

# The Palace

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# The Palace

classroom notes on post-colonialism



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- \* How can we find a way to talk about this? That is the first question which postcolonialism tries to answer. Since the early 1980s, postcolonialism has developed a body of writing that attempts to shift the dominant ways in which the relations between western and non-western people and their worlds are viewed. What does that mean? It means turning the world upside down. It means looking from the other side of the photograph, experiencing how differently things look when you live in Baghdad or Benin rather than Berlin or Boston, and understanding why. It means realizing that when western people look at the non-western world what they see is often more a mirror image of themselves and their own assumptions than the reality of what is really there, or of how people outside the west actually feel and perceive themselves. If you are someone who does not identify yourself as western, or as somehow not completely western even though you live in a western country, or someone who is part of a culture and yet excluded by its dominant voices, inside yet outside, then postcolonialism offers you a way of seeing things differently, a language and a politics in which your interests come first, not last.

**Robert J. C. Young**

Robert J. C. Young is a Professor of English and Critical Theory at Oxford University and a Fellow of Wadham College, Oxford. His publications include *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Culture* (1995), *Theory and Race* (1995), and *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (2001).

## \* INTERVIEW WITH SIBO KANOBANA

Sibo Kanobana is Assistant Professor at the *Open University of the Netherlands*, where he delivers lectures at the Department of Cultural Studies, Diversity and Inclusion. He has more than 20 years of experience in second language acquisition and language policy in adult education, vocational training and higher education. He is the editor of the book “*Zwarte bladzijden*”, which collects reflections of Afro-Belgian authors on Flemish colonial literature. He is a member of the editorial team of *Rekto:Verso*.

- \* Within stereotyping, then, we have established a connection between representation, difference, and power. However, we need to probe the nature of this power more fully. We often think of power in terms of direct physical coercion or constraint. However, we have also spoken, for example, of power in representation; power to mark, assign, and classify; of symbolic power; of ritualized expulsion. Power, it seems, has to be understood here, not only in terms of economic exploitation and physical coercion but also in broader cultural or symbolic terms, including the power to represent someone or something in a certain way—within a certain ‘regime of representation’. It includes the exercise of symbolic power through representational practices. Stereotyping is a key element in this exercise of symbolic violence.

### **Stuart Hall**

Stuart Hall was a Marxist sociologist, cultural theorist, and political activist. He was President of the British Sociological Association from 1995 to 1997 and was involved in the Black Arts Movement. His most influential publications include *The Hard Road to Renewal* (1988), *Formations of Modernity* (1992), *Questions of Cultural Identity* (1996), and *Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (1997).

**Thomas Crombez:**

Maybe it's useful to have a good idea from what perspective you're coming. You told me about your research in sociolinguistics. Can you tell us something about that and how it influences your writing about culture?

**Sibo Kanobana:**

Maybe it's the other way around. I started my PhD at a later age. I had a career already and I was teaching Dutch as a second language. It was my first job in Brussels, the city where I grew up.

I was also raised multilingual. I was born in Congo. My first words were in Lingala, but then French became my main language. I spoke French at home, but I went to school in Dutch. That became my professional language.

I was raised in that multilingual and multicultural setting. Which obviously was in confrontation with the world in which I was living, that is much more ordered in a way. I was always very much into culture. I felt like cultural practices or art was a place where chaos or messing up things or things shouldn't be as ordered as a society wants us to be.

I was very much attracted to hip hop music, or hip hop culture generally, as a kind of cultural practice where you can just experiment and do different things. Also with languages and being multilingual and multicultural.

That's also the context from which I was already writing for *Rekto:Verso* and already being an editor before I started my PhD. When I started my PhD, I started to do it in sociolinguistics and that wasn't specifically about analyzing literature or analyzing music.

In 2016, there were the terrorist attacks in Brussels. Following these attacks, there was a surge of job offers for new security guards. The problem is that Brussels is a predominantly French-speaking city, but to become a security guard, you have to know at least the basics of the other language.

