THE UNCOMFORTABLE CHAIR OF THE COLONIAL PAST AND RACIST PRESENT

AN AFFECTIVE APPROACH TO WHITE DISCOMFORT IN THE NETHERLANDS

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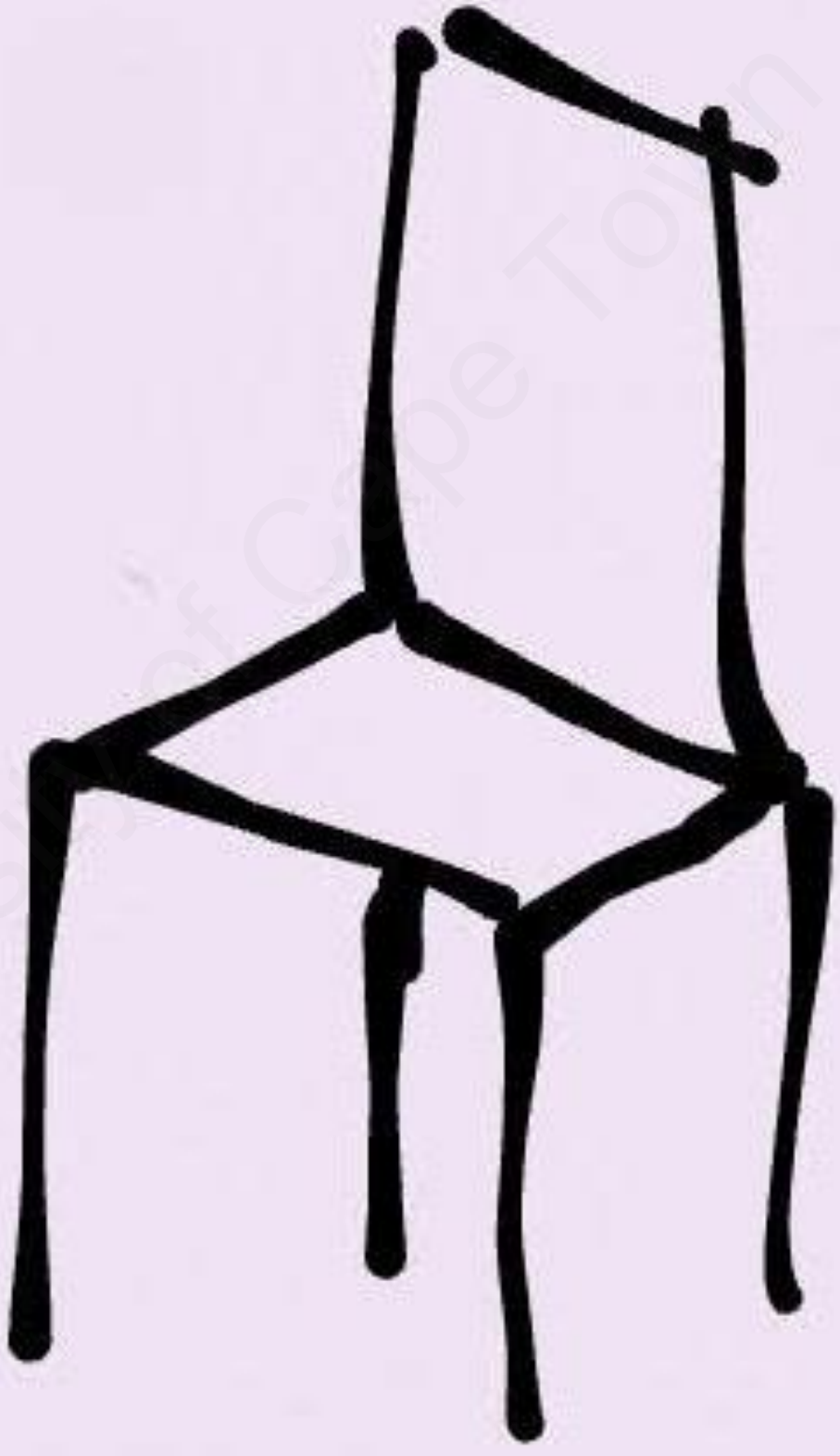

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‘Wees moedig in je ongemak. Wees open en nieuwsgierig, dan ben ik dat ook. Er is geen ik zonder jou en geen strijd zonder hoop. Laten we beginnen.'

