

Chapter 6

‘Understanding everyday racism’: a case of oppositional realism

1. The other taboo

As outlined in the previous chapter, in 1986, Herman Vuijsje argued for the abolishment of ‘ethnic difference as a Dutch taboo’: since the genocide on the Dutch Jews during the Second World War, the Dutch would feel unjustly inhibited to express negative feelings about members of ethnic minority groups. One of new realism’s most outspoken opponents, Dutch-Surinamese anthropologist Philomena Essed, claims exactly the reverse: if it comes to explaining the white Dutch attitude towards fellow citizens of colour, the word ‘racism’ in Holland is taboo (Essed 1984: 15).¹

In this chapter I will take a closer look at Essed’s work on everyday racism in the Netherlands, especially at the extensive study *Inzicht in alledaags racisme* (Essed 1991a), which was published in English under the title *Understanding Everyday Racism* (Essed 1991b). For many new realists, Essed’s approach is one of the most outspoken examples of oversensitivity regarding issues of ethnicity and race within the Dutch minorities discourse. In Vuijsje’s *Murdered innocence*, for example, Essed is typified as a ‘preacher of guilt and penance’ [*schuld en boete prediker*], and figures as one of those left-wing intellectuals responsible for reinforcing and capitalizing on the Dutch taboo on ethnic difference (Vuijsje 1986: 29-32). In the same vein, Bernadette de Wit once characterized the tendency to victimize members of minority groups as an instance of ‘philomenian’ thinking (De Wit 1991).

In fact, Essed’s work is less representative of the Dutch minorities discourse than these critics suggest. It is much disputed, both outside and within the field of Dutch minority studies. While internationally, Essed’s work is part of a growing body of critical discourse on issues of race and ethnicity,² in the context of the Dutch minorities discourse, her studies of everyday racism still stand pretty much on their own.³

I chose Essed’s work as a case of analysis for several, and at points contradictory reasons. On the one hand, reading *Understanding Everyday Racism* as a white Dutch is an uncomfortable experience. The text reproaches, castigates and denounces Dutch society for both its racism and its denial of racism. I will not conceal the feelings of irritation and frustration that accompanied much of my reading. On the other hand, I whole-heartedly subscribe to its effort to put the issue of everyday racism on the scientific and political agenda. Everyday racism is a much denied, and difficult to pinpoint wrong, inflicted upon people of colour in a world where white still is the ‘colour of no colour’. In the course of my readings, I hope to be able to do justice to and account for this mixture of valuations.

The aim of this part of the case study is to check the extent to which the discourse of *Understanding Everyday Racism* can be read as a case of situated knowledges. In my opinion, Essed’s work is of special interest, because it testifies to a considerable affinity with what I referred to as the *normative* dimension of situated knowledges.

1.1 *Everyday racism*

Throughout her work, Philomena Essed has shown a deep concern for the necessity to expose and change a reality that in her view, especially in the Netherlands, is concealed and difficult to grasp: the reality of what she coined 'everyday racism'. Essed first attracted the attention of a wider Dutch audience in 1984 with the publication of *Alledaags racisme* [Everyday racism] (Essed 1984). The book gives an account of empirical research concerning the experiences of black women in the Netherlands and the US in everyday meetings and communications with white people.⁴ Essed finds that, in their everyday life, the women she interviewed are persistently confronted with racism.

In 1991, the Dutch translation of Essed's doctoral dissertation *Inzicht in alledaags racisme* [Understanding everyday racism] appeared (Essed 1991a).⁵ It basically builds on the research scheme and aim of the earlier book. Here also, Essed reports of her interviews with black women in the Netherlands and the US on their experiences with everyday racism. Whereas the earlier work concentrates on individual accounts of experiences of everyday racism, in this study the presentation of empirical results is preceded by elaborate chapters on theories of racism and methodology, which constitute the scientific underpinning of Essed's concept of everyday racism.⁶

The subject matter of Essed's studies is not the nature of racism in general. That is assumed to be a much described, analyzed and disputed phenomenon in many other studies. Essed conceives of racism as the "cognitions, actions and procedures that contribute to the development and perpetuation of a system in which Whites dominate Blacks" (Essed 1991b: 39), whereas everyday racism is defined as "the integration of racism into everyday situations through practices (cognitive and behavioral [...]) that activate underlying power relations" (1991b: 50).⁷ According to Essed, the Netherlands and the US are white-dominated societies, in which "the superiority of Euro-American culture is taken for granted" (viii).

With the concept of everyday racism, Essed wishes to bridge the gap between macro and micro aspects of racism and to transcend the classical distinctions between institutional and individual racism, and between structure and agency. Thus, she attempts to drive home the insight that systemic features severely constrain the actions of individuals, but that individuals nevertheless are sometimes able to resist such constraints (see 1991b: 38).

In the first four chapters of *Understanding Everyday Racism* (henceforth: *UER*), Essed discusses practices and theories of racism, and renders an extensive account of her methodological choices. Chapters 5 and 6 consist of interpretations of the 55 interviews held with black women in the Netherlands and the US. The fifth chapter deals with the accounts of one Dutch-Surinamese woman, Rosa N., in particular, whereas the sixth gives an elaborate overview of all kinds of racism black women are confronted with on an everyday basis: from denial to violence, from patronizing to withholding feedback, from humiliation to failing to protest. The last chapter draws conclusions: concerning the extent to which everyday racism systematically marks the experiences of black women, the usefulness of the concept of everyday racism in showing this, the way black women acquire knowledge of racism, the significant differences in this respect between women in the US and the Netherlands, and, finally, the oppositional strategies available to challenge racism as a systematic, everyday problem in both the US and the Netherlands.

Essed's study concentrates on the ways in which racism manifests itself at the level of everyday interactions between black and white people. She emphasizes that racism should *not* be seen as a characteristic of individuals, but rather as a process "which connects structural forces of racism with

routine situations in everyday life” (1991b: 2). Although individuals are the actors in practices where such processes take place (and where particular individuals then can be picked out as the agents of racism), Essed states that her study is about racist practices, not individuals (1991b: viii). Despite these claims, however, many readers did conceive of her work as dealing with and condemning the racism of (white) individuals - one reason why reactions in the Dutch media, both in 1984 and in 1991, were mixed: Essed’s work was much appreciated, but also fiercely contested.

1.2 *A mixed reception*

In the Netherlands, some welcomed Essed’s work for its attempt to finally break through the remarkable silence and denial of Dutch racism which black people nevertheless experience on a daily basis.⁸ For Anet Bleich, for instance, *Alledaags racisme* constituted a ‘standard work’, and an invitation to its white Dutch readers to try and put themselves (just “a little bit”) in the place of their ‘ethnic’ fellow-citizens. Then, according to Bleich, they will see that these ‘others’ are not after some sort of people’s tribunal, but that “the only thing asked for is a bit of understanding, a bit of humanity, a bit of civilization” (Bleich 1984b). And in the prominent academic journal of *Migrantenstudies* [Migrant studies] Essed’s doctoral dissertation is highly recommended as “masterly and well argued”, because of the “sensitive way in which it combined a clear conceptual framework with an in-depth empirical inquiry” and its “refreshing attempt to break through all kinds of disciplinary boundaries” (Solomos 1993).⁹

Others were much more critical. Though one author acknowledges that it will contribute to the becoming aware of racial discrimination, he doubts the *scientific* pretensions of *Alledaags racisme* (i.e. Essed 1984). He finds that it is begging the question: the thesis that the Netherlands is a racist society would wrongfully constitute both the starting point and the conclusion of Essed’s argument. He finds that results are presented in such a way that they are not falsifiable. Moreover, the work would run counter to the “universalistic character of science” in its privileging of the experiences of black people and its exclusion of whites as knowledgeable subjects of racism (Bovenkerk 1984). Another (newspaper) commentator is mainly irritated by the accusatory tone she hears in Essed’s voice, which would label all white Dutch as racists: “[O]nly some hide it better than others and those actually are the worst, because they are not only prejudiced, they are hypocritical as well” (Brunt 1985). One particularly dismissive review met with vehement reactions. The journalist in question, Hans Moll¹⁰, denounces Essed’s dissertation as ‘unscientific’, “full of tendentious pronouncements discharging in vague accusations”, and “replete with statements which are not substantiated” (Moll 1991). He gives vent to his indignation regarding the members of the scientific community, who, according to him, cowardly kept silent out of fear to be called a racist. Angry readers of the *NRC Handelsblad* accuse the author of having done Essed’s work great injustice.¹¹

To sum it up, *UER* is celebrated by some as the much needed beginning of an inter-racial dialogue on matters of race and ethnicity in Holland, whereas others reject it because it would make any real (ex)-change impossible.¹² The project receives praise for its success in convincingly laying bare the reality of everyday racism, but is also criticized for its neglect of basic “logical, methodological and research - technical” rules (Bovenkerk 1984).

This mixed reception in the Netherlands differs significantly from the more straightforward positive appraisals of Essed’s work in the Anglo-American academic world. Thus, Essed’s first book (Essed 1990) is perceived as having made “unique contributions to the literatures in race relations and communication” (Houston 1992). Whereas the second (Essed 1991b) is assessed as a “marvelously subtle

and skilful report” (Lokare 1992), as developing “an original and important new theoretical framework” (Feagin 1992) and “a brilliant cross-cultural analysis” (Rice 1993).¹³

The vehement discussions engendered by Essed’s work in the Dutch media could be perceived as proof that, indeed, in the Netherlands, to speak of ‘racism’ when it concerns the relationships between whites and people of colour is quite taboo.¹⁴ Particularly the Dutch-Surinamese women interviewed testify of feelings of bitterness and powerlessness, caused by their frequent confrontation with covert forms of racism, which they, according to Essed, found difficult to protest against, because of the self-image of a tolerant people that the (white) Dutch would cherish (1991b: 107). Thus, by starting from the experiences of the victims of this everyday racism and putting their personal accounts into a more structural framework, *UER* tries to give voice to these ‘subjugated knowledges’ and contribute to the empowerment of black women in the Netherlands.

By passing on black women’s knowledge of the mechanisms of everyday racism, *UER* indeed is an effort to ‘murder’ the innocence of white Dutch. Its meticulous descriptions of occurrences of racism in everyday situations, and the negative impact these seemingly small incidents have on the basic feelings of well-being of black women, are attempts to create a moral sensitivity among white readers regarding the harm inflicted upon black people by everyday racism.¹⁵ In giving voice to experiences of black people which were mostly vague and unarticulated, the author wishes to make everyday racism into a legitimate subject of contestation, and to endow it with the status of a problem that can be recognized, referred to and judged as such, by both black and white Dutch.

