

Does it matter who speaks about racism?

An analysis of the public positionality of black and white spokespersons addressing white privilege/racism.

Master thesis Sociology: Grootstedelijke Vraagstukken en Beleid

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Abstract

In this research the public life of the issue of racism/white privilege in the Netherlands was analyzed. As a case to limit this there was chosen for the public involvement of two Dutch public figures in the issue, and the public reactions they ignited. The goal was to see if there is a different reaction for black and white spokespersons addressing the issue, and how this could be interpreted. The results of the analysis show there are several lines of thought/reactions revolved around the issue. The most important finding is that there is a more positive reception for a white spokesperson than a black spokesperson, a paradoxical white privilege to publically speak about racism/white privilege. This can be understood by the conservative and excluding imaginary/identity of Dutch society/culture/citizenship and the infrastructure/interests of white privilege. Also new phenomena of the debatability/denial/reversal of racism are seen to revolve around the issue. Phenomena that are in need of more research.

Keywords: Public issues; Racism/white privilege; Sunny Bergman; Sylvana Simons

1. Introduction/problem definition

One of the main public issues of today in the Netherlands receiving a lot of media and public attention and discussion is racism. Closely intertwined with it is the issue of white privilege. The issue I would like to focus on in this research. It is only since a couple of decades that the “black page” in Dutch history and the issue of racism is coming more and more into the public. This “black page” has among other things to do with the Dutch involvement in slavery, colonialism and imperialism. According to Gloria Wekker the public debate surrounding these issues started with the first wave of anti-racism in the Netherlands, during the 1980’s (Wekker, 2016). Social scientists like Essed and van Dijk contributed to the public debate on racism and the scientific analysis of racism in the Netherlands. They soon became social pariahs for their accusations of Dutch racism and left the Netherlands, to more fruitful places for their work (Essed & Goldberg, 2002).

Today a second wave of antiracism is rising in the Netherlands. This is seen in the resurgent interest of the works of critical race theorists like Essed and van Dijk. But we see it also in the public debate and media. More and more actors and institutions are publicly speaking about racism/white privilege and demanding a critical reflection regarding the Dutch “black page” in history and contemporary racism/white privilege. Important public actors in making the issue of racism/white privilege public and contributing to the public debate, are for example Dutch/Surinamese politician Sylvana Simons and Dutch writer/documentary maker Sunny

Bergman. Sylvana Simons started her participation and public outcry in the debate on racism through Dutch tv shows like *Pauw* and *DWDD*. To better fight these issues she has made the decision to start her own political party named *Artikel 1*. Sunny Bergman also participates in the debate through tv appearances. But especially her documentaries on racism/white privilege like *'zwart als roet'* and *'wit is ook een kleur'* have played a big public influence regarding the issue. Both of these actors have received a lot of public attention and reaction. They received a lot of backlash from various public actors and institutions like politicians, different social groups and the media. Most were negative, fierce reactions. They are heavily criticized for their opinions and seen to be digging up old irrelevant dirt/past.

These public reactions show how much racism/white privilege is still a very untouched, underlying and slept on issue. And for long time it was problematic to speak about racism in the Dutch public sphere. And large part of the people would like to maintain it that way. But it is in this latent, non-reflected, non-criticized non-public sweeping under the rug, that racism/white privilege is most inflective. It is therefore essential to research how the issue of racism/white privilege is being made public, which public lines of reactions/thought/ideas are involved and what I's of the I-Map are at stake/work.

As a case to delimit this research I focused on the public appearance of the above mentioned public figures/actors. I looked at the public reactions their public appearances ignited. In these reactions I intended to discover which public lines of thought/idea/expression are involved, which I's are at stake/work and how racism/white privilege manifests itself in the Netherlands. But most importantly I wanted to see if there is a different reception, for two figures with the same message. One being the hypothetical insider and native Dutch (Sunny Bergman), and the other being the hypothetical outsider, the racial other, allochthonous Dutch (Sylvana Simons). I contrasted the public situations of these two figures to see if white privilege also plays a role in who gets to speak about racism/white privilege. This gives insight in who has the public right to speak about racism/white privilege, what Dutch society's reaction is, and if there is a more progressive, positive reception now than compared with the first wave of anti-racism. The following research question therefore guided this research: *how do public reactions differ for black and white spokespersons addressing white privilege/racism, and why?*

The scientific relevance of this research lies in the fact that it contributes to the small amount of research that still exists on racism/white privilege in the Netherlands. It also opens a new field in researching who the messenger and accuser of racism is, and if for its effects, it matters who the spokesperson is. The societal relevance of this research lies in the fact that it tries to contribute to the debate on racism in a new way. By shedding light on what the public reactions

are to different spokespersons/accusers of racism/white privilege this research tries to show if it matters who the messenger is. Do outsiders and insiders have the same right to speak about the issue and do they receive the same reactions and effects. The specifics of how this research was realized is discussed in the research method.

2. Theoretical framework

White privilege, white fragility and the Dutch “black page” in history

First of we need to clarify what is exactly meant by the term white privilege. White privilege refers to the social, political, cultural and economic benefits white people possess based on the fact that they are white. Since political, cultural, economic and social structures are historically created and controlled by white people, there is an unequal distribution of power, resources and privileges. Consciously or unconsciously this benefits white people and disadvantages people of color. White privileges are mostly ascribed, everyday unconscious privileges that white people are ignorant and unaware about because it is “normal” and “common sense” to them (Diangelo, 2011). It only becomes apparent when it is lacking, as is mostly the case for people of color. These privileges can range from for example getting easier entrance to discos, or not being racially profiled, targeted and harassed by the police.

As mentioned before it is the publication of the Dutch “black page” in history, the denial, negligence, ignorance and the contemporary aftereffects that ignited the fierce public debate about the issue of racism/white privilege. This is a part of history that many autochthone and allochthone Dutch are ignorant of because it doesn’t get extensive attention in Dutch education. So when these issues are made public Dutch society reacts in defense mechanisms, innocence and negligence. Or it feels ashamed and feel it is something of the past and see it as a taboo to speak about. This “black page” has for example to do with the role the Netherlands played in slavery and slave trade (Wekker, 2016). The Netherlands played one of the largest roles in the ownership and distribution of slaves in history. Many slaves were trafficked to and owned in Dutch colonies like Suriname, the Dutch Antilles and the Dutch East Indies. The Netherlands became the last country to abolish slavery. The Dutch colonial powers were also translated to Indonesia, where the killing of thousands of Indonesians was euphemistically framed as “police actions” (Wekker, 2016).