\* Usually, Francophones have to learn Dutch in order to become security guards. And already in the early 21st century, around 2005, there were already efforts to have more. There are more cameras. There's more security. We're living in a more insecure world. They wanted to have more security workers in the streets. It was decided, following the attacks, to lower the threshold necessary to learn Dutch. You didn't have to be fluent in Dutch, you just needed some basics. And they offered free courses in Dutch.

My first job was teaching Dutch to immigrants. And it was specifically in order to enhance their opportunities on the job market. The job market in Brussels is recognized by professionals as being a racist job market, where they are actually offering Dutch courses to people who experi-





ence racism, so that they can enhance their chances on the job market. In effect, it is to give the tools to victims of racism to trump racism, that they are actually better than any white person, and they can access the job. Now, that is a discourse that was reproduced also with the people I interviewed. I did ethnographic work. I followed their training for six months.

**Thomas Crombez:**

You were not teaching the security workers, but you were following it from the sidelines.

**Sibo Kanobana:**

Yes. I participated in the training of the security officers. I observed them and looked at their interactions.

I looked at what languages they were using, how they did their job, and what do languages do in that context. And any stereotypes that you have about these guys—because they were all men, and all men of color—are all wrong, I can tell you. I had pretty bad prejudices concerning who is doing that job and why they were doing it. That was completely turned around while I was working with them. They are soldiers of the system. But aren't we all soldiers of the system somehow?

The title of my PhD was *Serving the White Order, Language and Race in the Making of Security Workers*. You can ask 'What is whiteness?', and we can elaborate on that. But that's my background in sociolinguistics.

There is symbolic analysis, there is the role of the Dutch language in Brussels, if it's not necessary to speak it, but it's necessary to pass the test, then what is the meaning of that language? What is the political, economic, and social meaning of that language in that context?

\* In the sixteenth century, real language is not a totality of independent signs, a uniform and unbroken entity in which things could be reflected one by one, as in a mirror, and so express their particular truths. It is rather an opaque, mysterious thing, closed in upon itself, a fragmented mass, its enigma renewed in every interval, which combines here and there with the forms of the world and becomes interwoven with them: so much so that all these elements, taken together, form a network of marks in which each of them may play, and does in fact play, in relation to all the others, the role of content or of sign, that of secret or of indicator. In its raw, historical sixteenth-century being, language is not an arbitrary system; it has been set down in the world and forms a part of it, both because things themselves hide and manifest their own enigma like a language and because words offer themselves to men as things to be deciphered. The great metaphor of the book that one opens, that one pores over and reads in order to know nature, is merely the reverse and visible side of another transference, and a much deeper one, which forces language to reside in the world, among the plants, the herbs, the stones, and the animals. Language partakes in the world-wide dissemination of similitudes and signatures. It must, therefore, be studied itself as a thing in nature. The only differences are that there is only one nature and there are several languages; and that in the esoteric field the properties of words, syllables, and letters are discovered by another discourse which always remains secret, whereas in grammar it is the words and phrases of everyday life that themselves express their properties. Language stands halfway between the visible forms of nature and the secret conveniences of esoteric discourse. It is a fragmented nature, divided against itself and deprived of its original transparency by admixture. It is at the same time a buried revelation and a revelation that is gradually being restored to ever greater clarity.

**Thomas Crombez:**

So you mean that you were studying language like a tool of power?

**Sibo Kanobana:**

\* Yes, exactly. I was looking not at how people speak and what kind of registers they are using, but more at using language as a sign of legitimacy. How performing Dutch gives you access to specific places, to specific jobs.

**Thomas Crombez:**

When you're speaking Dutch in Brussels, it's like a social statement in itself?

**Sibo Kanobana:**

Yes, it is. It is used like that by people, the security workers themselves, as well as the people that they're interacting with. There is a level of complexity that the Dutch language traditionally, historically in Belgium, has been marginalized. It's not the language that is associated with prestige or with the upper classes. It's rather a language, at least in Brussels still, that is associated with rural areas, with marginality, with something that's not very sophisticated. It's not considered beautiful, it's considered ugly.

But at the same time, since the 1960s, the language gained political legitimacy, and Flanders became a much richer region than Wallonia. You get this paradox where a language that is actually not associated with prestige and

with something sophisticated is at the same time economically necessary.