In this respect, the project of *UER* can be compared with the coining of the term ‘everyday sexism’ by Western white feminists. When, for instance, in the 1960s Betty Friedan tried to give voice to the vague feelings of discontent, shared by many (from hindsight: white, middle-class, higher educated, heterosexual) American women, she described this as a search for naming ‘the problem that has no name’ (Friedan 1963). Friedan succeeded in re-writing the mystery of feminine discomfort into a political story about sexism and sex-discrimination. At present, *The Feminine Mystique* can be considered as one of the founding moments of the Second Feminist Wave in the Western world. Feminist theorizing of the structural impact of ‘sex’ and sexism enabled women to give name to all kinds of uncomfortable and humiliating experiences they had to put up with in a male-dominated society. Beside vague dissatisfactions, also the more excessive and violent sides of sexism such as sexual harassment, father-daughter incest or rape within marriage, were ‘made real’ through the hard work of feminist researchers and critics. As I emphasized in my discussion of feminist theorizing, the ‘abnormality’ of these voices, like Friedan’s at the time, contains a potential for inventing new vocabularies, for a revolutionary change vis-à-vis the dominant discourse of gender. Similarly, the contemporary voices of Black feminists strike a dissonant chord within the dominant discourse of race and ethnicity.

1.3. *Anti-racism and feminism*

In the beginning of the 1980s, Essed was one of the first to put the issue of racism on the agenda of the Dutch women’s movement. To convince her white audience of the need for an active antiracist feminism, she made extensive use of analogies between experiences of racism and experiences of sexism. Thus, just like men are endowed with a blind spot when it comes to sexism, so do white people have a blind spot to

racism. And just like masculinity functions as the norm and makes anything associated with femininity inferior, so the norm of whiteness turns every person of colour into a 'lesser' person. The author relates how she herself suddenly understood why she was so attracted to the discourse of *Black Power*: "Now it was clear. What I had underlined was purely feminist! Race could be replaced by sex, racism by sexism, black by woman. Related, interchangeable" (Essed 1982: 30). It is precisely because of their experiences with sexism, Essed finds, that white women are in a better position than white men to understand the mechanisms and effects of racism. Nevertheless, just like for men who would want to be free of sexism, for white feminists to become "free of racism in thought, feeling and action" a lot of work is still to be done. The big problem, Essed observes, is that even white feminists, despite the fact that they know how oppression feels, repudiate responsibility when it comes to acknowledging the racism women of colour experience on a day to day basis.

During the first Dutch Summer University in Women's Studies [*Zomeruniversiteit Vrouwenstudies*], held in 1981 in Amsterdam, issues concerning women of colour were captured under the denominator of 'foreign women'. Thus, Essed's own paper on feminism and racism was presented in a series of sessions about women in Nicaragua, women in the GDR, women in China, and methods of anthropological research. In a note, the organizers of this session, among whom Essed herself, admit the awkwardness of the combination, and explain that, for want of anything better, Surinamese and Antillean women with a Dutch passport are to be reckoned as part of this category (Beelaerts 1981: 10). During the follow-up of this national event of Dutch women's studies, the 1983 Winter University in Nijmegen, black women spoke out more collectively by protesting against the whiteness of the conference. Anger was expressed about the way in which issues concerning black women this time had to be sought for under the headings of 'non-western cultures' or 'non-western women'. The knowledges produced within this "white tower of women's studies" were denounced as ethnocentric and racist (Loewenthal 1984). The Winter University constituted the cradle of the first multi-cultural, black and migrant women's movement in the Netherlands.¹⁶ Loewenthal's challenging lecture also triggered off quite a debate in the Dutch Journal of Women's Studies [*Tijdschrift voor Vrouwenstudies*]. To summarize it schematically, adherents of a more constructivist approach objected to what they deem to be a deterministic and antagonistic 'black' versus 'white' approach, and proposed instead to emphasize ethnic diversity and the different ways in which different women are affected by racism (Leeman and Saharso 1985; 1986). Their proposal receives an indignant response: highlighting diversity would deny the specificity of racist oppression, as well as the need to distinguish between perpetrators and victims, between those who are accountable for and those who suffer from racism, i.e. between 'white' and 'black' (Loewenthal and Kempadoo 1986).¹⁷

The program of the last large-scale Summer University in Groningen 1987 offered a more integrated approach of issues of race and ethnicity across thematic issues, as well as a separate program on 'black and white'. Still many black women felt they were not really taken seriously, and raised the matter of what they perceived as mechanisms of exclusion and marginalization in an open letter to the organization and participants.¹⁸

During the last decade, networks of black and migrant women have been extended and increasingly professionalized. But the exchange between 'white' and 'black' perspectives still leaves much to be desired. This, for instance, is illustrated by the fact that the Dutch *Journal of Women's Studies* did not pay any attention to Essed's doctoral dissertation. In 1991, the assumption apparently was that arguments about the appropriate relation between feminism and anti-racism were exhausted. Within this circle, the discussion was closed, or perhaps better: for the time being decided in favour of more constructivist perspectives on issues of race and ethnic difference.¹⁹

2. Oppositional knowledges

2.1 *The standpoint of black women*

The discourse of *UER* shows great affinity with the epistemology of black feminist standpoint thinking.²⁰ To begin with, the *experiences of black women* are taken as the basis of theorizing about everyday racism. The reasons are twofold. First, until now, Essed claims, issues of racism have largely been studied from a white perspective. It is high time to call attention to black perceptions of racism: a matter of some necessary affirmative action in theorizing. Secondly, black people have a *better insight* in the characteristics of everyday racism, because of their position as the victims of racism. Whites tend to ignore or deny the reality of racism, because they have vested interests in keeping up the image of society as tolerant and non-discriminatory.²¹ Black people can see through this dominant vision, precisely because they constantly are confronted with the contrast between ideology and practice. Therefore, because of their experiences with racism and their ensuing *double consciousness*, “Black people can develop profound and sophisticated knowledge about the reproduction of racism” (Essed 1991b: 1-2).

Also in line with standpoint theory is the author’s perception that black women’s knowledge of racism did not come ‘naturally’ with their position in a racist society. Rather, it is built on a variety of skills: on the ability to analyze, compare, interpret and evaluate specific experiences. In line with this, the research project of *UER* must be seen as a ‘reconstruction’ of “how Black women acquired knowledge about racism” (1991b: 9). It would be unjust to consider these accounts of racism as merely ad hoc stories, for “[t]hey have a specific structure that reflects various knowledge systems” (9)

Finally, Essed shares a belief in *epistemological realism* with most adherents of standpoint theory. Just like Nancy Hartsock believes that a feminist standpoint brings us closer to “the essence of reality” in its exposure of “the inhumanity of human relations” (Hartsock 1983: 303), Essed subscribes to a view of ‘correct’ knowledge as “knowledge which corresponds with the world” (1991b: 56), and which makes it a necessary step for the researcher to check the validity of the subjective reality constructions of the black women interviewed.

However, Essed is not an out and out standpoint thinker. For one thing, *UER* does not go along with the essentializing move, made by standpoint thinkers such as Nancy Hartsock or Patricia Hill Collins. She does not, for instance, suggest that black women stand closer to nature, have a more relational self, or share an Afrocentric world view. The knowledge that *UER* wishes to bring to the fore is a form of *political* knowledge, which enables black women to identify cases of unacceptable behaviour as manifestations of racism. Next to this, the author of *UER* does not speak as a black female intellectual who develops a certain standpoint on the basis of experiences of (other) black women. Instead, she presents herself as a scientific researcher who emphatically strives for objectivity.

In the following three sections, the points of agreement and difference between *UER* and standpoint thinking will be explored further. I will in particular focus on Essed’s endorsement of realism (2.2), her view of representation (2.3), and the claims to objectivity made in *UER* (2.4).

2.2 *Realism*

At the end of *UER*, readers are reminded that “[the] purpose of this study was not to develop a theory of change but to provide a description and analysis of reality ...” (1991b: 296). The presumption of the

persistent *denial* of racism by white US and Dutch citizens makes it understandable why the discourse of *UER* is committed to what I will call a position of *oppositional realism*. Its rhetoric testifies to the author's expectation that the outcomes of the project will meet with a lot of scepticism. Thus, it is emphasized that the way racism marks black women's lives "has seldom been demonstrated in so much detail" (283). The empirical data 'defy' perceptions (283), and 'demonstrate[s]' the repressive nature of the ideology of cultural tolerance (291). Likewise, Rosa N.'s account "features sharply the Dutch nature of racism" (290), while the experiences of the black women interviewed 'expose' the 'hidden agendas' of racism (291). The realism of *UER* is oppositional, because it runs counter to prevailing assessments of reality.

The concept of 'everyday racism' is developed in order to be able to grasp the impact of racism on the everyday lives of black people. With the notion of 'everyday', the author wishes to indicate both the seemingly ordinary character of such events, and their not so ordinary, because devastating long-term effects. The concept of everyday racism bridges the gap between agency- and structure-oriented approaches and wants to cover both the micro level of specific events and the macro aspect of racism as a system of domination.

In order to convincingly prove the reality of everyday racism, it therefore has to be shown that the individual experiences related by black women are not 'single events', but part of "a complex of cumulative practices [...] unified by repetition of similar practices" (1991b: 288). Analyses of the individual experiences of black women (all in all, Essed listened to the accounts of some 2000 racist incidents) form the basis for more generalizing statements about the nature of everyday racism. Everyday racism thus emerges as a whole of heterogeneous manifestations which betray one underlying structure of racism. The concept of the 'everyday' refers to the seemingly *ordinary* and *repetitive*, yet always *unexpected* nature of racism.

In the course of her argument, Essed makes some valuable programmatic remarks about what it means to be *knowledgeable* about racism. Thus she observes that "[k]nowledge and a full understanding of racism encompass the availability in memory of the relevant cognitions to *make a distinction* between racist situations and nonracist situations" (1991b: 73, [my italics, bp]). A similar remark returns in the final chapter, where it is concluded that this inquiry has shown that knowledgeable black women "become more sensitive to information that may be either consistent or inconsistent with the hypothesis that racism is involved. Among other things this characteristic *distinguishes* their knowledgeable perceptions from prejudiced perceptions, which would only be receptive to hypothesis-consistent information" (284 [my italics, bp]).

However, the urge to prove the everyday reality of racism contradicts this view of knowledge as the capability to make distinctions. Considering the programmatic remarks on what it means to be knowledgeable, it might for instance be expected that *UER* would contain both (analyses of) accounts of 'really' racist, and accounts of 'seemingly' racist situations. This is not the case. In the discourse of *UER*, *every* reported encounter between 'black' and 'white' involves some form of racism: if not immediately visible, than in its more covered forms. As a consequence, the respondents' individual stories become mere *illustrations* of one explanatory framework: the all-pervasive, inescapable and undeniable structure of racism.