According to Wekker (2016) this history collides with the self-representation and self-image of Dutch society/culture. This is an image of a society that is tolerant, non-racist, and

innocent. Speaking of Dutch racism is thus a taboo. So when public actors like Simons and Bergman speak about racism/white privilege, Dutch society reacts defensive and angry, proclaiming that they are innocent and that racism is just a little bad thing from the past. This theory by Wekker (2016) can thus explain why Simons and Bergman ignited such an outrage and so many reactions. But it doesn't say anything about the positionality of the messengers of the issue.

This fierce, defensive public reaction to the publication of the issue of racism/white privilege, Diangelo (2011) interprets as an aspect of white fragility. White fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium. The notion of colorblindness comes under attack and in defense white people say people of color are racist for making an issue of color. In their notion you shouldn't pay attention to color. But in this train of thought the structural, latent, invisible, build up, ingrained, institutionalized racial/cultural inequality is neglected and unacknowledged, because they feel everyone to be equal in theory. Speaking about racism/white privilege is then seen as an attack to the status quo. It is uncomfortable and frightening because it challenges the daily way of life with its customs, comforts and privileges (Diangelo, 2011, 2014). Based on the notion of white fragility we could maybe expect and hypothesize that the message of racism/white privilege is more receptive when a white person speaks about it. White people would then feel less accused and attacked by an in group member because of a shared history, daily life, interest, lifeworld and position. Fragility would then hypothetically be less if the message was made public by an in group than an out group member.

Who has the right to speak?

This basic notion of in and out group membership is in line with the discourse on integration in the Netherlands on the macro level, which maybe can give insight in the possible different reactions to the positionality of the two public actors. Before Sylvana Simons spoke publicly about the issue of racism/white privilege she had never been under public scrutiny and attack. She was a tv personality who was likened and well received for her public appearances. This all changed after she began speaking about issues of national, public concern, and critiquing Dutch society. Before, her Dutch citizenship status and integration was never discussed. But

after, her allochthonous background was highlighted, she was seen as a traitor, a foreign danger to Dutch society, and too outspoken and critical about “native” Dutch concerns (Schinkel, 2013). She should have been grateful to be received in to the Netherlands, and go to Suriname if she is not satisfied. In short, she should have known her position. This position can be hypothesized as being one of a second range citizen that is not completely an insider to Dutch society, due to her allochthonous background (Schinkel, 2013). Dutch citizenship and being integrated then means to be assimilated and totally accept the “Dutch” way of life. This means not critiquing Dutch society/culture and speak about the issue of racism/white privilege. This is a right only reserved for autochthone Dutch. Following this theory there should be different reactions for Bergman and Simons. In the negative for Simons. There would be a paradoxical white (autochthone Dutch) privilege to talk about white privilege.

This privileged white positionality can maybe also be explained by the ideological difference between universalism and individualism. Diangelo (2014) explains universalism as the power to represent the human norm, humankind in general, which is positioned as belonging to white people. As with the ideology of individualism, universalism places whites outside of racialization, a subject position only available to them. Within this ideology, people of color can only represent their own raced perspectives, while whites can speak for all. So the Dutch public may be more receptive to the issue of racism/white privilege if Sunny Bergman is the messenger. She would have the more superior, universalistic perspective, and be seen as more neutral, reliable and insightful based on her positionality and not her personal, subjective experiences, as would be in the case of Sylvana Simons. Based on this theory, we would again hypothesize that the Dutch public reaction to Sunny Bergman’s statements will be milder, in contrast to Simons’ reaction.

This notion of individualism, and having a specific, singular, exclusive perspective has been positively interpreted by supporters of standpoint theory. According to this originally feminist theory, it is the marginalized person who has a privileged perspective and position (Sismondo, 2010). A feminist standpoint is a privileged standpoint, not merely another perspective. The central argument of standpoint theory is that women’s experience of sexual discrimination allows them to better understand gender relations. They are able to see aspects of discrimination that cannot be seen from the male perspective. A standpoint carries with it the contention that there are some perspectives on society from which, however well-intentioned one may be, the real relations of humans with each other and with the natural world are not visible (Sismondo, 2010). For the case of black women, Patricia Hill Collins (1986) speaks of the privileged outsider within status of black women. This position of a marginalized person

active within the dominant society, gives them a privileged position to certain experiences, information, insights and knowledge. This theory thus validates the perspective of the black women for her potential scientific knowledge, information and consciousness building (Collins, 1986). But this theory does not tell us about the activist, societal, practical, and public influence of this perspective. It is beneficial for gaining new knowledge and insights but it doesn't tell anything about the public effectiveness of these insights for battling white privilege/racism. The public reception of this privileged knowledge is thus not considered. So standpoint theory only deals with the privilege of perspective and knowledge, but does not deal with the privilege of publishing this knowledge and insight, and its public effects. Someone could have a better perspective and insight but this doesn't say anything about how this knowledge is messaged, by whom and its effects. There can be privileges regarding a scientific position/standpoint, as there can be privileges for making that message public.

The only research that seems to be done on the positionality and different public reception on black or white persons, seems to limit itself on the public appearance in advertisements, and popular media, speaking about or representing non-political issues (Watson et al., 2009, Spence et al., 2013). Results indicate that larger, mainstream society and specifically white people prefer white spokespersons, were as people of color slightly prefer people of color as well. The question now is how the Dutch public in particular reacts to white or black spokespersons about racism/white privilege. Do white people do indeed have more privilege to talk about racism/white privilege, or doesn't it matter for the respectability of the message who is speaking.

Public issues and the I's of the I-Map

There is no doubt that white privilege/racism is a public issue in the Netherlands. But what does analyzing a public issue entail. Analyzing public issues means looking at the publicity of an issue and towards the public reactions/expressions/ideas and publics revolved/involved in it (Schinkel, 2016). (For this research I have focused only on the public reactions/expressions/ideas revolved around the issue and the two public figures). The point with public issues is not to discuss a social problem, to explain a phenomenon, or to weigh pros and contras concerning an issue. Key is to describe how an issue is public and what publics or public lines of reactions/thought are revolved around it. The focus should be on the public life of the issue, as well as on the public life of the publics or public reactions/ideas on the issue (Schinkel, 2016). For the public life of the reactions/ideas the focus is not on how these are

formed or how these are spread, but what these reactions represent, what kind of lines of thought/reactions they embody, to better understand the vehemence and significance of the issue in Dutch society. The aim when analyzing public issues is to not take the issue at face value, but to describe it in its publicness, that is, to describe and analyze what it is, and how it is what it is, for specific publics or public lines of thought/expression that help bring the issue into being. An important aspect in analyzing public issues is looking amidst which I's of the I-Map the issue emerges and which I's are at stake/at work regarding the issue (see figure 1) (Schinkel, 2016).