So people do not love Dutch, but they need Dutch. They acquire it in order to gain access to power. But it's very paradoxical, because even if they become fluent in the language, they will never associate themselves with the word Flemish. The word Flemish in French is nearly an insult. There is this really paradoxical situation where you get these historically marginalized cultural symbols that are associated with the Dutch language, and are now the emblematic symbols of whiteness.

Because Dutch is also associated with the police force, with the administration, and with the state. For example, the prime minister for the last few decades has always been Flemish, with the exception of Elio Di Rupo. But also the police force in Brussels is perceived as being Flemish. Because there again, bilingualism is required, and Flemish people are usually better at speaking French than the other way around. It's not that you have a majority of Flemish police officers, but they are overrepresented. About a third are Dutch-speaking police officers. Which does not correspond to the presence of Flemish people in Brussels in general, which is about 10%. And most of them are bilingual, they are not even identifying with Flanders.

## *The Order of Things (1966)*

### **Michel Foucault**

Michel Foucault was a historian and philosopher, associated with the structuralist and post-structuralist movements. He has had strong influence not only in philosophy but also in a wide range of humanistic and social scientific disciplines. His most important works include *The Order of Things* (1966), *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1965), and *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975).

There is research about Dutch-speaking people living in Brussels, who are not very fond of associating themselves with Flemish. A majority of them say they are not Flemish, they are 'Brussels people'. There is this paradox. And that is something that I find very interesting. The South African context is kind of similar. During British colonization, of course black people were oppressed. Let's be clear about that. But the white Afrikaner-speaking people were also oppressed. The British wanted to exterminate them because they were such stubborn people. They were oppressed by the British, but then when they became white, they became the symbol of oppression, completely erasing the role of the British in this whole history.

You see something similar with Israel and Palestine today. How historically oppressed people become the soldiers of this neo-fascist order and become like the symbols of oppression. And Flemish people played a similar role in the Belgian context, at least in the Brussels context.

- \* It is as if I had been looking at a fishbowl—the glide and flick of the golden scales, the green tip, the bolt of white careening back from the gills; the castles at the bottom, surrounded by pebbles and tiny, intricate fronds of green; the barely disturbed water, the flecks of waste and food, the tranquil bubbles traveling to the surface—and suddenly I saw the bowl, the structure that transparently (and invisibly) permits the ordered life it contains to exist in the larger world. In other words, I began to rely on my knowledge of how books get written, how language arrives; my sense of how and why writers abandon or take on certain aspects of their project. I began to rely on my understanding of what the linguistic struggle requires of writers and what they make of the surprise that is the inevitable concomitant of the act of creation. What became transparent were the self-evident ways that Americans choose to talk about themselves through and within a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence.

**Toni Morrison**

Toni Morrison was a writer, who was noted for her examination of Black experience within the Black community. She received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. Her most important published fiction novels are *Beloved* (1987), *The Bluest Eye* (1970), and *Sula* (1973). Her work of criticism on American literature is *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992).

**Thomas Crombez:**

Let's go to the other topics that you are working on, such as art and literature and film and music. How did these insights that you gained during your sociolinguistic work play into your work as a cultural journalist for *Rekto:Verso*?

You're a member of the editorial board of *Rekto:Verso* and you are a frequent contributor. How do you make this connection?

**Sibo Kanobana:**

Sociolinguistics is also very much interested in ideology. And how ideology is reproduced through language. Sociolinguistics feels like language is much more than what we have learned in school about grammar. You have to understand sociolinguistics as something very broad, in which you can put discourse, in which you can put semiotics, too. And discourse is, of course, the way that we create reality. Sociolinguistics is really about the social role of language in society and how we use language to create our reality. That informs the way that I look at art and at music.

When I see a painting, it is a language. It's speaking to me. When I'm looking at a film, and when I'm listening to music, even without words, it speaks to me. It reproduces and tries to create a reality. That's how I see the direct link.

I'm very much interested in colonialism and in racism and how racism works. I was raised in a world where racism is

illegal, but where it still is at play.