My point here is not so much whether the incidents related are *valid* examples of racism. In most cases, I agree with the assessment of author and respondents, that the events related are indisputably cases of racism. The stories told often evoked feelings of indignation and weariness in me. As Rosa N.'s account of the blatant racist remarks made by one of her medical professors, who in his lecture spoke of foreigners

being so 'stupid' as to lose a hand or a foot during their work in the factory, and who would cost Dutch government a lot of money if they became permanently disabled - not to speak of the fact that his words aroused hilarity rather than protest among Rosa's fellow-students (Essed 1991b: 149). Or her report of more 'subtle' incidents, such as the case where a medical student presented a patient as coming from Surinam, after which he apologized to Rosa, while another person started patting her on the back - as if saying that a person is from Surinamese descent would in itself already be an insult (Essed 1991b: 150-151).²² My point rather is that we read *solely* (reconstructions of) experiences with racism - or at least situations which *should* be perceived as racist, even if the respondent did not experience them as such. Thus *all* inter-racial communications reported are infused with racism.²³ This does not only hold for the personal accounts by the black women interviewed. The same strategy is followed in the more general expositions about race and ethnic relationships, for instance in governmental policies. I will take a closer look at two fragments, of which I will argue that the realities described leave room for a more differentiated reading than the ones put forward by Essed.

Thus, in an exposition about the nature and manifestations of Dutch racism, the housing policy of Dutch government is characterized as a policy of "dispersing Blacks throughout the country" (1991b: 22). According to the author, the governmental argument that this is done to prevent ghettoization should be unmasked as a rationalization. For "the real political implications" are different: "Dispersion is a way to undermine resistance to racial oppression" (22). In passing, reference is also made to "the protests frequently heard from the Dutch against Blacks in their neighbourhoods" - which likewise is perceived as a sign of racism, now from the white Dutch population. What, however, goes unnoticed in this interpretation, is that the denounced housing policy apparently also goes *against* racist tendencies among the population of the neighbourhoods in question - which in my view leaves room for the interpretation that Dutch housing policy must have something of an anti-racist edge as well. Instead, the discourse of *UER* provides us with the puzzling phenomenon of a racist policy that meets with resistance from an equally racist population.

Another example: when the author addresses the issue of the concealed racism in the Netherlands, she observes that "[t]he current norm that racism is 'wrong' has a certain disempowering impact on individual members of the dominant group. Today the almost universal rejection of racism is often experienced by Whites as a restriction. They feel they can no longer express what they feel about Blacks because others will accuse them of racism. This is experienced as an unfair situation" (1991b: 40). This generalizing statement refers to the particular tendencies towards a 'new realism' in Dutch public debates on minorities. It may be clear from my reading of this debate in the previous chapter that I agree with Essed's characterization of the position of Dutch opinion leaders such as Herman Vuijsje, whose objections to the so-called taboo on ethnic difference indeed seem to call for the freedom to express negative feelings about ethnic minorities. In this fragment, Essed takes these public spokespersons as representative for all white Dutch, who would experience the "current norm that racism is 'wrong'" and the "universal rejection of racism" as an unwelcome restriction (40). However, this interpretation leaves it an open question *who* those 'others' are who subscribe to the said 'current norm' and 'universal rejection of racism' and who would accuse one of racism. The general wordings suggest it to be (almost) all people. But, if that would hold, would not this include the majority of, or at least many, white Dutch as well?

In the discourse of *UER*, then, to be knowledgeable, in my view, does not involve the ability to differentiate. Considering its practice of interpretation, it rather appears to refer to the skill to lay bare a

hidden reality, the reality of (covered) racism. This makes for an image of the knowledgeable subject as a keen and skilful detective, who will not let herself be deceived by appearances, but detect, not so much the perpetrator, but rather the crime itself, where and whenever it is committed. This subject, moreover, is deemed more knowledgeable, according as she is able to detect *more* of such similar crimes.

Hence, in order to prove the *reality* of (everyday) racism, *UER*'s oppositional knowledge leaves little room for differentiation. Although differences among whites are sometimes referred to, they are glossed over in favour of general characterizations which put whites collectively in the category of 'perpetrators' of racism. Differences between black people receive more attention, but, as I will show in the next section, only up to a certain extent. Differentiations are made between kinds of racism, but they still are all manifestations of the same underlying structure.²⁴ And although the starting-point of research consists of the careful assessment of concrete and particular situations, the emphasis lies on their status as only 'the tip of the iceberg'.²⁵

Racism is thus presented as an omnipresent and undeniable reality for both blacks and whites. Blacks cannot deny their position as victims: "Because racism is inherent in the nature of the social order, Black women remain locked in oppressive relations even when, on a local level, there may be small victories in the struggle against racism" (289). Whereas whites, as members of the dominant group, are supposed to be 'naturally' reluctant to give up their prejudice and their position as the superior and privileged group.

2.3 Representation

In its representation of the subjugated knowledges of black women, the discourse of *UER* contains a double movement. On the one hand, by focusing at the characteristics of black women's knowledge, the epistemological positions of researcher and respondents are constructed as *equal*. Doing research among one's equals would foster an attitude of respect, and stimulate the researcher to take her respondents seriously. On the other hand, the author puts herself into a *meta-position* vis-à-vis the respondents, in so far as she is the one who is to check the validity of their accounts. Essed very aptly captures this dual character of her research project when she typifies it as a 'methodology within a methodology' (55). *UER* "is about the understanding of everyday racism through examination of Black women's understanding of racism in everyday life" (55). The concept of 'understanding' in *UER* thus refers both to the general sense of ordinary people's comprehension of a particular event (also called 'understanding' with a small 'u'), and to special cases of understanding, namely scientific processes of interpretation of events (also called 'Understanding' with a capital 'U'). In the above quoted passage, the second 'understanding' applies to the 'understanding' of the black women interviewed, whereas the first refers to the scientifically accounted for 'Understanding' of black women's comprehension.

Thus, Essed explicitly introduces a methodological distinction between the researcher's 'Understanding' and the respondents' 'understanding', a distinction which in fact relativizes their afore mentioned equality. With this, Essed is able to substantiate her claim that a certain closeness between researcher and respondents (in this case: because of their shared position as educated black women in white-dominated societies) leads to respect, but does not imply uncritical acceptance. Moreover, by making a distinction between the researcher's account and those of the women interviewed, the author does not hide behind the voices of her respondents. This 'authoritarian' element reserves room for the author to be called into account for her account of the black women's stories. It also makes it harder to

reduce these stories to one body of 'black female knowledge'. It opens up space for differences between representative and represented, for different understandings of, even dissensus about incidents of everyday racism among black women.²⁶

The methodological distinction between 'understanding' and 'Understanding' is in accordance with ideas in feminist standpoint thinking about the relationship between experience and knowledge. For Essed also, experiences of racism are a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for understanding racism.²⁷ Because they always already have a discursive dimension, experiences do not only have an individual, but also a collective and a cognitive dimension. Consequently, "[e]xperiences include specific (micro)events, but experience can also be seen as the impact of knowledge of general (structural) phenomena on one's definition of reality" (58). As experiences can only be made available for academic investigation by means of verbal reconstructions, the appropriate data for inquiry cannot be 'experiences per se', but have to be *reliable reconstructions* of experiences.

The problem, however, with this (in itself justified) assumption that experiences cannot be taken at face value, is that it detracts from the afore mentioned inscribed difference between the author as representative, and the respondents as the ones represented. For this openness to differences builds upon another difference, installed earlier on and partly prior to the actual process of inquiry and analysis, i.e. the difference between *knowledgeable* and *not knowledgeable* accounts of racism.

As already indicated, Essed draws on the stories of 55 respondents from the US (California) and the Netherlands. It concerns black women with a higher educational (mostly academic) background, living in Western, white-dominated societies - a condition they share with the researcher.²⁸ Referring to feminist tendencies within the social sciences to do research among one's equals, Essed emphasizes that such closeness makes interviewees feel more free to explore their experiences and feelings. The researcher's involvement would engender more reliable knowledge because respondents' accounts will be taken more seriously.

Their social position, however, is not the main reason why these particular 55 women constitute the group of respondents. Several times the author draws attention to the fact that the women interviewed are 'a select group' (77), whose willingness to participate in a research project about experiences of everyday racism could be regarded as a sign of their involvement with and awareness of the problem of racism. The women were "familiar with the idea of problematizing racism" (4). This implies their 'political involvement' with racism, which is perceived as a necessary condition for acquiring knowledge of racism.

Almost all women perceive themselves as knowledgeable, that is: as able to recognize racism when it occurs.²⁹ This is confirmed by the author when she describes them as 'articulate' subjects who "understand the issue of racism, have practical experience with the problem, are able to discuss different sides of the problem, and are able to give detailed descriptions of manifestations of racism" (55).

The criteria used to select respondents include the extent to which the women could be expected to act as reliable witnesses regarding their personal experiences with racism. Hence, the closeness between researcher and respondents involves more than their shared educational and racial background. Because of their propounded ability to give adequate interpretations and evaluations of particular situations, the respondents are also capable of taking a nearly scientific attitude regarding issues of race. In other words, they are expected to follow the same procedure as a scientific researcher would do.

Whether the women indeed did follow such a procedure is checked regarding each separate

account. In order to “to test accounts for comprehension of racist events” (77), the author interprets the reports of racist incidents with the help of a specific discourse-analytic schema (for a discussion of the subsequent steps of this test procedure, see the next section). Their reliability, to be sure, does not concern the respondent’s ability to recall how the incident in question affected her personally. It rather concerns her ‘understanding’ of the incident, that is: her ability to assess whether the incident was *in fact* an incidence of racism or not.

Thus, some of the respondents are reported to mention examples of unfair treatment, which they do not label as racist. According to the author, however, “[i]n various cases they gave enough other relevant information concerning the situation *for me* to make the *objective* conclusion that they had been subjected to racism” (78)[my emphasis, bp]). The conclusion is that the women in question miss “the basic condition for the comprehension of racism”, namely to identify themselves as ‘Black’ (78).³⁰

More generally, the Surinamese-Dutch women are considered less informed than the US black women. Surinamese women’s tendency, for instance, to explain Dutch racism in terms of culture, ethnicity, inequality or ignorance, rather than in terms of structure, race, conflict and power, as most US women do, is explained by their lack of historical orientation, their acquisition of knowledge only ‘indirectly; their being “misinformed about the role of the Dutch in Surinam” (110), and their ‘internalization’ of the white Dutch ideology of cultural pluralism (108). In her conclusions, Essed likewise suggests a difference in quality between the explanatory knowledge of the US and the Surinamese-Dutch women. When black women in the Netherlands are observed to explain racism in terms of white-Dutch ignorance, Essed imputes this to their “internalization of the discourse of tolerance and ‘good intentions’” - whereas, in her own understanding, racism in the Netherlands is a problem which is ‘much worse’ (287). The fact that, in these cases, the author looks for explanations of the perceptions of the Surinamese women indicates that she finds the absence of critical remarks problematic - not in accordance with what could reasonably be expected. Moreover, the explanations given suggest that theorizing racism in terms of structure, race, conflict and power is more suitable to understand the Dutch situation. The suggestion is that if the Surinamese women were more conscious and critical, they would phrase their experiences of Dutch racism in the same terms as the US black women.³¹

In these cases, the discourse of *UER*, instead of leaving room for differences or disagreement, simply disqualifies respondents as knowledgeable subjects. In other words, the scientific ‘Understanding’ of everyday racism is based on accounts which are first (scientifically) qualified and selected as ‘understandings’ of everyday racism. The afore mentioned *closeness* (or equality) between researcher and respondents thus appears to boil down to the construction of a considerable degree of *sameness* (or identity) between the ‘understandings’ of researcher and respondents. Differences and disagreements are allowed for, but only within the confines of a particular, scientifically approved, understanding of everyday racism.