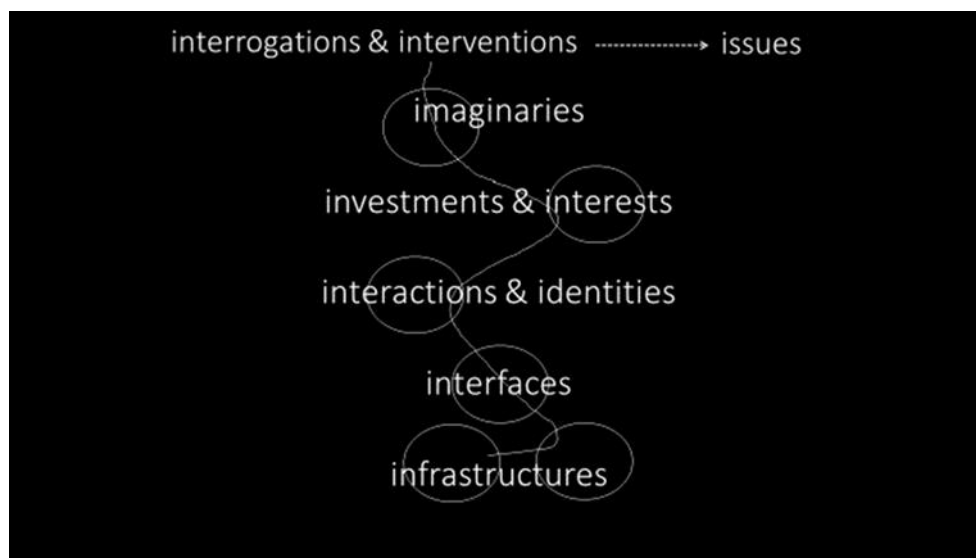


Figure 1. I-Map. Source: Course Manual Public Issues, Schinkel (2016).

The I of the I-Map that probably stands out first regarding the issue of racism/white privilege is the imaginary of Dutch society/identity/Dutchness. Imaginaries are namely background understandings, ideas or concepts. It is the structured ways in which social life is rendered visible and ways in which people expect and imagine their social existence and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations (Schinkel, 2013). There are thus criteria and parameters of 'Dutchness' and Dutch society, and these boundaries are delineated. This is a productive and performative imaginary that includes and excludes others, and envisions, visualizes and essentializes who is part of this imaginary and who isn't. This imaginary is expected to be central in the public life of the issue, as the racial and cultural otherness of Sylvana Simons is constantly targeted.

In line and co-construction with this imaginary is the identity of 'Dutchness'. Identity refers to a social category defined by (alleged) characteristic attributes or expected behavior that is structured by membership rules. These are socially distinguishing features that a person takes a special pride in or views as unchangeable but socially consequential (Fearon, 1999). With the increase of identity politics, culturalization of citizenship and returning attention on integration and conservation of traditional Dutch culture/identity, identity constructs and oppositions are expected to structure the public debate and public lines of thought/ideas/expressions (Duyvendak, 2016). The above mentioned self-image/identity of tolerance, enlightenment, non-racism and innocence is probably an important element in the identity construction and performance surrounding the issue. The opposing incommensurable identities of the cultural/racial insider and outsider are expected to structure the public role and public reactions/expressions/ideas on the two public figures.

What's more at stake/work here is the infrastructure and interest of white privilege. Infrastructure refers to the structure or conditions underneath that enables or constrains existing possibilities and choices. Infrastructures are commonly understood as large, structural, stable, invisible systems and services that have a big impact on the visible. Infrastructures thus make certain options possible while constraining others (Schinkel, 2016). The infrastructure of white privilege was expected to play a role in the publicness of the issue and the two actors addressing it. White privilege conditions the public positionality of black and white spokespersons. It structures the public setting and influences the freedom of speech and public reception of black and white spokespersons. It advantages white spokespersons and disadvantages black spokespersons in the public arena regarding the public discussion/ contestation/ participation /reception on public issues. So also with this public issue there is an expected white privilege to publically talk about white privilege.

What follows from this infrastructure of white privilege is the interest of the white majority to maintain the status quo, hierarchy, power asymmetry, privileges and facilitative infrastructure. Interests often play a role in the public life of public issues, as different parties surrounding the issue have different interests. Regarding the issue of racism/white privilege the expectation was that the white majority will try to protect its interests and privileges in the public contestation over the issue. These interests can realize themselves in the public marginalization and demonization of certain public statements and actors.

Public issues are discussed and contested in the public sphere. The public sphere is a structured setting where cultural and ideological contest or negotiation among a variety of publics and public lines of thought/expressions/ideas takes place (Eley, 1990, in Fraser, 1990).

This formulation by Eley does justice to the multiplicity of public arenas in society by expressly acknowledging the presence and activity of "a variety of publics and public lines of thought/expression/ideas" (Fraser, 1990). At the same time, it also does justice to the fact that these various publics and public lines of thought/expression/ideas are situated in a single "structured setting" that advantages some and disadvantages others. Finally, Eley's formulation does justice to the fact that, in society, the discursive relations among differentially empowered publics are as likely to take the form of contestation as that of deliberation (Fraser, 1990).

The Dutch public sphere in the analysis of the two cases, was delimited by traditional, popular media like tv, newspapers, social media and websites. It is mainly through these domains and "structured setting" that the public debate around white privilege/racism is realized. Which public lines of thought/expressions/ideas are formed, what role the two public figures played in the public sphere and what public reactions they ignited will be discussed in the results of analysis section. How this was realized will now be discussed in the research method.