\* So what's going on? What happens? And that's where I think that we can think about art as a language. If language is the way that we create our reality, it means that it's at the same time a tool that can oppress, but that can also emancipate. Because we create an oppressive reality by creating discourse, by creating different ways of speaking to people to tell them that is reality, that's how you have to interpret the world. That's what is normal, that's what is abnormal, that is what is legitimate, that is totally illegitimate. All these things are created through the languages that we produce. And that's how I see a direct link between sociolinguistics and cultural studies. In a way, semiotics could be the bridge.





**Thomas Crombez:**

Let's turn to the book *Zwarte Bladzijden*, or "*Black Pages*". It's a book that you edited and that deals with Flemish literary works from the period of Belgian colonialism. These are works of quite a long time ago. These books are not widely read anymore. They feel very strange to us because of their attitude. What made you want to do this book? What made you want to reflect on that body of Flemish colonial literature? What made it important to you and the other contributors of the volume?

**Sibo Kanobana:**

It might be interesting to know that I was lucky that the Letterenhuis came to me and asked me if I would be interested in doing something with their archive. They said "We trust that you're going to do the right thing". In a way, I was hired by a white institution to make them look good. To at least appear as they are doing some decolonization. Sorry, that's just a cynical remark.

My selection was guided by how popular the books were at the time of their publication. A lot of books are forgotten, but were essential at the moment they were published. They were books that drew a lot of attention with positive reviews. That was an interesting parameter to select these books. Why did we forget about them if they were popular at the time? The book that I read, which was *Ik, blanke kaffer* by Paul Brondeel, I don't

think it feels like an old book. It's still a very modern book.

**Thomas Crombez:**

It's about a white colonialist, a Flemish man, experiencing anti-Flemish discrimination in Belgium. Then still experiencing those same feelings when he moves to the Congo. And then reflecting, seeing the racism against the Congolese people as a kind of reflection of the discrimination he experiences.

**Sibo Kanobana:**

That would be too much credit for the guy. No, it's rather that he realizes how messed up the situation is in Congo.

**Thomas Crombez:**

So, the title is also a racial slur, right? How could you translate it? *Kafir* is from Arabic?

**Sibo Kanobana:**

It's originally from Arabic and in South Africa. It was used as a slur to refer to black and brown people. But he's saying, 'Me, White scum'. Because he's really racist, too. At the same time, he's like, 'What am I doing here in this country? I shouldn't be here'. And he realizes that he, although he is racist and he doesn't like black people, at the same time his position is kind of similar to the oppression that he experiences. And he's like, this is kind of a perverse situation. But that translates into alcoholism and into abusing his wife and stuff like that. He's really not a good guy. But he's tormented.



And for me, that's very similar to *Killers of the Flower Moon*, the new film by Martin Scorsese, where you also see at least one white guy who is really tormented, who thinks he's doing the right thing by being a racist. But at the same time, in his heart, he feels like... something is really wrong, but he doesn't change, despite completely rotting on the inside. You see something similar in *Twelve Years a Slave*, with the guy who's played by Michael Fassbender.

The interesting thing is that the book by Paul Brondeel, *Ik, blanke kaffer*, was just as popular and had raving reviews when it came out. At the same time, in the similar period as *Gangreen* by Jef Geeraerts. And Jef Geeraerts is kind of the complete opposite in a way that... it's about exoticism. Yes, there is some kind of feeling like 'It must have been great to be a white guy in Congo'.

**Thomas Crombez:**

Because you could do whatever you wanted. This open moral space where the law was just... just vanished.

**Sibo Kanobana:**

And the thing is that in the context of Jef Geeraerts, he was actually defying sexual morals, defying the authority of the church. Certainly about sex, it was like, 'anything goes'. But then the whole colonial dynamic is really problematic. That's one of the reasons why the book stayed popular

throughout the decades, it's only like in the last ten years that it starts to be... frowned upon. While the *Ik, blanke kaffer* by Brondeel has disappeared. And it entails a very intricate critique of colonialism and how colonialism persists today. It's much more subtle than Jef Geeraerts.

- \* Which is partly the point. Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor. Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril. Can nobody see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the breakup of one petty European mind? But that is not even the point. The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world. And the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization, which depersonalizes a portion of the human race, can be called a great work of art. My answer is: No, it cannot. I do not doubt Conrad's great talents. Even *Heart of Darkness* has its memorably good passages and moments.