As a consequence, the voices of researcher and respondents often merge into one. The author’s role as representative, initially made visible by the methodological distinction between ‘Understanding’ and ‘understanding’, in second instance becomes invisible again. Distinctions between statements about ‘black women’s accounts of everyday racism’, and statements about ‘everyday racism’ are rare, transitions from one kind of claim to the other are not marked. Moreover, *UER* frequently suggests to speak for, and address the experiences of black women in general - ignoring the earlier methodological steps by which those subjects and accounts which were considered *not* ‘knowledgeable’ (either in their own view, or in the opinion of the researcher) were excluded.

Thus, the selected reliable data for *UER* appear to consist of those understandings of racism which already fit the theoretical framework used by the author to analyze those same data. In other words: the project of *UER* seems to suffer from a circular design, in which the results are already predetermined by the input.³²

2.4 Objectivity

The accounts of black women, selected in *UER* as knowledgeable accounts, are presented as the objective data for outlining the structure of everyday racism. In the third and fourth chapter of the book the author explicates the *procedure* by which it can be assessed whether a certain narrated event indeed counts as racist. This six-steps procedure is assumed to be followed by those black women who are knowledgeable about racism. The first five steps are called ‘interpretive’, the last ‘evaluative’. The distinction suggests a clear-cut distinction between value-free, objective interpretation on the one hand, and the subsequent evaluative judgement of the situation on the other hand.³³ However, following the outline of these subsequent phases, the boundaries between fact and value, between objective and subjective assessments become rather porous.

The first step toward understanding everyday racism, according to Essed’s procedure, is to decide whether a specific practice or behaviour is *acceptable* or not. In this respect, the author emphasizes that the ‘situational knowledge’, required to be able to adequately interpret questions of acceptability, is culturally specific and as such always “subject to change” (Essed 1991b: 79). Still, the procedural outline continues as if what counts as acceptable behaviour could be established in an objective manner. Thus, ‘covert racism’ is defined as “behaviour that *seems* normal but that is *in fact* not acceptable in that specific situation” (80 [my emphasis, bp]). In my view, such an objectifying characterization neglects that what counts as acceptable behaviour often is a contested matter, not only *among* cultures, but also *within* a particular culture or society. In other words: to interpret certain behaviour as (un)acceptable indeed requires taking into account the contextual features of the situation at hand, but, in the end, it still means that one takes a stand in a morally charged situation. In my view, Essed’s description of this first procedural step takes insufficient account of this. Thus, she claims that “if the interpreter feels the event is unacceptable, when, *objectively*, it has to be considered acceptable, the *subjective* judgment must be seen as expressing insufficient situational knowledge” (80 [my emphasis, bp]). The ascribed qualities of objectivity and subjectivity here, in my view, mask the actual *disagreement* in such a case between respondent and researcher, as well as the fact that, ultimately, it is the researcher who takes on the *authority* to decide who is right.³⁴

The same holds for the second step discerned: the assessment of the *excusability* of the unacceptable behaviour in question. The logic of this step is explained as follows: “When *objectively* acceptable excuses are *subjectively* experienced as unacceptable, *subjective* assessments of the event as racist must be considered *objectively* invalid” (80 [emphasis mine, bp]). Again, the additions of subjectivity and objectivity gloss over the normativity of the conclusion about the excusability, consequently non-racist, nature of the unacceptable behaviour in question.³⁵ And, again, the ascriptions of subjectivity and objectivity conceal the apparent *disagreement* between researcher and respondent, they deny the essentially contested nature of such decisions.

During the third procedural step, the interpreter will try to find out whether the unacceptable behaviour directed at her has to do with her being black. If this is the case³⁶, so Essed, then “there are no reasonable excuses for discrimination” (80). The ‘surplus value’ of this third step involves the assess

ment of the race-discriminatory character of the incident, as it is suggested that we are already talking about unacceptable, inexcusable behaviour per se. Which to me seems too neat an account, if we look at the discussion of at least some events later on in the book. When, for instance, one is asked where one comes from (191), when one is complimented by a teacher for one's 'excellent Dutch' (202/203), or offered help in finding one's way in town (246), in my interpretation, in cases of white-white, or black-black communications, this would mostly be perceived as acceptable, if not friendly behaviour. Only when (perceived as) race-discriminatory (that is: when it concerns a particular treatment because of one's race), such behaviour might turn out to be problematic - not the other way around. Either way, like the first and the second, the third step in the procedure of understanding everyday racism clearly involves a mixture of empirical and normative judgements.

The remainder of the procedure leading to the 'understanding of everyday racism', heads from (supposedly interpretive) assessments of behaviour as *race-discriminatory* to (supposedly evaluative) assessment of behaviour as *racist*. In my view, however, these subsequent steps do not bring about a further refinement of judgements. That is: they give no indication as to which events could be considered examples of race-discrimination, but *not* of racism. Thus, step 4, which addresses the question "Is the Specific Event Excusable?", leads to only one (right) answer: a categorical 'no'. If an interpreter would answer with a 'yes', the 'objective assessment' would have to be that this respondent has "no general knowledge of racism" (82). With step 5, the interpreter asks "Is the Event Socially Significant?" The only acceptable answer here is a categorical 'yes'. If a respondent would consider this particular event not significant, she would testify, again, to a lack of general knowledge of racism (82). In other words: if the procedure is followed correctly, every case of race-discrimination will turn out to be a case of racism.

To summarize my difficulties: most of the time it is impossible to first judge whether a particular behaviour is (not) acceptable and excusable in itself, only to find out in second instance whether it has to do with race. Moreover, the suggested conceptual distinction between race-discrimination and racism has no distinguishing effect: if an interpreter follows the procedure correctly, every instance of race-discrimination comes out as an instance of racism. Finally, contrary to the suggested separation of interpretive and evaluative moments, all interpretive steps actually consist of mixtures of empirical and normative judgements. In other words: in its rectilinear outline, the suggested procedure for understanding everyday racism contains little to no room for the subject's sensitivity to the complexities and ambiguities of a situation at hand.

With these critical notes I emphatically do *not* want to suggest that it *does* make sense to make a (descriptive/normative) distinction between instances of race-discrimination and racism. Inexcusable, unacceptable behaviour towards another person because of his/her race in my opinion indeed should be labelled as disreputable race-discriminatory or racist behaviour. The point rather is that there seems to be no interpretive or evaluative difference between race-discrimination and racism at this phase in the procedure, when instances of acceptable or excusable behaviour were already ruled out by the foregoing steps. Neither do I mean to suggest that, because the procedure involves mixtures of empirical and normative judgements, assessments of events as racist would thus be invalid. On the contrary, in the majority of cases brought to the fore (though not in all) I side with the oppositional interpretations of the events related. My critical notes are rather meant to show how values and interests play a constitutive role in processes of interpretation, which therefore cannot be claimed to start from nor to lead to objective, or neutral, insights. Instead, the knowledges thus produced are *essentially contested*, or *political* knowledges.

Essed does propose to consider the knowledge of racism displayed by her respondents as a specific form of political knowledge (74). She refrains, however, from any allusion to the project of *UER* itself as a political project. The suggestion is that the study of ‘understanding everyday racism’ merely *registers* black women’s knowledge of everyday racism - thus sustaining the image of the researcher as a neutral and objective epistemic authority. In my view, however, both the narrative accounts (by black women) of certain events *as* instances of ‘racism’ and the analyses (by the researcher) of these accounts *as* instances of ‘knowledge’, consist of mixtures of empirical and normative judgements. Both kinds of accounts should therefore be regarded as essentially contested and situated claims. With such practices of interpretation and evaluation one is engaged in politically charged field of values and interests.

According to Sandra Harding, the denial of the constitutive role of interests and values in scientific research leads to forms of ‘weak objectivity’, or ‘objectivism’. A standpoint approach, on the other hand, would recognize the inevitable entrenchment of particular values and interests in the testing of hypotheses as well as in the meticulous following of methodological rules. Values and interests are a constitutive part of knowledge, and a ‘strongly objective’ approach would account for that. In an objectivist approach, however, the values and interests which motivate the inquiry concerned are not problematized. Hence, they come out as they have been put in, ‘untouched’ (Harding 1991a: 144).

The discourse of *UER*, in my opinion, because of its insistence on scientificity, neutrality and objectivity, inclines towards such an objectivist stance. At this point, therefore, it deviates from a standpoint approach to knowledge. Hence, although *UER* constitutes a good case of situated knowledges in the *descriptive* sense of the term, in the end, it cannot be perceived as such in the *normative* sense.

3. Innocence murdered

3.1. *Black and white*

Against the construction of the relative unity of black women’s knowledge of everyday racism (see section 2.3), the discourse of *UER* posits another, that of a unitary white perspective. The polarization and ensuing homogenization of the categories of black and white are already built into the working definition of racism as “a system in which Whites dominate Blacks” (39). What this system ultimately consists of, is visualized in the diagram which summarizes the results of inquiry in its depiction of “the structure of everyday racism” (279). The so-called areas of conflict between the dominant and the dominated group concern resources, norms and values, and definitions of social reality. The conflicts are specified in terms of things which *whites do* and *blacks experience*, such as: objectification, legitimation, underestimation, denial of dignity, pacification, cognitive detachment and tolerance of racism. These actions, moreover, are presented as part of the ‘basic agenda’, ‘hidden agendas’ and ‘the agenda of the agenda’ respectively. The metaphor of the ‘agenda’ suggests that these acts are perpetrated not only collectively, but also intentionally - this in spite of the author’s announcement that *UER* addresses the problem of racist practices, not persons.³⁷ Thus, in the outline of the structure of everyday racism, whites are endowed with the position of wilful agents, whereas blacks are inscribed as the ones acted upon.³⁸

Whiteness, moreover, is consistently associated not only with membership of the dominant racial or ethnic group, but also with “White perceptions of blacks” (13), “White images of Black women” (31), “a White point of view” (194), or a “White orientation” (195). Just like blacks are expected to develop an oppositional consciousness because of their marginal position in a racialized society, so are

whites supposed to be endowed with a white point of view because of their dominant position in society. The adjectives of 'black' and 'white' thus refer to *racial* and *political* positions at once. A white racial identity is assumed to almost automatically engender a particular white political, i.e. racist identity. Exceptions are mentioned only in passing, and, so it sometimes seems, to prove the rule rather than to differentiate.³⁹

This is particularly remarkable against the background of a distinction made between four kinds of 'experiences' of everyday racism, i.e. *personal* experiences (of racism directed against oneself), *vicarious* experiences (of racism directed at 'other identified Blacks', witnessed or reported), *mediated* experiences (of racism directed at groups of blacks, passed on through the media), and *cognitive* experiences ('the impact of knowledge of racism upon one's perception of reality') (58). This conceptual framework, strangely enough, does not only indicate that those who do not experience racism directly, like white people, still may be knowledgeable of racism, it even suggests they might 'experience' racism, namely in mediated and cognitive forms. Although the distinctions mentioned leave ample room for whites as knowledgeable subjects of racism, this is not incorporated in the schematic overview of 'the structure of everyday racism' (279). Throughout the discourse of *UER*, the perceptions of whites are repudiated as invalid. Because of their dominant group membership, they are supposedly "generally inclined to deny racism" (viii).