‘*Be brave in your discomfort. Be open and curious, then I’ll do the same. There is no I without you, and no struggle without hope. Let’s start*.’

- Typhoon (2020, July 12th)

Plagiarism Declaration

I declare that this is my original work. The ideas drawn from the work(s) of others have been acknowledged or cited fully. I understand that copying the works of others and presenting them as mine is wrong. This thesis has not been submitted in the past, nor is it being submitted at any other institution.

SIGNED BY CANDIDATE

Kiki Kolman

ABSTRACT

Activists, artists, academics, and other experts have pointed out the problem of (manifestations of) white discomfort in the Netherlands: white Dutch people experience strong unease when topics like racism or the colonial past are addressed, resulting in defensiveness and avoidance of important conversations – hence, obstructing the anti-racism struggle. In order to tackle this problem, it is important to understand where white discomfort is rooted and how it manifests. Gloria Wekker's work shows the importance of 'white innocence' in understanding Dutch whiteness – the false conception of (progressive) Dutch white people that the Netherlands and they themselves are innocent with regard to racism. This myth of innocence is constructed on a collective national level. International literature on white discomfort, however, is often (but not always) focused on the individual's psychology. Therefore, this interdisciplinary thesis explores an additional conception of white discomfort, grounded in the Dutch reality, that acknowledges the historical and collective context of whiteness. This is done by combining critical whiteness studies with Affect Theory, specifically Sara Ahmed's work on whiteness and discomfort. The result is an understanding of white discomfort as the friction between the historically shaped self-perceived innocent body, and the historically shaped and continuously changing space this body is in. The conceptualisation is then further developed in a dance between theory and practice by analysing the results of focus groups with (self-identified) progressive white Dutch people. The research points to white discomfort as an interplay of 1) the identification of the individual with the collective of white Dutch people, or simply with the Netherlands as a country; 2) the collision with the innocent self-image when this collective collides with the innocent self-image; 3) the white person's desire to either be good or be perceived as good (most likely, a combination of both); And 4) the restricted space to speak in conversations on racism. The approach of white discomfort as affect, then, offers the opportunity to connect the white individual to the collective history of the Netherlands, while still acknowledging individual responsibility. And it helps uncover how the avoidance of white discomfort by individuals maintain problematic forms of whiteness.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The first time I, a white Dutch student, entered the African Studies classroom at the University of Cape Town, I felt awkward to say the least. Coming from the Netherlands, I was hardly used to being one of the only white people in a room – let alone a room full of critical Black[1] people discussing decolonial theory, including the consequences of all the violence the Dutch had committed in South Africa. I felt hypervisible. In my head, I kept wondering what my fellow students thought of me entering the room. Were they suspicious of me being there? (Yes, they confessed a couple of weeks later.) Was I disrupting a space I should not have entered in the first place? Was it clear enough that I was ashamed of the violent histories of the Netherlands? In that moment, I was aware of every move I made, all my facial expressions, everything I said, everything I did not say. I experienced what I would now define as white discomfort: the feeling of discomfort white people experience in conversations or situations that make them aware of issues related to racism or their white privilege.

Fast-forward to 1st June 2020. 10.000 people gather on Amsterdam Dam Square in the Netherlands for the first out of more than twenty #BlackLivesMatter demonstrations all over the country. Jennifer Tosch takes the stage and addresses the white people in the audience. 'Get comfortable being uncomfortable. Because we have work to do!' (see Stelk, 2020). This protest was the start of a period of protests and a rise in attention for racism and the colonial past in the mainstream media and public debate. Since that moment, the word 'ongemak' ('discomfort') resurfaced in opinion pieces, speeches, and interviews (for example Boersema, 2020; Kraak, 2020; Van der Laan, 2020; Vink & Rosman, 2020 July 15; Wiegman, 2020; Van der Wielen, 2020 June 30). The general message is similar: white Dutch people have been avoiding conversations on racism far too long because of their discomfort. Regularly, their discomfort even manifests in violent ways: white people get angry, start crying or leave the conversation to avoid feelings of discomfort. And this avoidance of white discomfort prevents or delays progress in the struggle against racism. In other words: the ways in which white discomfort manifests are sometimes harmful to Black people and people of colour[2], and help maintain racist structures (Schols, 2019; Cairo, 2021, p.153).