#### **Chinua Achebe**

Chinua Achebe was a Nigerian novelist, poet, and critic who wrote in English and is regarded as a central figure of modern African literature. His most important essays include *Yet on Creation Day* (1975), *Hopes and Impediments* (1988), *Home and Exile* (2000), and *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness* (2016).

**Thomas Crombez:**

I want to make a connection with the book *Playing in the dark* by Toni Morrison. Because what continues to fascinate me, while I was reading your book, was: Why do certain books get forgotten while they were very popular in their own time? For me, it also has something to do with the Belgians wanting to forget everything that happened in the Congo before 1960. But Toni Morrison makes a comparable argument regarding the presence of African people and Afro-American people in American literature. She says something like—they are there, but they are present like a shadow. They're not foregrounded. They're always there as a kind of contrast, as a kind of background of unfreedom and dependency, which serves to highlight the American dream, the ideals of freedom and independence of the main characters, who are white. There is some kind of blackness there in American literature that is very much backgrounded. Can you make a parallel with how African people are present in Flemish colonial literature?

**Sibo Kanobana:**

In Flemish literature it is very recognizable. The main characters are the white characters, and the role of the black characters is only to enforce the white character.

- \* All these books about Congo do not give a voice to Congolese people. They are completely silenced.

They are not individuals with emotions, with relationships, with doubts. No. They're not full human personalities.

The only book, where black people are given a voice, is *Terug naar Congo* by Lieve Joris, which is a postcolonial book. It is a documentary. And the weird thing about the book is that it gives voice to black people and to the Congolese. But the whole idea of the book is that she goes back to Congo because she realized that her uncle or something was a colonialist. But then she completely disappears from the story. It's the outsider's view, the objective person who is looking at Congo and describing Congo. And her own biases, her own whiteness, is completely erased from the story. Because you think these people are talking to her as a woman, as a white woman, and that is completely not taken into account in the dynamics or in the information that comes her way. That element is still missing.

But what Toni Morrison is saying, that is something I believe is still very much the case. And there's been no improvement so far.



**Alexandra Duschnat:**

Do institutions, such as this academy, make a distinction in what they include as art?

**Sibo Kanobana:**

There is this institutionalized art, and there is all the not recognized art, or even criminalized art. Again, to talk about my hip hop background, that's the place where people make art, and they do illegal things to do their art.

Often rap music is now very commercialized and problematic in a way, but that's only the rap music that is commercialized. But then, when you think about graffiti, that is being institutionalized more and more. You find graffiti in an art gallery. But that's maybe not really graffiti, right? I think there is this element of it doesn't speak to them, because there is this elitism, there is this idea of how institutionalized art is supposed to be.

But then we are completely dismissing that people are making art outside of these institutions, and that we do not take that art seriously. Because it is considered not art, as long as it's not recognized by white institutions as being art.

**Thomas Crombez:**

Is it a solution to include marginalized domains of art, or domains of creativity, into the institutional art, or does that kill them?

**Sibo Kanobana:**

In a way, it makes them innocent. I don't remember who said that, but there is this quote, art goes to a museum to die, or something like that.

**Thomas Crombez:**

I think it's from the film *Les Statues Meurent Aussi*, or 'Statues Also Die', by Alain Resnais and Chris Marker. They made a film in the 1950s, invited by *Présence Africaine*, and there they wrote about African objects in European museums, and they said, art goes to the museum to die.

**Sibo Kanobana:**

I'm very suspicious of inclusion, what does that mean? We can be against inclusion, but how is it then implemented? Maybe the institution has to get out, rather than trying to include. I think it's much more about breaking the walls, rather than trying to incorporate these things. History tells us that when art forms are incorporated into the institutions, they lose their soul, and they are not as subversive anymore as they used to be. They become part of the system, and are not questioning the system as significantly as they used to. I think we have to be more outside, and less inside.





**Klaudia Bogusz:**

What is your opinion about assigning an art form, for example hip hop music, to a race? Since hip hop comes from black culture, from black resistance, and there's a history behind it. But now, it is becoming popular, and it is being performed by white people who have nothing to do with its history. Another aspect is the language of hip hop that is now used every day and that also comes from a certain place. I just wanted to know your opinion about non-black people performing hip hop, and to put it in a context of Toni Morrison — maybe black presence here is only like shadow of the history, actually disregarded?