The 'black' and 'white' vocabulary used in *UER* thus constructs two homogeneous blocks, which relate to one another as two opposing parties. Not only are those categories assumed to be mutually exclusive; together, they are also taken to cover the range of possible subject positions to be taken within a racial structure. Consequently, *UER*, organized along the lines of this binary framework, offers its addressees only two possible reading positions: either you identify as (racially and politically) white or you identify as (racially and politically) black.⁴⁰

In the Netherlands, many white, but also non-white, readers resisted this forceful appeal, and lapsed into a distanced attitude: 'this account has nothing to do with me, or with Dutch society as I know it.' The mixed Dutch reception of *UER* could very well be explained with the help of the explanatory framework of *UER* itself. Within this framework, differences of opinion are predictable: they stem from the oppositional interests attached to perceiving one's society as racist and white-dominated. From a black perspective, it then could be argued, dialogue is made possible - *UER* finally has given blacks a voice. It gives their accounts of experiences of racism the status of acceptable, rational contributions, sustained by scientific evidence of the existence and reality of everyday racism. From a white perspective, on the other hand, dialogue appears to be closed off: in presenting whites as perpetrators of racism only, they are denied any status as knowledgeable subjects concerning issues of ethnic and race relations.

3.2 *Involved and resisting*

So, *UER* offers its readers only two reading positions: to understand its account of everyday racism, a reader must either identify as 'black' or as 'white'. This textual strategy can be likened to a strategy once used by the organizers of an exhibition on the history of racial relationships in the US, held in Washington D.C.. To enter the exhibition floor, visitors had two options: they either could take the gate signed 'black', or they had to go through the gate signed 'white'. Reactions were telling. People of colour went through the 'black' gate without much further ado. But many white visitors could be observed hesitating: most of

them would ultimately, be it reluctantly, pass through the 'white' gate, others would even, but obviously no less unhappy, sneak in through the gate signed 'black'. The message of the organizers was clear: in order to get entrance to, that is: really understand, the history of racial relationships, you have to realize your own position within this constellation; an entry signed 'neither' is inconceivable.⁴¹

Analogously, the discourse of *UER* leaves me, as a white Dutch reader, no option but to identify as 'white'. As such, it can be said to have a useful edifying effect. It reminds me that I too belong to a particular racial or ethnic group, that I am an inheritor of its history and profit from the privileges which that racial position brings along: in daily life, I need not be on my guard against distrust, humiliation, condescendence or hostility because of the colour of my skin. Within Dutch society, I can pass for racially unmarked, I self-evidently belong. The discourse of *EUR* counters this self-evidence and 'interpellates' me, in the Althusserian sense, as a white-Dutch subject, thus reminding me of my non-innocence, my being part of, and as such accountable to, a collective white-Dutch history, which is also one of colonization, slave trade, and missionary paternalism. These are the terms on which I can get involved in the discourse of *UER* in the first place.

However, *UER* also interpellates me as a subject who, because of her whiteness, is endowed with a white *point of view*, which, moreover, is straightforwardly identified with a racist point of view. In this respect, as already will have become clear, the discourse of *UER* elicits my resistance. In my view, just as there are different ways of 'being' racially/politically 'black', there are different ways of 'being' racially/politically 'white'. Thus, I could 'be' white by trying to pass for racially neutral: this is the familiar position of whites who speak from the place of the universal, for whom whiteness equals 'the colour of no colour'. A second way in which I could 'be' white would be to affirm my whiteness in a celebratory manner, and insist on the maintenance of its 'purity'. Finally, I can position oneself as white by acknowledging my *belonging* to the category of white, but refusing to *identify* as white in that celebratory mode.⁴² It will be clear that I would regard my own position as 'white' in the third sense of the term. My difficulty with the discourse of *UER* is, that it tars the first and second position with the same brush of 'racism', while it reserves no *conceptual* space for this third way of 'being' white. This is especially regrettable since it is from such oppositional or critical locations, from the problematizing of fixed racial, sexual, class identities, that white, black and migrant subjects can start building common grounds, and develop antiracist feminist knowledges.⁴³

My analysis of *UER*, therefore, is one of both an involved and a resisting reader.⁴⁴ As may have become clear from the foregoing, I resist the discursive appeal this particular text makes to me, as a white reader, to identify my white perspective with a racist perspective. But I have equally tried to resist the inclination to retreat into the position of the neutral, unmarked knower. My reading should be seen as an exercise in 'partial' rather than 'partisan' reading. Where the latter would imply a loyalty to one of the established parties in the antagonism between 'black' and 'white', the first involves the attempt to find common grounds and make connections across such party lines, i.e. to deconstruct the homogeneous oppositional blocks of 'black' versus 'white'. Such processes will inevitably and admittedly *start from* particular historical-cultural positions, but they resist the idea that subjects are bound hand and foot by such positions.

3.3 Denunciation and empowerment

The foregoing readings were presented to illustrate the critique of standpoint thinking which I developed

in chapter 3 (section 5.3): in *UER*, the understanding of everyday racism is achieved with the help of closed circular reasoning, and builds upon the essentialization of black and white identities as fixed oppositional parties.

A possible objection to this could be that *any* valuable, or 'real' understanding involves a certain circularity. As Paul Ricoeur explains, hermeneutic understanding "is entirely *mediated* by the whole of explanatory procedures which precede it and accompany it" (Ricoeur 1981: 220-221).⁴⁵ *UER*, however, does not present itself as a hermeneutical undertaking. Its primary aim is not to understand how black women in the US and the Netherlands *give meaning* to their encounters with white people; it rather sets out to reveal a *reality* which exists independently of these processes of signification. Everyday racism is taken to be a pre-discursive phenomenon, a reality of experiences, feelings, structural inequalities and concealed mechanisms of power: *accessible* through discursive accounts, but not discursive *in itself*. *UER* clearly has no truck with the linguistic or constructivist turn. Objective knowledge is taken to consist of an adequate reflection (scientific 'Understanding') of a world 'out there'.

This *epistemological* commitment to objectivity and realism, however, is motivated by a strong *political* commitment to represent black women, i.e. to speak for and side with the victims of everyday racism. The desire to build a strong case for the reality of everyday racism stems from the author's political commitment to the cause of its victims. When, for instance, the results of investigation are recommended because "the extent to which racism systematically marks Black women's everyday experiences has seldom been demonstrated in so much detail" (Essed 1991b: 283), they are recommended as evidence regarding the *injustices* black women in white-dominated societies suffer on a daily basis.

Thus, the scientific proof of the existence of everyday racism can also be read as a strong political and moral *denunciation* of racism. The paradigmatic place for the denunciatory genre of speech is the court of law. Here, the character of the crime and its perpetrator have to be convincingly pointed out. This is done before a neutral instance who is asked to pass the final judgement. It is assumed to be possible to establish the facts, and the extent to which these facts can be considered a crime, in such a way that in principle every reasonable subject would agree. In so far as the discourse of *UER* belongs to the genre of denunciation, its author models her task as a scientist according to the role of the plaintiff in a court of justice. Just like the prosecutor, who, as a 'professional' accuser, is more skilled in the juridical language game than her client(s), the author, as a 'professional' knower, is more skilled and articulate in the language game of scientific discourse than the black women she represents. She brings her indictment before the forum of scientific colleagues, who are capable of assessing the reliability of the accounts of the black women on whose behalf the author is speaking. In her plea, she tries to establish the harm inflicted upon black women by everyday racism.

From this denunciatory perspective, the conflict between black and white as described in *UER* would concern what Jean-François Lyotard has named a *litigation* [in French: *litige*]. According to Lyotard, a litigation involves a conflict which can be regulated, in analogy with juridical lawsuits. The assumption is that the perspectives of plaintiff and accused are commensurable. As they use the same 'idiom', the harm inflicted by one upon the other involves a *damage* [*dommage*], i.e. an injustice which, if brought before an impartial court, can be proved, repaired, straightened out.

At the same time, however, *UER*'s watertight account of racism suggests that the whole of society is infused with it. Readers who want to get 'involved' in *UER*'s account, I explained earlier, have only two options: to identify either as 'white' or as 'black'. Hence, there is *no neutral position* from which to under

stand the racial conflict - no common ground for deliberation, no neutral tribunal before which one could plea one's cause. Purportedly neutral instances, such as juridical courts, governmental bodies or scientific fora, are actually white, and will therefore not listen to black accusations and proofs of everyday racism - however reasonable they may be. From this perspective, the racial conflict described in *UER* would, in Lyotard's terminology, involve not a litigation, but a *differend* [*différend*]. In the case of a differend, the harm inflicted constitutes not a repairable damage, but a *wrong*, i.e. a damage "accompanied by the loss of the means to prove the damage" (Lyotard 1988: 5). Everyday racism could be conceived of as such a *wrong*: the dominance of whites over blacks is reinforced every day again by assumptions of white superiority. Consequently, accusations by blacks about unfair treatment, humiliation, neglect, i.e. about everyday racism, however well argued, will not be taken seriously by whites - which is itself a repetition of the wrong of racism. The gap between black and white is thus made unbridgeable, the difference incommensurable. Lyotard's paradigmatic case of a differend is the holocaust: the only reliable eye-witnesses of the horrors of the gas chambers are their victims - but as they are dead, they cannot testify. All others would not count as reliable witnesses: precisely in their quality as survivors their testimony would lack the ultimate proof. This, in Lyotard's view, does not only hold for cases of (mass) murder, but also for 'minor' injustices. In general, a wrong is inflicted when people are deprived of the right or authority to testify to the damage they suffer. The essence of a wrong, it could be said, is the deprivation of one's voice.⁴⁶ To testify, as a victim, to this wrong, would inevitably elicit a paradox, and constitute a relationship of 'double bind' between plaintiff and addressee. For if you are indeed wronged, so Lyotard explains, it will be argued that "since you can bear witness to this wrong, it is not a wrong, and you are deceived (or lying) in testifying that you are the victim of a wrong" (5).