3. Research Method

The literature thus now has shown different theories for the vehemence and magnitude of making the issue of racism/white privilege public. The Dutch outrage in reaction to Simons and Bergman can be caused by the discrepancy between the Dutch self-image, self-representation and the image being made public by the two public figures (Wekker, 2016). It can also be interpreted as a case of white fragility (Diangelo, 2011). Alternative reactions to black and white spokespersons can be interpreted through the discourse on integration, or through the perspectives of individualism or universalism. The relevance and validity of these theories in regard to the described case will be proven in the results of analysis section. But what still remains unexplored is if there is a difference in the public attention/reception/reflection of the issue of racism/white privilege when addressed by a black or white spokesperson. Therefore I had set up the before mentioned research question (*how do public reactions differ for black and white spokespersons addressing racism/white privilege, and why?*) and the following sub-questions guiding me through the research process:

- 1. What role did Simons play in making the issue of racism/white privilege public?*
- 2. What role did Bergman play in making the issue of racism/white privilege public?*

3. What are the public reactions to Simons public appearances, and how can they be interpreted?

4. What are the public reactions to Bergman's public appearances, and how can they be interpreted?

To realize this research I made use of a media content analysis. It is namely an adequate method for gathering and analyzing the content of text (Macnamara, 2005; Massengill). The 'content' refers to words, meanings, pictures, symbols, ideas, themes, or any message that can be communicated. The 'text' is anything written, visual, or spoken that serves as a medium for communication. It allows one to analyze and draw conclusions about the transmitter of the message, the message itself, and the receptive public. And to draw conclusions about the collected data and the context they are imbedded in. Information and data is analyzed and processed where by the communication is categorized and coded in different categories, topics and text units (Macnamara, 2005; Massengill). This way it was an adequate method to collect data on the public reactions in response to Simons' and Bergman's public statements, since these are written and spoken commentaries. After collecting, analyzing, coding and categorizing this material, I was able to draw some conclusions about the I's of the I-Map, content, context, tone, intention and public lines of thought/expressions/ideas represented in the reactions.

In line with the concept of public issues and central to media content analysis are four roles (see figure 2) (Macnamara, 2005). Relevant for this research were the sources, issue and publics. These three roles/domains are interrelated and should not be seen as separate cases for analysis and insight. The figure displays an abstract overview of how these domains are related and influenced by popular media. A media content analysis is thus an adequate method for analyzing how these domains are intertwined with popular media, and to get insight in different aspects of the publicness of the issue. The figure must thus be seen as a guideline, overview and illustration of how the analysis was designed and structured. The three domains all play an important role in the publicness of the issue of white privilege/racism. Following this model, insight could be gain about what role media sources and interfaces played in the public life of the issue. Meaning which media sources pay attention to the issue and how they do it, or how they are used. And which media sources/platforms the two public figures and the involved publics use and how they use it. Then insight was gain about how the issue is presented, framed, the magnitude and coverage of it, how it is made public in the media, and what I's were at stake/work in the depiction of the issue. Lastly, by analyzing this media coverage, insight could

be gain in what role the two public figures played in the publicness of the issue, which public lines of reactions/thought are involved and which I's of the I-Map are at stake/work in this public opinion. With the ultimate goal of seeing if it matters who the spokesperson of white privilege/racism is, analyzed in a national media setting.

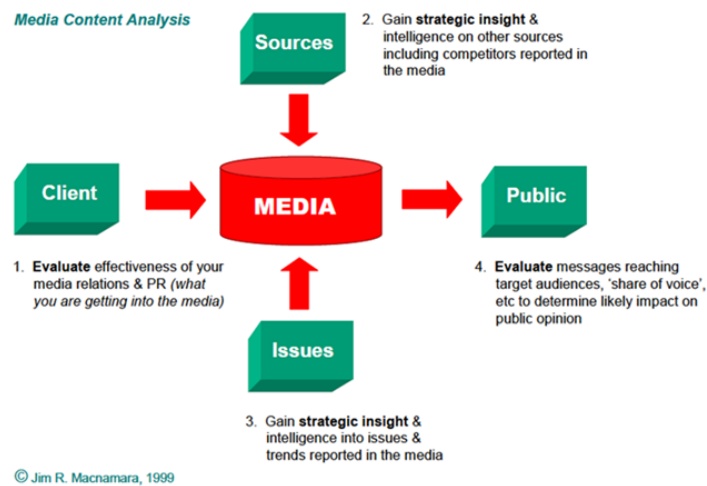


Figure 2. The four roles of media content analysis

Source:

<https://amecorg.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/Media-Content-Analysis-Paper.pdf>

The collected data was spoken or written digital text material. This data includes mostly twitter reactions, short comments from comment sections and parts of online articles. I collected these data from different sources like Twitter, online newspapers and popular opinionated websites like www.geenstijl.nl and www.joop.nl. The reactions on the public appearances of Bergman and Simons was delimited by the selection of public events were the two figures received the most public reactions on. Public reactions were collected until saturation occurred. The public events that were selected for Bergman are: *Pauw* (talk-show, 2014), *Zwart als roet* (documentary, 2014), *Wit is ook een kleur* (documentary, 2016). The public events that were selected for Simons are: *DWDD* (talkshow, 2015), *Pauw* (talkshow, 2015), joining political party *Denk* (2016), start own political party *Artikel 1* (2016). The collected text material was then analyzed, coded and interpreted to answer the sub-questions and research question. The results of the analysis will be presented in the next section.

Before the research I had chosen not to state some hypotheses but some expectations about the outcomes of the analysis. I expected there to be quantitatively more and a slightly

more fierce public reaction to Simons' public appearance than to Bergman's. This is based on the amount of public attention, public opinion and discussion Simons is receiving. Not only the reaction that she receives for her public statements, but also the attacks she receives on her person. Being acts of comedy and satire and downright racism, sexism, insult and slander. Also based on the theories mentioned above she would receive more outrage, due to her positionality. Being a woman and of color, an outgroup member, allochthone makes her more of an alien threat to Dutch society/culture, due to her perceived cultural and social distance and independence. Related to the I's of the I-Map I expected the imaginary of the conservative, traditional Dutch nation/society/culture, nationalism and identity politics, the infrastructure of racism, culturism and sexism, and the political, economic, cultural and social interests of white privilege to play a role in the public reaction to Simons' and Bergman's public messages.

4. Results of analysis

Simons' and Bergman's role in publicness of the issue

The public vehemence regarding the issue of racism/white privilege did not start with Simons and Bergman. Before their public statements the issue had already gained a public life through for example the Black Pete discussion. Accusations of the racist element of Black Pete is not something new, but in the last years the Black Pete discussion has intensified. The Dutch-Surinamese artist Quinsy Gario contributed a large deal to the publicness of Black Pete (and indirectly racism/white privilege) through his public crusade and public arrest for his "zwarte piet=racisme" statement¹. Sunny Bergman was also arrested on that day, while supporting anti Black Pete protestors and shooting for her documentary '*zwart als roet*'².

But the first time Bergman really made a deliberate public statement regarding the issue and positioned and manifested herself publicly vis a vis the issue was in Dutch tv show '*Pauw*', in 2014³. In this talk show she discussed the racist character of Black Pete and the vehemence of the Black Pete discussion together with Quinsy Gario.

