



Introduction to Colson Whitehead

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Maartje Laterveer

Colson Whitehead has written his book in a tumultuous time. A time that is revolutionary, conservative, liberating, restricting, confusing, frightening, or plain barbaric – depending on your perspective. In the US, we have Donald Trump’s demagogic presidency, sharpening the social boundaries that Barack Obama’s election so hopefully seemed to have erased. We have Black Lives Matter and football players taking a knee against police brutality. In Europe, we witness a public rise of conservatism, and an underground rise of right-wing organizations who are against anyone who is not white and who are proud to be compared to Nazis. In Holland, well, we have a ferocious debate against Black Piet, and we have a ferocious debate against the debate against Black Piet. Two weeks ago, I interviewed an influential Harvard-sociologist by the name of Michèle Lamont, and she told me that worldwide inequality hasn’t been this high since 1929, and that Western Europe has become significantly more racist when it comes to black people. So, I think it’s safe to assume that your aforementioned perspective is highly influenced by the color of your skin.

But then again. Is your perspective on time, on the world, not always heavily influenced, if not determined by the color of your skin – whether it’s dark and you carry the obvious weight of your ancestries, not to mention the fear of being stigmatized or simply treated differently because of your skin color, or whether your skin is white and you’re blissfully blind for the fact that this whiteness doesn’t appear to be as innocent as you’ve always liked it to be?

Yes, I would say after reading Colson Whitehead’s novel that astonished me just as much as it impressed me. It was one of the first books in years that I couldn’t put aside. From the very first sentence it grab me and captured my head and my heart up to a point where I even dreamt about being his protagonist Cora, fearless but frightened, in a perpetual state of alertness, on the run, depending on scary people, being stuck under a burning house, witnessing torture and slaughter of people having her skin color. Not that I would even dare to imagine what it’s like being a girl like Cora, having to risk my life for freedom and having the formidable personality to do that – but in your dreams it’s your subconscious talking and subconsciouses have a way of being infused by books that are very well written, and *The Underground Railroad* is one fine example of those. In this case, that means you’d better not read it just before going to sleep – but please do read it, if you haven’t done so already. Because it makes you aware of an important part of history that still lives on, and the way it lives on depends on how we – black *and* white – deal with it.

I thought about this earlier, nearly ten years ago. I was 31 years old, just married and I went on a honeymoon trip to South-Africa. For three weeks we travelled around the country, we saw impressive landscapes, elephants and lions and even a killing leopard from up close. We had

outdoor showers with the fear of monkeys stealing our soap, we bathed in sunlight and luxury in stunning lodges in the forest. But everywhere we came, there was something that kept me from fully enjoying. The people who served us were black, the people owning the restaurants were white. The people making our pretty rooms were black, the owners of the lodges were white. The streets had Dutch names like Jan van Riebeeck. The language of the white people resembled my own language. Only they used it to tell us that black people were not that intelligent. That the rate of criminality was higher among black people than among whites. I kept silent, not knowing how to respond to such obvious nonsense, but deep inside I felt furious. And ashamed – ashamed of my own passport. I realized that apartheid was a result of Dutch colonialism and that we caused the racism that was still reigning this beautiful country. And I also found it quite shocking that I hadn't come to this conclusion before, and that my lack of understanding black people was largely a lack of knowledge about history and the role my own country played in it.

That may sound like a noble realization – but it isn't. Because I didn't do anything with it. I didn't come back to the Netherlands to start talking about it. I didn't make other people aware of the lack of education we have on this matter. I didn't redo my own education by reading history books and diving into the true history of slavery. I didn't do what's needed to fully come to realize that my white innocence is a social constructed lie, not a given privilege, and that therefore we can change it. Why didn't I do that?

Maybe because it's easier to live with given privileges than with the truth. And also because we didn't have Colson Whitehead back then. In order to comprehend the roots of racism, we need to comprehend the history of slavery and we need good books and films to show it to us. Now that I've read *The Underground Railroad*, I cannot escape from the awareness that that feeling I had in South-Africa, that feeling of shame and guilt, was a right feeling to have. I would like to thank Colson Whitehead for making me aware once again that the history of slavery isn't just the history of black people. It's also the history of white people. And it's on us to make sure it doesn't repeat.