Read in this mode, *UER* does not primarily aim at a recognition of the harm done, not by a neutral instance, nor by the party who inflicted the harm. Considering the lack of a neutral or common ground, such would be a vain attempt. The only thing which might actually turn the scale of racial relationships is political struggle and the acquisition of collective power. From this perspective, the discourse of *UER* can be conceived of as part of that struggle. As such, *UER* appears to constitute a mixture of genres: on the one hand, it is written in a strongly denunciatory mode, on the other hand, it also belongs to what I would call the genre of *empowerment*. Thus, in denouncing the injustice of racism from a black perspective, *UER* at the same time resists the double bind which arises as soon as the wrong of racism is denounced from a black perspective. It thus squarely evokes the paradoxical situation in which black women *speak out* about their *silencing* as black women. It is their representation, not so much in the epistemological but in the political sense that constitutes an act of empowerment, a challenge of the paradox against all odds. A paradoxical testimony may not appear consistent, or reasonable - on the contrary, it is often perceived as exaggerated, hysterical or paranoid.⁴⁷ But as a form of discursive resistance, it seems the only way to start breaking through rooted structures of dominance.

Hence, as a denunciatory text, *UER* gives a (epistemological) representation of white-dominated societies in which blacks are not allowed the position of legitimate subjects of speech, whereas, as a text aimed at empowerment, it constitutes a (political) representation which grants black women the status of legitimate subjects of speech. There is a clear analogy then between the paradoxical aspects of this practice of Black criticism, and practices of critical feminist discourse. Thus, feminist expositions of the marginalization of women within science and epistemology contain both (epistemological) representations of realities in which women are perceived as unreliable knowers, and the (political) representation of women who speak as epistemological authorities. The performative effect of such projects is likewise paradoxical: its denunciatory aspect fixes what the aspect of empowerment unfastens. It seems then, that

knowledges from an oppositional location, whether feminist, Black or other, have no other option than to plunge in the heart of their paradox and risk double binds and reproaches of paranoia. However, I do think there is a more felicitous way to deal with paradoxical situations.

3.4 *Let's turn to stories*

A crucial difference between the new realist discourse, as discussed in the previous chapter, and Essed's oppositional realism lies in their assessment of the state of innocence. Whereas new realists perceive innocence as an epistemological virtue, the author of *UER* clearly wishes to leave such innocence behind. On the one hand, she attempts to unmask the purported innocence of white Dutch, who, in her view, are merely 'playing the murdered innocence' - a Dutch saying for acting as if one would have nothing to do with the matter. On the other hand, she represents black women as non-innocent, i.e. as knowledgeable subjects of the workings of everyday racism. Against Vuijsje's appeal for a return to 'normal manners', Essed posits their what Rorty would call 'abnormal' voices. To black women, so it is shown in *UER*, Vuijsje's call for normality sounds nonsensical, if not repressive, as their speech is not yet carried by the power of self-evidence. Within the context of white society, black women still have to reinforce their status as reasonable subjects, as reliable witnesses to their own experiences.⁴⁸

The plunge in the paradox may have a transformative, empowering impact on *UER*'s black readers. For white readers such as myself, however, its performative effects are less felicitous. For the oppositional discourse of *UER* actually reverses the burden of the racial conflict: whereas the discursive structure of everyday racism catches resisting blacks in a double bind, the discursive structure of *UER* repeats this paradoxical gesture, but now directed at whites. For if I, as a white reader, *question* the claim of racism as a wrong of whites against blacks, I provide additional proof of its validity. On the other hand, if I, as a white reader, *acknowledge* *UER*'s claims, I thereby detract from their validity. Thus, by turning the tables and putting the hitherto marginalized standpoint of black women center stage, *UER* effectively murders white innocence. But: it keeps the racial *differend* intact. Though it *denounces* the conflictual relationship between black and white, it at the same time *confirms* this relationship as one of constant and inescapable conflict.

To be sure, the reassurance that all conflicts would be solved if we would just realize that 'all of us' belong to the same human 'genre', is historically and politically naive. Such colour-blind innocence needs to be undone indeed. But what to do then *after* innocence is murdered? How to prevent oppositional knowledges to reiterate 'black' and 'white' as ultimately antagonistic and incommensurable perspectives or standpoints? How to tell and how to understand stories in such a way that they deconstruct these homogeneous blocks without relapsing into denials of racism? How to turn the paradoxical message of black women's stories to more universal advantage?

In phrasing my questions, I tacitly replaced the term 'knowledges' with the notion of 'stories'. When referring to the experiential accounts of the black women interviewed, the author of *UER* also speaks of 'stories' and their 'narrative structure'. The application of the 'narrative' categories of context, complication, evaluation, argumentation and decision is combined by Essed with the use of heuristic devices such as inference, comparison for consensus and comparison for (in)consistency. All of these analytical tools are used to prove that the stories concerned may be regarded as rational reconstructions of experiences of everyday racism. It is an interpretative strategy which yields remarkably streamlined recon

structions. Not surprisingly so, since the interpreter of *UER* is interested in the stories of her respondents, only and in so far as they are *adequate representations of everyday racism*. She is not interested in their quality *as stories*.⁴⁹

This for instance shows in the fifth chapter, dedicated to the account of Rosa N.. What counts as Rosa N.'s 'story', so the author emphasizes, consists of a compilation of those fragments from the interview in which Rosa N. relates of her experiences with racism. To prove that Rosa N. may be considered a knowledgeable subject, one who can tell the difference between unfriendly and racist behaviour, the author gives a brief impression of Rosa N.'s accounts of positive experiences with white Dutch. But concerning the actual aim of the study, the revelation of the structure of everyday racism, her accounts of differently marked encounters between black and white are deemed irrelevant - they are literally considered not part of 'the story of Rosa N.'. This carving out of one particular narrative structure *beforehand*, in my view, is a main reason for *UER*'s closed off accounts of racial relationships as inherently conflictual. Another reason lies in the author's realist understanding of these narratives, in her assumption that they straightforwardly reflect reality.

From a more constructivist angle, an interpreter would precisely be interested in the *variety* of narrative structures which the women dispose of to tell their stories. Moreover, these stories, whether of conflictual or friendly encounters with whites, would be conceived of as the *artefactual* and *partial* constructions of experiences. A crucial question would be what the available narrative structures enable the women to tell, and to which extent existing rhetorical spaces limit the kind of accounts that can be given. The realist aim of *UER*, its oppositional stakes notwithstanding, impedes such exploration of different narrative 'scripts', as Lorraine Code named it (see chapter 2, section 3.2). In rejecting the notion of the constructed, hence contested nature of *everyday racism*, as well as the constructed, hence provisional nature of *understanding* everyday racism, the discourse of *UER* thus remains caught by the very paradox its oppositional knowledge practice resists.

In my view then, to turn the paradox to advantage, it is necessary to conceive of accounts of reality no longer in their quality as knowledge, but in their quality as stories. The constructivist turn, in other words, necessitates a turn from epistemology to narrativity, a shift in critical focus which perceives knowledge practices as practices of story-telling: as always partial, contested and unfinished constructions of reality. To focus on the narrative dimension of accounts does not at all undermine their legitimacy. It merely wishes to prevent, as Haraway once phrased it, their being mistaken for "the thing itself" (Olson with Haraway 1995: 59).

This turn to narrativity, to be sure, applies both to the particular accounts of ordinary people, usually the 'objects' of knowledge, and to the more general accounts of the (scientific) authors, the 'subjects' of knowledge. In hindsight, my reading of *UER* as a mixture of the genres of denunciation and empowerment already implicated a turn to a more narrative perspective. That is, my epistemological (or methodological) criticisms concerning the inherent circularity of Essed's argumentation in section 2, shifted towards the problem of the antagonistic narrative structure of Essed's story in section 3.

The remainder of my case study will consist of two parts, in which I will read several samples of the Dutch minorities discourse from a more constructivist perspective. Chapter 7 will resume the exploration of the *descriptive* and the *normative* dimensions of the concept of situated knowledges, not from the epistemological perspective taken so far, but from a more narrative point of view. What are the narrative features of stories which claim objectivity and neutrality, but can be shown to be situated in the descriptive

sense of the term? And what are the narrative features of situated stories in the normative sense, i.e. of stories written from a particular standpoint? In chapter 8, finally, I will discuss a number of texts which tell stories about Dutch multi-ethnic society which in my view give an indication of the visionary meaning of Haraway's concept of situated knowledges.

Notes

1. In her Foreword to the English translation of this study, Essed also writes: "After World War II it became taboo to even mention the word *racisme*, which is Dutch for racism, in the Netherlands" (Essed 1990: xi).
2. Which is supported by the fact that Essed's writings are more successful abroad than in the Netherlands. Thus, whereas the original version of *Alledaags racisme* (Essed 1984), published (in a somewhat updated version) in English in 1990 (Essed 1990), was reprinted once in the Netherlands (Essed 1988, AMBO: Baarn), the Dutch version of *Understanding Everyday Racism* (Essed 1991a) saw only one edition. Its English counterpart (Essed 1991b), however, has already gone into its 4th edition (according to Essed 1996b). For the differences in receptions 'at home' and 'abroad', see also section 3 of this chapter.
3. For other publications about racism and race-discrimination in Holland, see: Bovenkerk 1978; *De Groene Amsterdammer* 1980; Redmond 1980; Van Dijk 1983; Van den Berg and Reinsch 1983; Bleich and Schumacher 1984; Holtrop and Den Tex 1984; Anne Frank Stichting 1984; Meulenbelt 1986; Anne Frank Stichting 1987; Hisschemöller 1988; Leeman & Saharso 1989; Nederveen Pieterse 1990. None of these, however, has taken such a prominent and provocative place in public discourse as Essed's work has.
4. Essed 1991b consistently uses capitals when referring to 'Black' and 'White', whereas the other editions of the same text (1989 and 1991a) speak of 'black' and 'white', or *zwart* and *wit*. I will use 'Black' and 'White' only when I quote from Essed 1991b.
5. Essed's official graduation ceremony, which took place on January 17th of 1990 at the University of Amsterdam, already attracted the attention of the Dutch media. See for instance *NRC Handelsblad* 1990; Kohnstamm 1990; Houwink ten Cate 1990; Schipper 1990; Stam 1990; Sinnema 1990; Choenni 1990; Mak 1990; Vuijsje 1990.
6. In the remainder of this chapter, the English edition of the book (Essed 1991b) will be the main point of reference. Only in case of significant differences will I refer to the texts of the Ph.D. dissertation (Essed 1989) or the Dutch translation (Essed 1991a).
7. In an earlier interview with Anet Bleich, Essed makes clear that she does not hold with the concept of 'new racism', which, according to its inventor Martin Barker would function not on the basis of the attribution of (natural, biological) inferiority, but on the attribution of irreconcilable cultural differences (Bleich 1984a).
8. For positive Dutch reviews of Essed 1984, see Nieuwenhuis 1984, Nas 1985 and Delhaas 1985. On the occasion of the publication of the book, Essed also gave several interviews in which she explained the central aim of her book (see Van Galen 1984; Van Gool 1984).
9. For other positive Dutch reviews of Essed 1991a, see Choenni 1990, Helwig 1991, and Te Grotenhuis 1992.