Her public participation regarding the issue continued as she released the documentary '*zwart als roet*' in 2014⁴. The documentary explores the racist character of Black Pete, the Dutch colonial hangover and its significance in Dutch society. The documentary was

¹ See here a video of the arrest: <http://nieuws.tpo.nl/2014/10/17/quinsy-gario-c-s-ten-onrechte-gearresteerd-2011/>

² <https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/boulevard/entertainment/sunny-bergman-gearresteerd-bij-intocht>

³ Watch her appearance here: <https://pauw.vara.nl/media/322303>

⁴ Watch the documentary here: https://www.npo.nl/2doc/01-12-2014/VPWON_1226620

transmitted on the Dutch public broadcasting tv network 'Npo 3'. Before the release Bergman discussed the documentary and the issue in 'DWDD' in 2014, another Dutch talk show ⁵.

In 2016 she contributed to the public life of the issue with the documentary 'Wit is ook een kleur', which was also broadcasted on Npo 3 ⁶. This documentary explores and discusses white privilege in Dutch society. This time again Bergman appeared on DWDD in 2016 to discuss the documentary and the issue ⁷. As with all of the above mentioned public appearances there were many reactions. There is no doubt that the issue of racism/white privilege has shaken this up, and has led to a public contestation not yet seen before in the Netherlands. And Bergman has played an influential role in this public life of the issue.

The person that contributed even more to the public reactions, outrage, polarization and public life of the issue is Sylvana Simons. Before 2015 Simons was publicly primarily known as a likened tv personality without an anti-racist or political agenda. This changed after she questioned a racist slip by Martin Simek (another tv personality) in the tv show DWDD in 2015 ⁸. She received a lot of public attention and backlash for this action from all parts of Dutch society (figures 3 and 4 indicate the amount of public attention). It is namely after this incident that she started to publicly make statements about racism/white privilege, as the racist and hateful reactions motivated her to politically address racism/white privilege ⁹.

Hashtags rondom DWDD op 18 mei 2015



Figure 3. Source: <https://www.obi4wan.com/nl/social-buzz-van-nl-talkshows-rtln-jinek-en->

⁵ Watch her appearance here: <https://dewerelddraaitdoor.vara.nl/media/324289>

⁶ Watch the documentary here: <https://www.vpro.nl/programmas/2doc/2016/wit-is-ook-een-kleur.html>

⁷ Watch her appearance here: <https://dewerelddraaitdoor.vara.nl/media/367904>

⁸ Watch her appearance here: <https://dewerelddraaitdoor.vara.nl/media/339663>

⁹ On why Simons decided to get in to parlement:

<https://www.metronieuws.nl/nieuws/binnenland/2016/05/sylvana-simons-sluit-zich-aan-bij-denk>

Mentions rondom DWDD op 18 mei 2015

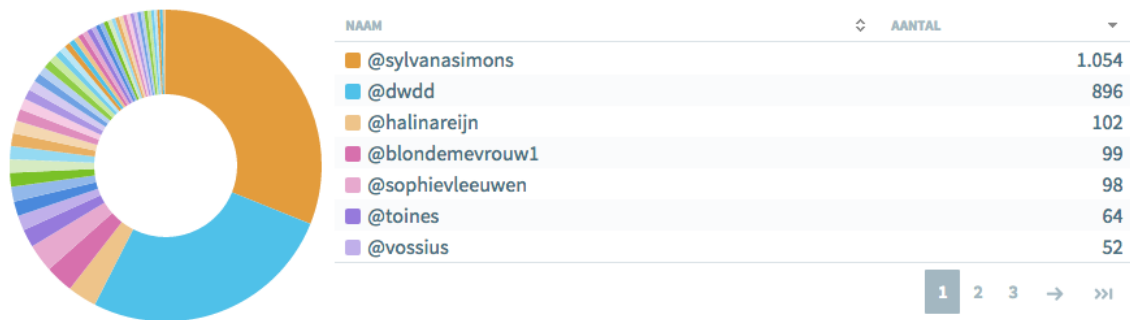


Figure 4. Source: <https://www.obi4wan.com/nl/social-buzz-van-nl-talkshows-rtltn-jinek-en->

Later in 2015 she then went on to speak about Black Pete and racism in another Dutch talk show: *Pauw*¹⁰. She was not yet politically active but demanded a national policy plan for the modification of Black Pete, due to its racist character.

As this public statement ignited more hateful and racist reactions, in 2016 she decided to join the multicultural emancipatory political party *Denk*, to politically address racism/white privilege in parliament. As with all of Simons' public actions and appearances this led to many diverse public reactions.

Later in 2016 Simons again made a public statement that highly contributed towards the public contestation of the issue and her person. She decided to leave *Denk* and start her own political party: *Artikel 1*. She felt that *Denk* wasn't giving enough value to LGBTQ and women rights, and thus wanted to establish her own political party. With still the primary aim to address and battle racism.

Both actors have made more public statements and appearances regarding the issue in the last years, but the ones described here can be seen as the most impactful public events that ignited the most public reaction and discussion regarding racism/white privilege. For Bergman these events were: *'Zwart als roet'* (2014, documentary), *DWDD* (2014, talk show), *'Wit is ook een kleur'* (2016, documentary), *DWDD* (2016, talkshow). For Simons these events were: *DWDD/Simek* (2015, talkshow), *Pauw* (2015, talkshow), *Denk* (2016, political party), *Artikel 1* (2016, political party) How the public reactions and publicness of these events in relation to the issue were analyzed will now be described.

¹⁰ Watch her appearance here: <https://pauw.vara.nl/media/350674>

Understanding the public reactions on the issue

Analyzing the public reactions to Bergman and Simons public appearances it is clear that the aforementioned expectation regarding the quantitative difference in public attention is confirmed. It shows that there are a lot more public reactions to Simons than Bergman. Simons' public statements ignite much more public discontent, provocation and attention. This is in line with the expectation mentioned in the method section. Simons public positionality and position in Dutch society is constantly problematized and discredited. This has to do with the fact that she is a black Dutch-Surinamese woman. Her Dutch citizenship and the right to publically speak on national issues is threatened because she is not seen as a 'real' Dutch person, because of her cultural and racial background not being in line with the Dutch'. From the public reactions it can be stated that when ethnic minorities (like Simons) assimilate and follow the dominant discourse and public opinion they are socially accepted and 'integrated'. But when they criticize or speak out about national issues (like racism/white privilege) they are excluded, marginalized and seen as a threat to the national identity. They are not seen as Dutch and racial and cultural difference and inferiority are emphasized to marginalize them and protect the status quo. They are placed outside 'society'. These are some public reactions that demonstrate this conservative many times racist/culturist public line of thought/reactions:

“Degene die het wel met haar meningen eens zijn, zijn geen echte Nederlanders. Want echte Nederlanders omarmen de Nederlandse cultuur”. Source:

<http://www.mediacourant.nl/2016/06/sylvana-simons-ik-ben-niet-tegen-nederland/>

“Gezellig samen Nederland afbreken. Sylvana gaat iets doen met cultuur; onze Sinterklaastraditie slopen. Sylvana gaat iets doen met media; zichzelf promoten. Sylvana gaat iets doen met emancipatie; Nederlanders zijn racisten en moeten zich schamen dat ze kleinere slavenhandelaren waren dan de voorouders van Sylvana en van DENK en zouden daar tot in de eeuwigheid voor moeten boeten. Sylvana gaat iets doen met onderwijs; geschiedsvervalsing over het slavernijverleden en vooral niet melden dat als wij nooit langs waren gekomen in Afrika zij nog in een paar palmladeren rondliep. En wat mij betreft gaat iedere Afrikaan die hier in Nederland tegen Nederland aan loopt te schoppen linea recta terug naar Afrika. Je neemt het ons toch kwalijk dat je hier bent? Donder dan op! En neem Sunny Bergman ook gelijk mee. En wil je dan zo vriendelijk zijn dit keer wel voor de overtocht

te betalen. Het eeuwenlange geparasiteer van jullie zijn we nu wel klaar mee". Source:

<https://fenixx.org/2016/05/18/sylvana-simons-sluit-zich-aan-denk/>



These reactions thus represent the defensive, hypochondriac reaction to protect to maintain the status quo and conserve the national identity/imaginary. These reactions can be interpreted as social hypochondriac or holding on to the self-image/identity/imaginary of a tolerant, innocent nation (Schinkel, 2011; Wekker, 2016). Social hypochondria is the defensive socio-cultural mechanism of a society to hold on and conserve its traditional identity/culture by focusing on every little threat to that status quo. Doing so by excluding and positioning those threats or (socio-cultural) diseases outside of 'society' (Schinkel, 2016). This concept is in line with the, in the theoretical framework discussed conservation and protection of the Dutch self-image/imaginary/identity. This image is felt to be under attack by anti-racists like Bergman and Simons. Accusations of racism/white privilege are in total discord with the identity/self-image of a nation of tolerance, antiracism, innocence and equality. This sense of loss and crises of national identity, self-image and the social body thus contributes largely in explaining the conservative, racist, culturist and vehement reactions to Bergman's and Simons' public statements about racism/white privilege.

Within this dominant public line of thought/reactions there is a radicalization and extremization of the dominant public line of thought/reactions represented in a smaller part of the reactions. This is a right-extremist public line of thought/reactions that radicalizes the dominant conservative discourse on identity politics. This is an explicit racist, xenophobic and sexist public line of reactions/thought that wants to exclude racial minorities and so called traitors of the country and race. These reactions are normally associated with low class, xenophobic PVV (a right wing, populist political party. Second largest in the country) supporters. These are examples of the public reactions that represent this radical, extremist line of thought/reactions:

“Sylvana is gewoon een mediaslet die genomen wil worden door een stadion vol zwarte pieten met die rotte apenkop van haar.” Source:

<https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/nl.politiek/s3nIKMCMmTg>

“Lekker oprotten uit dit land jij, leve KKK.” Source:

<http://forum.fok.nl/topic/2267614?token=970d1c03f0231fd68aca54d9e6ae01d1&allowcookies=ACCEPTTEER+ALLE+COOKIES>

“Als al die apekoppen het hier zo erg vinden, laten ze dan oprotten naar een land waar ze qua kleur niet opvallen.” Source: <http://blog.seniorennet.be/vroeger/archief.php?ID=1983310>

Next to these public lines of thought/reactions there is the anti-racist public line of reactions/thought. Here the presence of racism/white privilege in the Netherlands is not denied and the reverse racism claim is not made. This public line of thought/reactions feels racism/white privilege is still prevalent in Dutch society and speak and act on anti-racism. Racism/white privilege is felt to have been a taboo for too long in the Netherlands and the country’s racist colonial history and its implications today need to be addressed and challenged. This public line of thought/reactions thus supports Bergman and Simons public statements and stands opposite towards the other public lines of thought/reactions. It can be characterized as a counterdiscourse, since it is opposed and challenges the discourse of the dominant majority public line of thought/reactions (Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002). As this public line of thought/reactions formulates and circulates counterdiscourses, it permits itself to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs (Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002). This public line of thought/reactions thus welcomes the publication and contestation of the issue. These are some of the public reactions that represent this public line of thought/reactions:



“Het is onprettig, maar goed om af en toe kritisch naar onszelf te kijken. Identiteit en cultuur zijn glibberige concepten, ze staan niet in steen gegrift en ontwikkelen door de tijd heen. Net als karakter. Je bent niet meer dezelfde die je was als kind. En ook ons land is niet meer hetzelfde als in onze jeugd. Daarom is het werk van Bergman heel belangrijk. Niet omdat het blijft hangen in een veilig, nostalgisch beeld van hoe Nederland was of hoort te zijn, maar juist kijkt naar wat ons land nu is. Wie en wat een Nederlander anno 2016 is. Van daaruit komt de vraag wat er beter kan en wat we er zelf aan kunnen doen”. Source: <https://www.metronieuws.nl/lezerscolumn/2016/12/goed-voornemen-integreren>

But as there is a nuance in the dominant public line of thought/reactions there is a nuance in the anti-racist public line of thought/reactions. As with the larger anti-racist public line of thought/reactions this line public line of thought/reactions challenges the implications of the Netherlands colonial past and how racism/white privilege manifests itself. This is a public line of thought/reactions that isn't new, which has been committed to address and challenge racism/white privilege for a while and have been waiting for the issue to take on a public life and receive mass attention. But where this smaller public line of thought/reactions differs from the larger is the matter of the spokesperson's racial background. In the larger anti-racist public line of thought/reactions this is not important, but this public line of thought/reactions feels that a white spokesperson (like Sunny Bergman) addressing the issue is problematic, because they feel people of color have addressed the issue many times before, but never gained public attention. They feel a person of color should be in the position of Sunny Bergman, and given the public podium or resources to make a documentary from the perspective of a person of color. A person of color is seen to have a firsthand experience and able to communicate the issue and its implications better. We thus see here that the marginalized perspective is being valued for its unique perspective on this issue. This public line of thought/reactions validates the perspective/position of a black spokesperson more for her potential knowledge, information and consciousness building, just as in the before mentioned standpoint theory by Collins (1986). But contrary to this theory this public line of thought/reactions feel a white spokesperson addressing racism/white privilege is holding the opportunity and public involvement of people of color back. This public line of thought/reactions thus feels there is a white privilege to talk about white privilege. These are some of the reactions that represent this public line of thought/reactions:

“Toen Quinsy Gario het riep, toen Anousha zat te huilen op de televisie – maakt allemaal niet uit. Het wordt pas gehoord als de witte Sunny Bergman het vertelt. ... Als zwarte mensen iets over Zwarte Piet zeggen, worden ze weggezet als emotioneel en radicaal. Als een witte er iets over zegt, wordt er wel geluisterd. Hiermee werkt Bergman naar mijn mening precies in de hand wat ze al die tijd juist probeert te vermijden of verhelpen: door te zeggen dat er naar ‘een witte’ wel geluisterd wordt, vergroot je juist de kloof tussen zwart en wit en benadruk je juist vooral de aanwezigheid ervan”. Source: <http://www.spatonline.nl/2016/01/thanks-but-no-thanks-helper-whitey/>



“Sunny Bergman is het lieverdje van de VPRO en de witte linkse elite in Nederland. Een beetje anti-racistisch, een beetje kritisch en gesubsidieerd met geld dat bedoeld is voor de zwarte gemeenschap documentaires maken die een beetje ongemak veroorzaken bij witte mensen, maar ook niet teveel. De formule is dezelfde: je neemt een onderwerp dat zwarte activisten op de agenda hebben gezet. Je weet dat daar twee stromingen zijn: Vanuit institutioneel racisme stel je bij de documentaire van Bergman al gauw de vraag: waarom worden een kwart eeuw nadat gemeenschappen van kleur gekwalificeerde documentairemakers hebben opgeleverd zwarte documentairemakers niet in staat gesteld om voor de Nederlandse televisie een ongemak te presenteren die niet kietelend maar confronterend is, zoals je bij zwarte documentairemakers ziet in Engeland of Amerika”. Source: <http://www.iisr.nl/news/sunny-bergman-en-het-verschil-tussen-voorrecht-en-onrecht/>

“Eén van hen, een slimme, jonge, zwarte feminist, begon over ‘Zwart als roet’, de documentaire van Sunny Bergman over Zwarte Piet. Ze vertelde hoe veel van Bergmans punten al duizenden keren door zwarte activisten waren gemaakt. En hoe frustrerend het was dat zoveel mensen na het bekijken van die film, nu een witte vrouw het had gezegd, ineens wel

zagen dat Zwarte Piet een probleem is". Source: <http://ashatenbroeke.nl/2016/10/28/ik-sta-achter-je/>

The vehement, emotional and defensive reactions can also be interpreted through the other concept described in the theoretical framework: white fragility. White fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves (Diangelo, 2011). The notion of colorblindness comes under attack and in defense white people say people of color are racist for making an issue of color. Speaking about racism/white privilege is then seen as an attack to the status quo. It is uncomfortable and frightening because it challenges the daily way of life with its customs, comforts and privileges (Diangelo, 2011). The argument of black people making an issue of color, so they are racist is a constant returning reaction. This is in line with the notion of reverse racism (Titley, 2016). A term used to describe acts of discrimination and prejudice perpetrated by racial minorities or historically oppressed ethnic groups against individuals belonging to the racial majority or historically dominant ethnic groups. In this reversed accusation of racism resides important new responses to accusations of racism, namely the denial of racism and the debatability of racism (Titley, 2016). The existence of racism is denied because it is something of the past. We are supposed to live in a time of color blindness, and those who mention racial differences are seen to be racist. To speak of racism is making a point of race, to point it out, that is what is seen as racist. The victim role is adopted. This line of thought contributes to the debatability of racism which is also represented in the analyzed public reactions. Here the question of what counts as racist and who gets to define it is contested (Titley, 2016). Through this debatability of racism the denial, delineation and deflection of racism is secured. These new cultural scripts, communicative logic and debatability of racism are new obstacles for anti-racists and need to be studied more intensively.

At stake/at work here is thus maintaining the interests of white privilege. Through these strategies of denial, reversal and debatability of racism, white privilege, power asymmetries and the status quo is being secured. The anti-racist line of thought/reactions and accusations of racism are strategically marginalized and repressed by these tactics.

These are some reactions that demonstrate the notion of white fragility (including reverse racism, denial and debatability of racism):

“Wat beweegt Sylvana Simons om de racisme-kaart te spelen? Het is toch duidelijk dat de anti-racisten het racisme in stand houden? Waarom willen mensen zoals Sylvana racisme in

stand houden? Omdat het iets oplevert. Sylvana is een opportunist, die doet alsof ze opstaat tegen racisme, maar simpelweg beseft dat er geld mee te verdienen is". Source:

<http://www.dutchfreepress.nl/sylvana-simons-beroepsslachtoffer-en-nu-nog-zwarter/>

"Het thema 'racisme' is tegenwoordig klaarblijkelijk hot in Nederland. Maar is dat wel terecht? Los van enkele verwarde idioten, kan ik me niet aan de indruk onttrekken dat vrijwel alle Nederlanders een hoge mate van tolerantie jegens andere rassen, of moet ik zeggen: nationaliteiten?, ontplooit." Source: <http://www.dagelijksestandaard.nl/2016/11/jean-wanningen-gaat-los-op-sylvana-simons-racisme-pleur-op/>

"Ik zit te wachten op een volkert van de Gtje :) want daar vraagt ze elke dag om, klagen om ons, maar madam is zelf de grootste racist van nederland". Source:

<https://www.metronieuws.nl/nieuws/binnenland/2016/12/sylvana-simons-weg-bij-denk-richt-eigen-partij-op>

"Ook ik behoor tot 'alle blanken', mevrouw Simons, en ik voel me door u aangevallen, vernederd, beledigd tot op het bot, racistisch bejegend en gediscrimineerd. Maar dat zal u waarschijnlijk een zorg zijn, tot ik het omdraai". Source: <http://www.columnx.nl/open-brief-aan-sylvana-simons/>

"Afgelopen weekend sloeg Wilfred Genee de spijker op zijn kop toen hij haar recht in het gezicht vertelde dat haar boodschap prima is, maar de manier waarop irritant. Wat ik dus de hele tijd al zeg..." Source: <http://www.amightyblog.nl/tag/sylvana-simons/>

