racial hierarchy, which deviates from the cultural characteristics that are assigned to a group, rather, they are initiated from the moment that a person can be categorized in a racial group. In this sense, bodily and visual markers are the starting point of social encounters, and they condition the framework in which further social interaction occurs.



*Figure 4: In this still we can see the two protagonists from the 1976 Pim de la Parra film *Wan Pipel*, Roy and Rubia, played by Diana Gangaram Panday and Borger Breeveld. Several layers of controversy emanate from this particular image. Rubia assumes a docile and subordinate posture, in what is an enactment of a traditional submissive female role. Roy, in contrast, expresses a typical dominant male posture, while the gendered relation between the two is strengthened by their relative positioning. The submissive stereotype that Rubia displays feeds into a more general stereotype towards Hindustani as a racialized group, whereby a meek and subservient characteristic is sometimes foregrounded. Contrast this with narratives from the uprisings at plantations, and one immediately can debunk the cliché, I would contend. The filmmaker, I believe, was not particularly concerned with such gendered displays of inequality but intended to disrupt powerful anti-miscegenation moralities. From the analyses in this chapter and the previous one, one can deduct that this image would have been, and is, deemed to be a daring image of cross-racial behavior. In a society where racial antagonisms have been carefully stimulated by the Dutch, instrumentalized as a willful divide and conquer politics, the*

director took a bold step to negate the tensions between Hindustani and Afro-Surinamese and brought to the public what many saw as a breach of conventions, to say the least. A thorough analysis is needed to trace the complex genealogy of these race relations, in particular how white Dutch authorities were able to create conditions for the enabling of, arguably, practice of inculcating Surinamese racial groups with their particular visions on racial hierarchies.

CONCLUSION

The previous sections lead to the question...what can be done to curb these racializing processes ? How turn the tide of hundreds of years of racial colonial imprints, scripts, and imagery ? How does one convince people that black- or brown-facing is deeply racist ? Below are some answers as to what could be done.

In conclusion, I hope to have clarified that a colonial imposition of hierarchized racial schemas still operates powerfully as exemplified by a space such as Suriname.

A process towards overcoming – disentangling – the harmful racializing hierarchies could begin with a radical reconsideration of educational programs. Not only as regards formal education, but a bold and critical reconfiguring of dominant epistemologies and practices could be forged on other levels as well, at home, in community settings, through media and social media.

These efforts, hopefully aided by militantly outspoken research should lead to the fostering of a sustained practice of introspection coupled with rigorous mental decolonization, a process that should be ongoing and frankly, never-ending. If I look, for example as an analogy, at the difficult yet necessary ways that patriarchy and heteronormativity should be addressed and tackled in our daily lives, I know from personal experience that that is not a matter of attending a workshop on intersectionality or taking a course on feminism. Dominant power structures tend to be deeply embedded into our own bodies, and I therefore contend that a life-long effort needs to be undertaken to counter that, because the world as know it will keep on bombarding us with images, narratives, and mindsets that work to defend the racist, sexist, and capitalist status quo. Finally, the structures, and infrastructures that have been constructed by colonial powers, comprador forces, and colonial postcolonial perpetrators, should be disrupted. It is a start to take down statues, but we need to go much further than that. A sustained movement should be able to:

“...welcome a form of “distortion” that sees through what has been constituted via white racist orders as “clarity.” Hence, as the body of color enters various racialized spaces, indeed, elevator spaces, one must valorize the cracks, one must valorize the experience of ambush. “Don’t repair them. Instead, welcome the crumble of white supremacist lies¹⁴” (65).

And by crumbling the very powerful remnants of coloniality, be it physical or mental, we can begin to undo the damaging forces of racialization. Our world is made up of at least 80 percent non-white people, heading towards 90 percent. So, I think it’s about time to obliterate white supremacy and make this a world of ongoing resistance radiating the notion that black and brown lives profoundly matter, that our bodies matter, that our humanity matters.

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Copyright: <https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spaanse_bok>

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Figure 3: White supremacy in operation in South Asia.

Copyright: <Praveen Sewgobind>

Figure 4: Still from the film Wan Pipel.

Copyright: <<https://tffilmfestival.com/film/wan-pipel-one-people>>

¹⁴ Yancy, George. *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race*. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2008.