10. A reminder: Hans Moll is the same author who praised Vuijsje's *Murdered innocence* for breaking the taboo of the desire for "the intimacy of coarse ethnic indications". See chapter 5, note 11.

11. The debate between Moll and defenders of Essed took place on the pages of *NRC Handelsblad* of May 18, 1991, in four letters to the editor, followed by a postscript by Moll. The *NRC* of June 22, finally, prints a comment by Prof. Pettigrew from the University of California at St. Cruz, followed by a reply by Hans Moll again. The latter denies Pettigrew's interpretation that he (Moll) would have suggested that racism doesn't exist in the Netherlands, and concludes that, apparently, merely criticizing the scientific merits of this inquiry already makes people think you deny the whole phenomenon described.

Other Dutch criticism of Essed's dissertation came from Sinnema 1990, Kohnstamm 1990, and Bina 1991. The latter echoes Moll's opinion when he warns against rendering critical studies such as Black studies, but also women's studies and gay studies, into something like a 'sanctuary', which other scientists would not venture to put to the critical test. The whole gets a particularly nasty continuation two years later, in an article in which several journalists 'confess' that, at the time, they had not dared to criticize Essed's work, out of fear of being accused of racism. The assumption, however, that Essed only got favourable reviews is contestable. The author merely now gives people a second chance to throw mud at the person of Essed, whose photograph takes three-quarters of a whole page, and of whom Herman Vuijsje is allowed to say: "It takes courage to tell someone with a black face and beautiful brown eyes that her claims are all nonsense" (quoted in Inen 1992). Readers of *De Groene Amsterdammer* were furious (and rightly so!), witness the eight letters to the editor, printed in the subsequent issues of this (renowned progressive-intellectual) magazine. One critic later concludes that the article is the 'bitter fruit' of the magazine's attempt to liven up its dull summer-season (Koole 1993).

12. Sinnema, for instance, wholly agrees with Essed's claim that "racism is structural". But, so she claims, it is as structural in the Netherlands as anywhere else, since people always have the need to differentiate themselves. The crucial question would be how to *deal* with this as a society: "With that in mind, already all week I wonder what for heaven's sake is aimed at with this dissertation" (Sinnema 1990).

13. For other, mostly equally appreciative reviews of Essed 1991b, see Collins 1992, Razack 1991, Daniel 1993, Mama 1993, Wekker 1994 and Houston 1994.

14. As Essed remarks in the introduction to *Everyday Racism*: "How can blacks prove, both to themselves and to others, their sense that racism exists even when it is not being overtly expressed? [...] As we shall see, everyday reality teaches us that many instances of racial and ethnic discrimination are difficult to 'prove'. Yet the experiences and consequences of racism are no less real or far-reaching because the racism occurs in hidden and seemingly impalpable form. On the contrary, the effects of everyday racism may be even more damaging in the long run than those of blatant discrimination" (Essed 1990: 1-2).

15. In my reading, Essed's final statement addresses white readers, though in somewhat covert terms: "Black women's reconstructions of everyday racism provide conceptual as well as practical tools to question the unquestioned, to reject what seems acceptable, and to start sharing responsibility in the struggle against racism" (1991b: 296).

16. Roline Redmond relates how some women (especially Turkish and Moroccan women, but also other women of colour) had difficulty with the political denominator 'black', initially used at the Winter University by especially Moluccan, Surinamese and South African women. The label 'black and migrant women' came out as a suitable alternative (Redmond 1990: 62-64).

17. For an overview of this discussion, see also Pattynama 1987.

18. For an overview of this history of Dutch women's studies conferences and the position of black women, see also Strengé and Schuit in Loewenthal et al. 1987. Notably, whereas the introduction to this report makes a plea for 'black-white' rather than 'black' as a political label, one of the authors prefers the Dutch term *blank* to the term *wit*. Her reason is that *wit* would suggest it's being *equivalent* to *zwart* [black], whereas *zwart* as a political term could be better opposed to *blank*, as this would explicitly refer to the feelings of racial superiority of the Dutch. The term *wit*, according to this author, would be merely a masked change of names (see Helwig in Loewenthal et al. 1987: 88).

19. Thus, in the Journal's last special issue on gender and ethnicity, a tendency towards 'inappropriate moralism' among progressive people is observed, which would give women of colour a prerogative to join in discussions about ethnicity, and burden white women with paralyzing feelings of guilt. According to the editors, "[t]he world gets divided in the good, the bad and the repentants" - which, in their opinion, is not exactly a basis for discussion and exchange. As they see it, "whites can participate in discussions about gender and ethnicity just as well as men, provided that they take the trouble to think through the way in which their colour or gender contributes to their specific position" (Aerts et al. 1994: 5).

20. Although Essed refers, in passing, only to two standpoint-thinkers, i.e. Dorothy Smith and Patricia Hill Collins.

21. "Dominant group members are [...] generally inclined to deny racism" (Essed 1991b: viii); "In the Netherlands the dominant opinion maintains that the Dutch are tolerant and that there never has been a problem of racism" (6); "... dominant group members deny their own responsibility, claim that others probably did not mean it that way, and problematize those who refuse to accept racism..." (7). In the concluding chapter, Essed puts it in stronger terms, and speaks of the Dutch who "refuse to listen to talk of racism", of "massive resistance" and a denial of racism so 'pervasive' that it works as "an effective instrument of repression" (287).

22. Though the latter example might also be indicative, I think, of the particular relationship between Rosa N. and her white colleagues as it has grown during their work, and her white colleagues' increasing uncertainty on how to prevent appearing racist. Thus, Rosa N. relates how her colleagues find her 'oversensitive', or as one of them once said: "people always have to be so careful when they talk with you" (Essed 1991b: 152). And I must admit that, regarding some of Rosa N.'s accounts, I can feel with the uncertainty or irritation of her white colleagues. Thus, Rosa N. relates how "[r]ecently, there was another patient who [had responded unexpectedly well to treatment, after we had almost given up on her.] So I wanted to show that to one of my bosses. I said: come here, you've gotta see this. That's my enthusiasm. I saw him whispering with the others, then I thought, he's talking about me because I said, come look [...] The idea of: you're too emotionally involved, they don't like that, you have to be detached when making a report. That is the general trend in Holland" (quoted in Essed 1991b: 154). To me, this account does not so much tell of racism, but of what Rosa N.'s alertness to racism does to her perception of a behaviour (the whispering) which might very well have nothing to do with her at all. As a reader of Rosa N.'s story, I also get quite confused when she simultaneously reports that "at my work [...] I just can't let certain things pass [...] So I always respond [against racism]" (150), and that "I can never in my life bring the subject of racism. That just can't be, because they'll only trip me up" (155). The point is not that I don't understand how these two perceptions of one's situation could go together, but rather that Essed, as the interpreter, does not pick up and explain such contradictory aspects of Rosa N.'s story, which I think could give more insight into the complex and ambiguous nature of Rosa N.'s position as a black, race-conscious doctor working in a white hospital.

23. The quoted characterization of knowledge as the ability to make distinctions, for instance, is clarified further by an explanation about what is needed in cases of "covert racism" to substantiate the evaluation of these situations as racist: "This means that, when racism is expressed covertly, the interpreter must be able to pose the relevant questions and to make goal-directed inferences and observations to substantiate the evaluation *that* racism is involved in that particular situation" (Essed 1991b: 73). I emphasized what I consider the problematic word in this description: for, if knowledge is about knowing how to make distinctions, I would say that it is about the ability to assess, not *that*, but *whether* racism is

involved in that particular situation.

24. "Analogous to everyday life, everyday racism is heterogeneous in its manifestations but at the same time unified by repetition of similar practices" (Essed 1991b: 288).

25. This shows in Essed's frequent use of general terms and statements in describing the situation of black women in the US and the Netherlands, which in my view results in quite a reductive image of their lives and experiences. Thus, it is posed that "[c]onflict is the main theme running through Black women's everyday lives", involving "continual battle" (Essed 1991b: 10). In order to substantiate the claim that experiences with 'sexual racism' (white men harassing black women) are not incidental but recurrent (although Essed also indicates that "the real extent [...] cannot be inferred from the data"), (only) one respondent is quoted, saying: "It happens every now and then, but it is still pretty consistent", as illustrative of the fact that sexual racism "for Black women, in the US as well as in the Netherlands", is "a daily reality" (-252). By which, I suppose, Essed wishes to emphasize the seriousness of the problem, because it *could* happen to you every day, but chooses a formulation which suggests that it happens to *all* black women *every* day.

26. Thus, Essed highlights some significant differences between the accounts of Dutch-Surinamese and Afro-American women, which would be due to the different contexts of Dutch and US society. Whereas, for instance, Surinamese identity is denied because of the Dutch culture of assimilation, African cultural heritage gets disqualified within a US context of racial segregation (Essed 1991b: 205). And whereas US black women are confronted with ideologies of race purity, for instance with the idea that a lighter skin colour is better, Surinamese women do not mention this in their stories about the Netherlands, which Essed explains by pointing out that Dutch perceptions of 'race' merge more with notions of ethnicity, and that not race, but (class-related) cultural traits function as status symbols (218).

27. Although some of her remarks point the other way: "The more experience one has in dealing with racism, the more elaborate and organized one's knowledge becomes about the nature of racism" (Essed 1991b: 8).

28. In the text of the Ph.D. dissertation an appendix is added, which indicates that 17 US and 17 Dutch 'professionals', 10 US and 11 Dutch students were interviewed (see Essed 1989: 230-231).

29. Only two (Surinamese-Dutch) women showed no awareness at all, and a "lack" (Essed's quotation marks) of comprehension of racism. Although two US women presented themselves as not knowledgeable, there was a beginning of awareness, according to Essed, because they perceived this as a problem, as a failure they were trying to put right. They "just started to learn" (Essed 1991b: 77).

30. In *Everyday racism*, one Surinamese-Dutch woman tells the interviewer she never experienced discrimination in the Netherlands, and that anywhere she goes, she is always taken in. Her observations are disqualified by the author as follows: "Myra is a very kind woman, but it seems that she has put a wall around herself that only allows the passage of messages in which everything regarding contact with Dutch people is just fine" (Essed 1990: 54).

31. Some other examples: US black women are found to be much more concerned about indifference from whites, which they regard as signs of Eurocentrism and an undervaluation of black culture. Dutch black women did not mention this as a problem. Essed suggests a couple of explanations: no history of black protest movement, as immigrants the women are still so confined within Surinamese circles that they do not feel deprived, or: "it may also be the case that the Dutch dominant discourse of cultural tolerance blinds Black women in the Netherlands to the lack of institutional support to pass Surinamese culture on to the next generation" (Essed 1991b: 199). Another example concerns the occurrence of sexual racism, of which Essed notes that it is an emotionally charged subject in both countries. Still, several women brought it up themselves, but black women in the Netherlands looked more inhibited to her. The suggested explanation is, that it "prob-

ably has to do with fear of identification, for the Netherlands is a small country" (252). When, on the other hand, Surinamese women appear to be more critical than the US respondents (for instance, regarding the way they are treated on the labour market), the adequacy of the insight of the US women is not questioned. In these cases, the difference is explained by reference to the US situation, which, because of the politics of affirmative action and the antidiscrimination legislation, indeed would be better (270-228).