**Sibo Kanobana:**

I think it's great that non-black people, that the whole world, is making hip hop nowadays. The thing is what is the goal of doing that? Hip hop music is something that happened at a certain time, at a certain place. It happened in New York, in the Bronx, in the late 70s. But then you throw it into the world, and everybody does something else with it. And that's great. The problem is when capitalism comes into the picture, when it's all about money.

I don't think that black people own hip hop. The Bronx is predominantly black, but it's not just black, it's super mixed. And it's a cultural expression that tries to subvert society, and that is trying to produce culture outside of the expected frame-

works. And you could consider rap music nowadays completely appropriated by capitalism as not really doing that, but there's more stuff going on.

And then I see that people also use rap to not just talk about racism, but to talk about sexism, about ableism, about neurodiversity. That's also something that I really noticed in the 90s in Belgium when hip hop became really popular. It mostly started with people with a post-colonial migration background who appropriated that music from what they perceived as black America and thought, okay, I'm not a black American, but there's something that I recognize in this. There is something similar in these stories and in this aesthetics in which I can find my dignity by appropriating that culture and doing it, even if I'm not a black person. And you see that in Europe. For example, if you look at French hip hop, it's super diverse. There have always been white people and brown people and black people together doing this. Very male-dominant, of course, but I think that is also very much because of the commercialization. The gender dynamic is something very heteronormative also. But today if you look for it, you find queer rap, you find any kind of rap, and you find rap as really a tool for emancipation. That still happens, while at the same time, there's all this problematic rap music, too.

- \* We don't want to be correct and we won't be correct-ed. Politics proposes to make us better, but we were good already in the mutual debt that can never be made good. We owe it to each other to falsify the institution, to make politics incorrect, to give the lie to our own determination. We owe each other the interdeterminate. We owe each other everything. An abdication of political responsibility? OK. Whatever. We're just anti-politically romantic about actually existing social life. We aren't responsible for politics. We are the general antagonism to politics looming outside every attempt to politicise, every imposition of self-governance, every sovereign decision and its degraded miniature, every emergent state and home sweet home. We are disruption and consent to disruption. We preserve upheaval. Sent to fulfil by abolishing, to renew by unsettling, to open the enclosure whose immeasurable venality is inversely proportionate to its actual area, we got politics surrounded. We cannot represent ourselves, we can't be represented.

### **Fred Moten**

Fred Moten (cultural theorist, poet, and scholar whose work explores critical theory, black studies, and performance studies) and Stefano Harney (scholar specialized in black studies, anthropology, sociology, art criticism, and American studies) draw on the theory and practice of the black radical tradition as it supports, inspires, and extends contemporary social and political thought and aesthetic critique. Their most important publication collects essays under the title *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (2013).

**Vincent Becher:**

You mentioned the role the Dutch language plays in the Belgian job market.

Do you think, we as people, are responsible for these power dynamics in society? More like the antagonism of politics itself as people?

**Sibo Kanobana:**

Everything is political. That means nothing is political. The personal is political. And who are we when you talk about 'We'? We as citizens? Or we as art students?

**Vincent Becher:**

We as citizens of a state.

**Sibo Kanobana:**

\* I don't think there are always people who are more responsible than others. But in a way, we are all perpetrators and victims at the same time. It just depends on the context. Sometimes we're more the perpetrators. Sometimes we're more the victim. In a way, we just try to deal with a system that is oppressive and that is destructive. And we're all cogs in that system. And sometimes you try to pervert the system by being contrarian.

I'm not, as an individual, responsible. I'm participating in something. And how can I refuse to participate?