This is a problem because the Netherlands is a country with a strong colonial history whose racist structures still affect today's society and politics (Essed, 2017; Wekker, 2016). An example: last year,

[1] In this thesis, I will consistently write Black with a capital B, as requested by many Black thinkers like W.E.B. Du Bois, and Kwame Anthony Appiah (Nduwanje, 2021 December 7; Tharps, 2014). This is an acknowledgement of a shared (pan-African) history and community. White, on the contrary, will not be written with a capital W, since this spelling is often used by white supremacist groups.

[2] I choose the formulation 'Black people and people of colour' following the language employed by activists in the Netherlands. Since the #BlackLivesMatter protests, more and more people adjust to explicitly mentioning Black people to emphasise that racism affects them differently, as well as to acknowledge that people of colour can also perform anti-black racism.

the entire Dutch government had to step down when news came out that the National Tax Association had harmed around 50.000 innocent people by accusing them of childcare allowance fraud based on 'ethnic profiling' (Kleinnijenhuis, 2020). Cases went as far as stories of children that were taken from their families because their parents were deemed incapable of taking care of them due to severe stress. The government, as well as the independent official investigation, refused to classify the scandal as institutional racism (Radio 1, 2020 December 17).

A second example of racism with roots in the colonial past is the Dutch Black Pete's tradition. Black Pete ('Zwarte Piet') is the black 'helper' of Sinterklaas, the Dutch version of Santa Clause. Every year leading up to December 5th, white people dress up in blackface (often accompanied by afro-wigs, red lipstick, and gold earrings) to entertain Dutch children[3]. Black people have protested this blackface-custom since the sixties (Wekker, 2018, pp.202-203)[4]. Since 2011, protests have finally reached the mainstream media and public opinion is changing. However, opinion polls imply that still more than half of white people supported the blackface tradition in 2020 (Kester, 2020, p.11).

These are just two examples out of many that could demonstrate racism in the Netherlands. Both are also examples of white people denying racism, and white discomfort (manifested as denial or anger) obstructing anti-racism work.

1.1 White discomfort

Hence, to move forward with anti-racism work in the Netherlands, it is important that white people no longer avoid their discomfort. Or, as Gloria Wekker puts it, Dutch white people should *work through* their discomfort (Wekker, 2018, p.256-257). But what does this require? In order to know what is necessary to solve problems around white discomfort, I argue it is important to have a good understanding of white discomfort in the Netherlands: Where does it come from? How does it manifest? Multiple authors, both inside and outside of academia, have addressed and problematised Dutch white discomfort (for example: Cairo, 2021; Kolman, 2019, p.49; Schols, 2019; Wekker, 2018, p.256). However, no research has yet focused on white discomfort specifically and has taken a deep dive into its structures and mechanisms.

There is, of course, more literature on white discomfort in the international academic field. This valuable literature often focuses on pedagogical approaches, considering how discomfort can be

[3] For more information on the Black Pete tradition and its history, see Brienen (2014), Schols (2019), Wekker (2016, pp.139-167).
[4] The issue was even raised before at the end of the Second Word War by African-American soldiers after liberating the Netherlands (Euwijk & Rensen, 2017).

addressed in the classroom or among teachers (Zembylas, 2018, p.87). However, as Michalinos Zembylas (2018) points out, these approaches often focus on pushing white people to deal with their discomfort and racist attitudes on an individual level (ibid.). I believe this is insufficient. The work of Gloria Wekker (2018), one of the main researchers on whiteness in the Netherlands, shows that whiteness and white discomfort in the Netherlands are rooted in bigger historical, political, and cultural structures of 'white innocence': the myth that the Netherlands is a just innocent country, and its white inhabitants are free of racism. (Remember the refusal of the Dutch government to categorise the tax scandal as racism.) The distorted innocent self-image that many white Dutch people have, are, according to Wekker, a collective problem born from a colonial historical context. If white discomfort is rooted in these bigger structures, it is important to take these structures into account – and change them along with addressing individual discomfort. Hence, the central research question of this thesis:

How can white discomfort be conceptualised to allow for a historically contextualised and collective understanding of whiteness in the Netherlands?