As the public reactions show Sylvana Simons received a hate wave of racism and sexism for publicly addressing racism/white privilege. This does not mean that Sunny Bergman didn't receive any hateful reactions, quite the contrary. She was also attacked for criticizing national issues and disturbing the status quo. Besides receiving a lot of sexist reactions she was also seen as a threat to and traitor of the national identity/culture. Here are some of those public reactions:

"Vieze kk hoer moet met die apen meegaan". Source:

<https://www.vpro.nl/programmas/2doc/2016/wit-is-ook-een-kleur.html>

“Je bent de Nederlandse nationaliteit niet waard stuk stront dat je bent”. Source:

<https://www.vpro.nl/programmas/2doc/2016/wit-is-ook-een-kleur.html>

But there still exists a more hospitable public reception and public position for Bergman than for Simons. As reactions show that people are more receptive, reflective and open for statements made by Bergman. The issue of racism/white privilege is for many people new and with the message made by Bergman they now reflect for the first time on their privileges in society. This thus gives support to the comment demonstrated earlier (*“black figures have been telling this for years, nobody listened. White Sunny Bergman speaks about it, now everybody’s listening”*). This is not to say Simons doesn’t get positive reception (*“Sylvana Simons, je hebt me overtuigd met je waardige betoog”*). But this reaction demonstrates the more wide spread receptiveness of Bergman’s message:

“Hallo mijn naam is M., en ik was zeer tegen jullie bullshit, maar mijn mening is eigenlijk 180 graden gedraaid. Heb net de docu “Zwart als roet” gezien. Ik word hier eigenlijk best wel verdrietig van. Ik schaam me diep zacht gezegd, respect voor jullie. Van mij apart komt er een andere kleur piet! gr M.,.” Source:

http://tijdschriftlover.nl/politiek_en_maatschappij/bergmans_zwart_als_roet_overtuigt_pro-pieters#sthash.cfFrFxTc.dpuf

We can thus state that it does matter who speaks about racism. Sylvana Simons and many other black figures have not gotten the same public reception regarding the issue of racism/white privilege, as Sunny Bergman. Even though Bergman received a wave of hateful sexist reactions, the situation for black women is even worse regarding freedom of speech in the Dutch public sphere, specifically regarding the issue of racism/white privilege. Thus there seems to be a slight public favor for a white person to talk about racism/white privilege. So there is a white male privilege to talk publically address and discuss racism/white privilege. The public position of black women in the Netherlands thus lags pretty far behind. Even regarding an issue black women should be receiving the most public attention and reception for. But many times the black women is still framed as hysterical, angry, playing a victim, defensive and non-rational. Characteristics which in the analyzed public reactions are not attributed to the white woman (Sunny Bergman).

5. Conclusion/Discussion

Analyzing the public life of public issues can entail many things. For this research I looked at the public life of the issue of racism/white privilege, by looking at what role two well-known public figures (Sunny Bergman and Sylvana Simons) played in it, and which public lines of reactions/thought are revolved around the issue and the two public actors. In the last few years this topic has led to a lot of public discussion and uproar, where different lines of thought/reactions revolve around the issue. Particularly Sylvana Simons and Sunny Bergman are two public figures who contributed a lot in the publicness of the issue. After having completed and presented the results of the media content analysis, I wish to state some final conclusions and remarks.

After having answered the sub-questions in the previous section I want to get back to the main research question mentioned before (*how do public reactions differ for black and white spokespersons addressing white privilege/racism, and why?*). The results of the analysis show that there are some similarities between the public reactions on Bergman's and Simons' public statements. It is important to note that even though sexism is not the issue at stake, both these women receive a lot of sexist reactions, showing that female inequality is still very present in the Dutch public sphere. Contrary to the self-image of a tolerant, gender equal society.

From the dominant public line of thought/reactions both are attacked and seen as traitors, for criticizing Dutch society/identity/culture. Both are being demonized for their anti-racist agendas. They thus challenge the conservation of the interests of white privilege, and the dominant socio-cultural identity/imaginary. But there is a difference in the public reactions to Bergman and Simons. Simons does not get the amount of positive feedback as Bergman. Even though both represent almost the same message, the public reactions show that people are more likely to reflect and listen to Bergman than Simons. We can thus conclude that it does matter who speaks about racism/white privilege since there is a paradoxical white privilege to talk about white privilege.

This can be explained by the social and public position of black people in the Netherlands. People with another racial/cultural background are predominantly still seen as outsiders of Dutch society. Due to their racial and cultural background they are not accepted as 'real' Dutch and therefore should not comment or criticize national issues. Their citizenship status is constantly questioned (Schinkel, 2013).

Another explanation for this hateful, racist reactions towards primarily Simons is the concept of white fragility, which leads to the denial, debatability and reversal of racism (Tittley,

2016). These are dangerous increasing phenomena that marginalizes the anti-racist public line of thought/reactions and the signaling, denomination and treatment of racism/white privilege and solidifies the present structures of racism/white privilege.

But the public reactions also show a positive feedback on Bergman and Simons public appearances. The anti-racist public line of thought/reactions supports their message and stands behind them. But there is a small part in this public line of thought/reactions that targets Bergman instead of Simons. As the opinion is that white spokespersons are holding back the public involvement of black people regarding the issue, since black people have a more privileged perspective regarding this issue, could better explain it and need the opportunity more. It is thus not Sylvana Simons which is being targeted by this marginal public line of thought/reactions, but Sunny Bergman.

We can conclude that this research has brought light to some serious social developments and issues. From a social relevant viewpoint this research shows that it is better and more effective to speak of racism/white privilege in the Dutch public sphere if the spokesperson is white. This teaches us that the social and public position of black people in the Netherlands is still very unequal. They are not heard, and specifically not when addressing public issues. And this is not only the response from a radical, extremist minority, as the results have shown that these radical and extremist reactions are a continuation and radicalization of the discourse, imaginary, identity and interests of the dominant majority.

From a scientific relevant viewpoint we can conclude that this research for the first time explored the different public reception of black and white spokespersons addressing racism/white privilege. It shows that it matters, for its effects, if the spokesperson is white or black. Furthermore, this research demonstrated an important new element, phenomena in the public discussion of racism/white privilege that needs more research. This is the increasing debatability, denial and reversal of racism in the public sphere. This is an aspect which has not been fully discussed in this article, but which needs serious investigation, because it plays an increasing role in the public life of the issue of racism/white privilege. This is an increasing new, interesting but dangerous phenomenon, since it displaces the attention on real effects of racism to its meaning, definition and debatability.

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