- \* The people here in Tashkent, which is quite close to the Iranian border, are very diverse, and I am impressed by their apparent unity, by the ways in which the Russian and the Asian people seem to be able to function in a multinational atmosphere that requires of them that they get along, whether or not they are each other's favourite people. And it's not that there are no individuals who are nationalists, or racists, but that the taking of a state position against nationalism, against racism is what makes it possible for a society like this to function. And of course, the next step in that process must be the personal element. I don't see anyone attempting or even suggesting this phase, however, and that is troublesome, for without this step socialism remains at the mercy of an incomplete vision, imposed from the outside. We have internal desires but outside controls. But at least there is a climate here that seems to encourage those questions. I asked Helen about the Jews, and she was rather evasive, I think, saying only that there were Jews in government. The basic position seems to be one of a presumption of equality!

**Audre Lorde**

Audre Lorde was a poet, essayist, and autobiographer known for her writings on lesbian feminism and racial issues. Her most important poetry work includes *The First Cities* (1968), *Cables to Rage* (1970), and *Sister Outsider* (1984).

**Thomas Crombez:**

Here, at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, we have a student population with many international students. Can I ask the international students in the audience: What are your experiences? Does this connect with something that has been said?

**Fiobos Gkoubras:**

When I came to Belgium in 2014, I went through the immigration program. And I found that the program is very approachable, especially if you want to learn. But at the same time, I never felt part of the society here.

**Thomas Crombez:**

You also work in Belgium, Fiobos?

**Fiobos Gkoubras:**

I worked in construction and now in cleaning. I found it very hard to approach Belgians, all my friends are also immigrants. The Belgians I have as friends are very different. I wonder why the system is easy to get into, but you're never a part of it, you have to leave your identity behind.

**Sibo Kanobana:**

It's complicated, I don't think it's specific to the Flemish case. I do believe, that a place like France, for instance, you could assimilate much more easier if you speak the language. You have to become French, and to stand by France, and then you are French. Rather than looking just at Flanders, I would like to think

about just the wider project of the nation-state, and how that functions, in a way that we are expected to choose a site, and to define ourselves all the time, whether gender, or race, or other things.

The boxes are presented to you, and you have to make a clear choice in which box you fit in. And that is part of the social order that is created around us, and the idea of the nation-state, where the ideal is a country for one people, with one language and under one flag.

\* Belgium is a failed state in that context. But Flanders tries to be that, as much as possible. And that's what we are aiming for but of course most countries in the world are not like that. They are multicultural and multilingual. Why is it hard to become Flemish? Specifically in Flanders, there's a history of marginalization, a history of shame, a history of not being proud of being Flemish at all. That is all connected to the Flemish person as someone who is always complaining, who is never satisfied, who is always kind of feeling like the victim. And put that into context with migration, and all this and that's why there is much racism. There is this complex of inferiority, and this angst of losing their culture, losing their language. And that is now, they used to be over-represented in the working class. Now, they gained social mobility. They became rich. They became white.

- \* Middle-class ideology is a myth and belief found in several black (and other) American popular art forms. The middle-class ideology in popular arts is represented with affluence, unlimited consumerism, conspicuous consumption, individualism, social and economic mobility, heterosexual love relationship and/or marriage, and nuclear family. An excellent example of the operation of this repertoire component appears in African American postwar comic strips but also in black novels, films, and television sitcoms. The middle-class ideology is significant in the black post-war comic strip because it exalts, celebrates, and centres black urban life rather than black rural life or black religious life; speaks to the urban black middle-class; expresses a vision of urban black life in America that is equal to whites socially, culturally, educationally, economically, and (implicitly) politically; demonstrates that middle-classness is synonymous with racial integration, peace, harmony, and equality; complements rhetoric of equal civil rights evident in the activities of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People and similar organizations; suppresses social contradictions of inequality, racism, discrimination; and naturalizes existing society.

**Angela Nelson**

Angela Nelson is a Professor of Cultural and Critical studies, and her research focuses on Black popular cultural production including African American music, stage plays, and representations of African Americans in American post-war and contemporary comic art and television. Her most recent work includes *The Repertoire of Black Popular Culture* (2009).

**Fiobos Gkoubras:**

I want to understand, what do you mean when you say they became white?

**Sibo Kanobana:**

Yes, I wrote a whole article about that, how the Flemish became white. You can easily find it online.