1.2 Research approach

This dissertation is a quest in search of an additional conceptualisation of white discomfort – adding to the many valuable works on white discomfort already written. It is in the first place a theoretical exploration based in multiple disciplines: critical whiteness studies, critical race pedagogy, pedagogy of discomfort, affect theory, and queer and feminist theories. However, it will also include an empirical part, and work from literature research focused on the Netherlands. After all, when researching subjects like racism and whiteness it is particularly important to work from a specific context. From my positionality as a white, Dutch woman, I will explore the Dutch context – referencing Black authors and authors of colour, in acknowledgement of my shortcomings when talking from a white perspective. My research will dance between theory and practice, between the Dutch context and more general theoretical concepts like discomfort and whiteness – feeding into each other.

To answer the main question, I first delve into literature on the Dutch context. In Chapter 2, I present both academical work on whiteness in the Netherlands, as well as the ideas and observations of activists and other experts that help me sketch the current landscape of anti-racism work and the (disruptive) role of white discomfort.

Chapter 3 is the theoretical framework of this thesis. Firstly, I explore international literature on white discomfort, and articulate why an additional theoretical lens could be helpful. Next, I suggest an affective approach to white discomfort. Affect theory allows me to conceptualise white discomfort as more than an individual's emotion. It helps me explore how white discomfort is shaped, and how white (Dutch) people are emotionally invested in structures of whiteness, and in white innocence. I will specifically focus on the work of Sara Ahmed. She understands emotions as affects with extensive attention for the role of power and structures. Moreover, she covers topics like race, whiteness, the Other, and discomfort. I use her understanding of these topics and translate them to the Dutch context.

Next, I organised focus groups with white Dutch people to collectively explore our white discomfort. Where does it come from? How is it related to bigger structures? What are the consequences in our behaviour? Chapter 4 gives an overview of the methodology of my research. In Chapter 5, I analyse the data from the focus group through the affective understanding of white discomfort I developed. This analysis gives me insight in the roots and manifestations of white discomfort among the participants, and it helps me understand the link between the individual's discomfort and collective historical structures of whiteness in the Netherlands.

I will present my conclusions in Chapter 6. I will show that 1) my affective conceptualisation of white discomfort can, indeed, offer a valuable additional lens for analysing white discomfort in the Netherlands – and hopefully in a bigger international context. 2) White individuals, through their manifestations and avoidance of white discomfort, protect and maintain problematic collective structures of whiteness.

CHAPTER 2: WHITE DISCOMFORT IN THE NETHERLANDS

In order to explore white discomfort in the Netherlands, it is important to have a good understanding of how Dutch whiteness is constructed. In this chapter I start off with a literature overview of research on whiteness in the Netherlands. I will explore both what whiteness in the Netherlands actually means, and 'white versions of whiteness' (Essed & Trienekens, 2008, p.53): how white people see (or fail or refuse to see) their own whiteness. Subsequently, I will give an overview of the current state of the anti-racism struggle in the Netherlands. At last, I will show how white discomfort is a theme both in the Dutch anti-racism struggle and in Dutch critical whiteness theory – which will simultaneously demonstrate the societal relevance of this thesis.