32. The aspect of circularity appears quite explicitly in the outline of the research design of *UER*: "[T]he construction of validity involves relating Black women's shared interpretations to the overall theoretical structure to determine whether their constructions of reality are, in fact, related to the concepts and theoretical assumptions that are employed" (Essed 1991b: 60). The question as to *whose* concepts and theoretical assumptions are employed, is answered a few sentences later, when the author inscribes her own say in the matter of "comparing Black women's interpretations to *my* theoretical framework for consistency" [my italics, bp]. But the objective mode immediately returns: "In other words, to illustrate the validity of the methodology, it is useful to make a distinction between interpretations of reality and evaluative conclusions that the experienced reality is indicative of racism" (60).

33. The 'interpretive' steps are extensively discussed in Essed's chapter 3, which focuses on the way black women acquire knowledge of racism, whereas the 'evaluative' step is outlined in chapter 4, which focuses on the way accounts of racism can be analyzed by the researcher. To be sure, the suggestion is not that the respondents only give interpretations, which the researcher then would evaluate. Thus, chapter 3 does not merely look at interpretation - all steps in this procedure, as I will show, contain evaluative elements too, nor does chapter 4 solely focus on the work done by the researcher.

34. Notably, *UER* does not contain any example of the hypothetical case its author suggests here, i.e. that a respondent describes the particular behaviour of a white person as unacceptable, while the author decides that it should be regarded as acceptable behaviour.

35. Again, *UER* does not provide one example of the hypothetical case suggested here, i.e. a case in which a respondent considers a particular behaviour inexcusable, whereas the author concludes that it could be perceived as excusable, hence not-racist, after all.

36. A particular condition is added here: "given that the actor is acting of her or his own free will" (Essed 1991b: 80). This gives room to a lot of excuses for racist behaviour I am sure the author would not want to accept (nor would I). They would also go against the view that racism must be ascribed to practices, not to individuals or their intentions. For instance, if the perpetrator of the racist incident is ignorant of certain sensitivities of black people, denies her own (unconscious) feelings of white superiority, or in all honesty thinks she acts out of tolerance, whereas 'in reality' her behaviour is paternalistic (examples mentioned in *UER*), she can be said to be acting out of free will. In my view, this would not automatically make her behaviour excusable.

37. In her review of Essed's work, Sherene Razack exactly appreciates *UER*'s framework for pointing out that it is people, not just systems who oppress: "There clearly are systemic barriers. But who put them there? How do they operate and how are they sustained? Who benefits? In conceptualizing racism as a process, Essed wants to make sure that individuals don't manage to disappear in explanations of the institutional" (Razack 1991: 150).

38. A couple of times, the author suggests that general knowledge of racism also includes a differentiation between whites as "primary agents", and blacks "as secondary agents", referring to the possibility of blacks being possible perpetrators of racism also (Essed 1991b: 106; 286) She does not, however, assimilate this in her theoretical framework.

39. Essed mentions white anti-racism in the following statements: "only a few actively challenge the current consensus"

(Essed 1991b: 6); "the current ideological climate allows the press and academics to openly attack Blacks (and Whites) who fight against racism" (7); "Blacks and Whites involved in antiracist struggle.." (21); "it is also relevant to take into account the many dominant group members who incidentally or frequently oppose racism, whether in small or significant ways" (43); "[white] individuals can choose to take responsibility and to initiate change once they understand the processes of domination" (46); "I can imagine that, in the course of the analysis, readers may think of examples in which Black women have not experienced discrimination. Of course this is also part of the reality, as much as there are Whites who are critical of oppressive elements of the dominant culture. When relevant I shall note this" (188). My difficulty is that these are the *only* times in a book of nearly 300 pages that 'white' is *not* identified with racism, and that the overall conceptual framework used to describe racial relationships only 'knows' that 'white' equals 'racist'.

40. The fact that the different versions of *UER* either consistently speak of 'black' and 'white', or of 'Black' and 'White', may be meant to remind the reader that racial categories have never been conceptualized outside a specific power structure, and in that sense are always also political. Racial categories, so Essed, carry ideological weight, are more than 'just' social constructions. She therefore disagrees with Omi and Winant when they claim "that the racial dimensions of a particular relationship are never given automatically" (see Omi and Winant 1989 [2nd ed]: 69; Essed 1991b: 51-52). In other words: 'white' nor 'black' are merely descriptive categories. They refer to particular positions within networks of power. Although I can go along with this line of reasoning, rendering 'black' and 'white' into homogeneous categories leaves no room for whites who refuse to identify as 'White', or for people of colour who refuse to identify as 'Black'. It makes the existence of anti-racist whites inconceivable, just as it makes inconceivable the existence of blacks who (as 'secondary agents', in Essed's terms) deny, or even collaborate with racism.

41. I thank this story to Lotte Jensen, a Dutch-Danish arts & philosophy student, who, after having gone through this same little ordeal, for a time curiously watched the behaviour of her fellow visitors to see how they would deal with this confrontation.

42. I owe this distinction between 'belonging' and 'identification' to my colleague historian Elsbeth Locher-Scholten, who proposed it in one of the intense sessions on feminism, anti-racism and whiteness of the *intellectueel atelier*, organized by the Department of Women's Studies and Arts at Utrecht University.

43. Here I associate with Adrienne Rich's proposal for 'a politics of location', i.e. for white feminists to explore the meaning of 'whiteness': "recognizing our location, having to name the ground we're coming from, the conditions we have taken for granted" (Rich 1986: 219). Be it that I subscribe to a more postmodernist view of a politics of location as "schizophrenic", to adopt Michelle Wallace's term (quoted in Kaplan 1994: 143), as emphasizing the multiplicity of locations, and the discursive construction of different, not always internally coherent, subject positions. In the wake of the work of US authors concerning the necessary (de)construction of whiteness (see for instance: Harding 1991a, Russo 1991, Ware 1992, Frankenberg 1993, Morrison 1993, hooks 1995, Abel 1995), this recently has become more of an issue within Dutch feminist reflections also (Van den Broek 1987; Schipper 1995; Hoving 1995; Meijer 1996; Wekker and Braidotti 1996). What worries me in some of these undertakings, is the emphasis on the need for whites to acknowledge, confront and fight their 'racism within'. In spite of the multitude of assurances that this means taking up one's political responsibility and does not propagate indulgences in paralyzing feelings of guilt and defensiveness, I think that this is just the effect such individualizing approaches bring about. Moreover, they invite white authors to dwell extensively on their own personal struggles with 'the enemy within', heroically raising themselves above other white women who would remain stuck in stages of denial and evasion. As Judith Butler phrases it sharply: "Crucial to this position of the 'white feminist' is the existence of white women who get it wrong; the ritual denunciations of other white women - or the denunciatory production of 'white feminism' - become the ways in which the morally righteous white feminist critic acquires her sanctity through the moralizing repudiation of others. The project thus remains enmeshed in the problematic of white guilt, and white guilt is, finally, a form of negative narcissism and quite useless as a resource in building a political community

organized by an affirmative struggle against racism" (Butler 1995: 444). I could not agree more.

44. The notion of the 'resisting reader' was coined by literary theorist Judith Fetterley, who thus offered female readers an active strategy to revolt against the masculine subject positions offered by most literary texts. I learned about Fetterley's concept through the work of Dutch literary critic Maaïke Meijer, who used the concept of resisting readership to develop critical practices of anti-racist reading, and 'reading as a lesbian' (see Fetterley 1978; Meijer 1988; Meijer 1996). The marked difference with these and my own application of the term is that my resistance concerns a particular construction of the white subject position within anti-racist discourse.

45. James Clifford aptly summarizes this view: "A world cannot be apprehended directly; it is always inferred on the basis of its part, and the parts must be conceptually and perceptually cut out of the flux of experience. Thus textualization generates sense through a circular movement that isolates and then contextualizes a fact or event in its englobing reality" (Clifford 1988: 38). To be sure, the 'Understanding' in *UER* does not arise from mere intellectual curiosity about black women's perspectives. The researcher's stance is not a disinterested one. She wishes to bring black women's stories into the limelight because they deserve credit for expressing valuable insights about everyday racism. From a hermeneutic perspective, this need not lead to a failure of interpretation. On the contrary, according to Ricoeur, it is precisely the personal commitment of a reader/researcher which makes processes of 'real' understanding possible. The thus produced understanding will be circular, to be sure, but not viciously so - provided at least that one acknowledges one's commitment. Hermeneutical skill, after all, consists of making creative use of what one knows already, of one's 'prejudice', in order to develop new, insightful understandings of the text or human action at hand. From a hermeneutic perspective, the problem with *UER* therefore would not be its circularity, but the fact that its author is not selfreflexive about it.

46. "It is in the nature of a victim not to be able to prove that one has been done a wrong. A plaintiff is someone who has incurred damages and who disposes of the means to prove it. One becomes a victim if one loses these means" (Lyotard 1988: 8).

47. Such a paradoxical testimony shows resemblance with what French sociologist Luc Boltanski has named 'abnormal' denunciations: forms of critique which make use of particular rhetorical devices in order to prove the legitimacy of their claims, while anticipating that one's audience will find these imputations too far-fetched, products of a paranoid mind (Boltanski 1990). It should be noted, however, that Boltanski's reliance on 'common sense' for deciding whether a certain denunciation indeed *is* 'abnormal', is highly questionable. As Boltanski observes, it sometimes happens that denunciations which were initially considered paranoid and exaggerated, after much hard work and perseverance came to be accepted after all. In section 1.3 of this chapter, I already referred to one striking example of such a denunciation which, according to Boltanski's criteria, could pass for 'abnormal', i.e. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. Although this book makes frequent use of a rhetorical device which Boltanski identifies as typical of 'abnormal' denunciations, namely to speak of the injustice done as 'inconceivable' or 'unnameable', as "the problem that has no name", it is now perceived as a wholly justified and rational analysis of the oppressive circumstances in which white middle-class women in the US had to live at that time (see also Lieve de Recht & Co 1992). Thus, the label 'abnormal' can just as well point to the transformative potential of such discourse. As Rorty, following Kuhn, claims, discourse which is presently incommensurable with prevailing criteria of rationality and intelligibility may, in the long run, become accepted as the new, more edifying and self-evident way of speaking about ourselves and the world.

48. Or to recall Lorraine Code's analyses: within dominant discourse, black women still lack available narrative structures, 'rhetorical space', which could endow their testimonies with credibility.

49. In this respect I agree with Amina Mama who regrets that *UER* gives so little room to the voices of the black women interviewed, and focuses exclusively at the *cognitive* aspects of their accounts (see Mama 1993: 104-105).