Wekker’s study of mati work in Suriname is a major contribution to the study of human sexuality and the social structural and cultural contexts in which it is expressed.

— Claudia Mitchell-Kernan

Vice Chancellor of Graduate Studies at UCLA

Innocence Unltd.

GLORIA WEKKER VISITS UCLA TO DISCUSS HER CURRENT WORK ON GENDER, RACE AND SEXUALITY IN THE DUTCH CULTURAL ARCHIVE

BY HEATHER COLLETTE-VANDERAA

The feminist project has always had an agenda of upsetting and breaking through received inequalities,” Gloria Wekker asserted in her article “Still Crazy After all Those Years: Feminism for a New Millenium,” published in the 10th anniversary edition of the European Journal of Women’s Studies.¹ Her scholarship—on gender and sexuality, “ethnicized knowledge

¹. “Still Crazy After all Those Years: Feminism for a New Millenium,” European Journal of Women’s Studies 13 (August 2006): 211-228.
systems,” Afro-Surinamese working-class women’s culture, and women’s movements in the Netherlands—has significantly contributed to this agenda. A scholar of exceptional intellect and eloquence, Wekker will be giving a talk sponsored by the UCLA Center for the Study of Women on January 6, 2011, in Royce Hall 314. The talk, entitled “Innocence Unltd.: Exploring Dutch Diaspora Space,” will focus on her current research and forthcoming book: *Innocence Unltd. Intersections of Gender, Race and Sexuality in the Dutch Cultural Archive*. About this topic, Wekker says, “Elsewhere in the world, too, Islam often is the scapegoat, but in the Netherlands a special characteristic is that gender and sexuality have become the litmus test for who can belong and who cannot: ‘We’ are tolerant, in favour of women’s emancipation and gay rights and who cannot underwrite that program, does not belong to ‘us.’”

Residing in the Netherlands, Wekker holds multiple positions as Aletta2-chair on Gender and Ethnicity at the Faculty of the Arts of Utrecht University and coordinator of the one-year MA program “Comparative Women’s Studies in Culture and Politics.” In addition, she is the director of GEM, the expertise center on Gender, Ethnicity and Multiculturality in higher education at Utrecht University.

Wekker’s visit to UCLA represents a homecoming in a way: She received her Ph.D. in Sociocultural Anthropology at UCLA in 1991 with a dissertation entitled “I Am Gold Money (I Pass Through All Hands, But I Do Not Lose My Value): The Construction of Selves, Gender and Sexualities in a Female, Working-class, Afro-Surinamese Setting.” Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, Vice Chancellor of Graduate Studies at UCLA and Wekker’s doctoral

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2. Aletta, named after Aletta Jacobs (1854–1929), the first medical doctor, also feminist, in the Netherlands, is the new name of the IIAV, the International Information Center and Archives of the women’s movement, located in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.
By examining the everyday realities of Afro-Surinamese women, Wekker demonstrates the fluidity and mutability of sexuality that is not restricted to Western binary structures of homosexuality or heterosexuality and challenges the way race and class have been deployed to reinforce a dominant mythic norm of white, middle-class female (hetero)sexuality.
For the study, Wekker received the Ruth Benedict Prize of the American Anthropological Association, which is presented annually to acknowledge excellence in scholarly work on lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered topics.”

Wekker’s work also strives to undo naturalized assumptions of race by consistently demonstrating the constructedness of racial identity: “When ‘race’ and ethnicity can continue silently to operate as organizers of our realities, they continue to construct the dominant ethnic position in society, as emptiness, as invisibility, as insignificant, in short as a non-ethnicity. This silent ethnic positioning holds enormous power within a racialized hierarchy.”

Whether stemming from Dutch postcolonial discourses in the public sphere or in women’s studies within the academy, Wekker asserts that the habitually uncontested use of race as a demarcation of identity, or an “ordering principle,” has deleterious consequences for women of color individually and collectively, and poses obstacles to contemporary feminist projects that aspire to acknowledge difference along more reflexive, productive, and intersectional vectors.

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Note: For more information on Gloria Wekker and her work, visit http://www.let.uu.nl/~gloria.wekker/personal/

4. “Still Crazy After All Those Years...” p. 495