- \* I'm writing a book about this in Dutch right now. I try to theorize whiteness, because we use a lot of 'white' here and 'white' there without really knowing what you're talking about. And usually, the first thing that you think about is people's origins and appearance. I think that people are racialized also when they are appearing white. White is for me much more like an ideology that gives value to human lives and discards the value of other human lives. And it is fundamentally where race and class meet. For me, it's some kind of Western bourgeois idea of humanity. That is what white means. It's a symbol that has a lot of power, you have the advantage. The sense that people will not assume that you are a threat for the social order. There are symbols, language, religion, culture, class, etc. All these things are playing their part in creating what white people are. But basically, Olivia Rutazibwa speaks of imagined white lives, which is the idea of the middle class white person who lives in a house with a garden and who can park their car in front of the door.

**Fiobos Gkoubras:**

It's an idea that many people chase as well?

**Sibo Kanobana:**

Yeah.

It's a stereotype that people want to have that eventually. It's kind of aspirational whiteness you're talking about.

I say the Flemish became white. White people among themselves have spent much time trying to be the whitest of them all. There is this tension among white people, too, to be the real civilized.

**Kludia Bogusz:**

I wanted to mention, because I'm Polish, there's this bias connected to being a Polish woman. And it's almost everywhere, there's a lot of people in Poland who are biased against Ukrainians. It's this kind of chain of being this white race.

**Sibo Kanobana:**

It's presented as a binary, but it's actually not a binary. It is fractal. You have to compare it with a broccoli. You know a broccoli? If you take one piece out of it, you get a little broccoli.





**Thomas Crombez:**

Earlier in our conversation, you talked about a television debate, where you felt that you were there invited to talk about your experience, while the white professor was invited as an observer who would not have to talk about his experience. There was something structurally wrong with the setup of the debate. Can you tell me what happened?

Discomfort is super important. Yeah, basically when you feel comfortable, there's something wrong.

**Sibo Kanobana:**

Yeah, definitely. It became uncomfortable. I do not expect instant gratification when I'm doing things like that. Rather, on the contrary. Afterwards, we had a good conversation with the moderator and with the professor. I still disagree fundamentally with some things that the professor was saying.

**Thomas Crombez:**

And we should look for this. If I understand you correctly.

**Sibo Kanobana:**

Yeah, look for discomfort, I think that when it's uncomfortable, that's when we're learning, right? That's the tension between the idea of safe space and brave space. What is a classroom? A place where we can make mistakes? A place where we can say we're not making mistakes on purpose. The idea is not to attack people personally, but to learn. And I think that's when there is friction, that's when we are learning.



**Vincent Becher:**

Sometimes I really have the feeling that the university is like a system in itself, with its hierarchical structure. I realize this in especially Flanders now, with these rooms that have a certain order. It fits well in this society of inequity in itself. So, I sometimes wonder how sincere critical theory in a universitarian context really is.

**Sibo Kanobana:**

You're right. It's kind of a paradox that the university or higher education should be at the same time the place where we can make changes... Weirdly enough, while universities are becoming corporations, it's still a place where you get a lot of intellectual freedom, artistic freedom, and where you can do things differently, even if it's very hierarchical and very structured.

I mean, if we abolish the hierarchical structures of higher education, it will lose its prestige. It will not be anymore that institution where everybody wants to go to become. We still need that in order to still have that space where we can actually be critical of it. It's a paradox, I know.

I like the fact that you brought that up and that you point at that contradiction. You're right. I think it's still sincere. It's just one of these few places where you can embrace the paradox.

I think there are different ways to subvert a system.

And I think that we are partners. Those who are within the palace, trying to break down the palace, and those who are outside the palace, trying to break down the palace. And I think that we have to stay in communication with each other. But I still think that what people do, and that's because I am in the palace, that I think that what I'm doing is valuable, I'm trying to define myself. But I do not disregard what happens outside of the palace. I think I need people outside of the palace trying to abolish the palace, in order to get legitimacy within the palace to abolish the palace.

We have to relativize how much you can do when you're within the system, and try to subvert the system while you're within the system. I'm very aware of the limitations of it.

**Vincent Becher:**

I really like the image of the palace, the two fences.

**Thomas Crombez:**

Sibo, thank you very much for being here, for responding to the invitation, and for sharing your expertise and your ideas with us.

