

**“Reading the Comments Section;
or, Why Adults Refuse to Admit Racist Content in the Children’s Books They Love.”**

To understand and educate White adults who resist the possibility that beloved children’s literature may harbor racist content, this paper contends that we need to move beyond “white fragility” — Robin Di Angelo’s term for Whites’ tendency, in conversations about race, to display “anger, fear,... guilt,” and defensiveness. An emotionally resonant site of racial (in)formation, children’s literature is the ideal locus for developing a more subtle taxonomy of White strategies of displacement. In this paper, I develop a more nuanced map of White hostility to authentic racial engagement, drawing on thousands of responses to my *Was the Cat in the Hat Black?: The Hidden Racism of Children’s Literature and the Need for Diverse Books* (2017).

This approach derives from the fifth chapter of Gloria Wekker’s *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (2016), which reads the 1500 emails protesting a 2008 Van Abbemuseum of Modern Art exhibit that “critically interrogated the phenomenon of Zwarte Piet” (Black Pete, the racist caricature who, in Dutch lore, is the assistant of Sinterklaas [Santa Claus]). Wekker locates 10 themes, including an insistence on White innocence, defenses of “our” culture/tradition, claims that Black friends or neighbors like Zwart Piet, denial that Zwarte Piet is racist, assertions of Wekker’s ignorance (accompanied by an allegedly “true” story of Piet’s origin), and arguments that political correctness produces racism.

A preliminary examination of my own rich data set — social media responses, personal email, troll-reviews, comments on the “Talks at Google” YouTube video and on media stories — finds not only national differences, but divergent responses to our different embodiments. As an Afro-Surinamese Dutch woman, Wekker faces racist and sexist anger directed at her, personally. As a straight White American man, my unearned privilege prompts transformations of those types of anger — sexism encoded as emasculating liberalism, and racism as a symptom of either white guilt or illicit desire for people of color. However, other elements find parallels, such as the insistence on (White) childhood innocence, the “Black friend” argument, and blunt denial. Charting the landscape of forgetting, nostalgia, disavowal, and projection, my paper maps the structures of feeling that undergird American racism.