2.1 Studies of Dutch Whiteness

If I want to analyse white discomfort in the Netherlands, I will first need to understand how whiteness in the Netherlands is constructed. I will therefore start this chapter with an overview of the literature on Dutch racism and whiteness. Important sources for my literature review are authors in the areas of critical whiteness studies – in which my thesis is also located – and, more broadly, critical race theory. Critical whiteness studies is 'a growing field of scholarship whose aim is to reveal the invisible structures that produce and reproduce white supremacy and privilege' (Applebaum, 2016). The roots of this interdisciplinary field lay in the United States (ibid.; Twine & Gallagher, 2008). Hence, American (and British) concepts often dominate whiteness studies – even when analysing other contexts (Twine & Gallagher, 2008, p.16). Zuziwe Nokwanda Msomi, for example, points out that whiteness studies in South Africa draws much of its insights from North American literature (Msomi, 2020, p.16). In her research on whiteness, she therefore works specifically from the South African context to develop her conceptualisation of whiteness (Msomi, 2020). Similarly, I think it is important for this dissertation to understand and conceptualise whiteness from a Dutch context. I will hence focus on Dutch literature that analyses race and whiteness in the Netherlands. While the authors do sometimes refer to (American) whiteness studies, hardly any of them explicitly locate their research within critical whiteness studies. Nevertheless, as I will show in the rest of this chapter, their insight in Dutch constructions of race and racism have valuable implications for how to understand Dutch whiteness.

Attention for racism and whiteness in the Netherlands (both mainstream and in academics) came in two waves. The first anti-racism wave started in the eighties and lasted into the beginning of the nineties (Elibol & Tielbeke, 2019; Essed, 2014), and was closely intertwined with the publication of Philomena Essed's *Alledaags Racisme* ('Everyday Racism'). She was one of the first – both in

academics and in the mainstream media – to break the myth of the non-racist Dutch society (Essed, 2018, p.7). However, Essed's work and the general anti-racism activism was met with huge resistance (Elibol & Tielbeke, 2019; Essed, 2014). Consequently, critique on racism was soon mostly silenced both in academics and education (Essed, 2018, p.7), which led to 'three decades of silence on racism'[5] (Wekker, 2016, p.XI).

The still ongoing second anti-racism wave was ignited in 2011, when artist (and later politician) Quinsy Gario and poet Jerry Afriyie protested the Dutch Black Pete tradition (Jouwe in Lilith Mag, et al., 2020; Wekker in Jouwe, 2015, p.112). What started of small, led to a growing movement that critiqued not just Black Pete, but also broader issues of racism, exclusion, and the colonial past. Not unrelated, it was also around ten years ago that topics of racism, race, and whiteness regained focus in Dutch academia (Wekker, 2016, p.8). Precisely because talking about racism is such a taboo and because the Netherlands regards itself non-racist, some authors turned their lens towards the construction of whiteness. Gloria Wekker's *White Innocence* is the most important and influential result of this renewed focus on whiteness. Along with new researches, other works were released for the general audience (see for example: Bergman, 2016; Dipsaus Podcast, 2020; Nzume, 2017; Özdil, 2017; Van der Ven, 2020).

The overview of whiteness in the Netherlands as provided in this chapter, will be based on the above-mentioned and additional academic literature. Moreover, I will refer to media reports and interviews with antiracism activists[6] and scholars, as well as a fictional work, to include recent developments and analyses.

2.2 History of Dutch Whiteness

One cannot analyse whiteness in the Netherlands without looking at Dutch history. This section will focus on the actual historical construction of whiteness, including ideas of white supremacy. The Netherlands has an extensive colonial history with clearly racist elements, and is thereby responsible for the death, oppression and enslavement of people in Asia, Africa and the Americas. We started the colonisation of South Africa, resulting in the Afrikaner people and ideology that later initiated Apartheid (Steyn, 2014) – a system invented by the Amsterdam-born Verwoerd (Özdil, 2017, p.47).

[5] 'Silence on racism' refers to a silence on racism as a problem. Racism could not be named. This does not mean that there was no racism, or racialised language, as the rest of this chapter will show.

[6] On the topic of whiteness in the Netherlands, I find it highly important to include the insights of activists and other experts from outside the university as they have been on the forefront of opening the conversations on racism and whiteness in the Netherlands. Moreover, because of recent developments in the Dutch attention for racism and whiteness (see section 2.5), their recent comments provide insides that academic research can not yet provide.

We played a major part in the trans-Atlantic 'slave trade' (Nimako et al., 2014, p.33). During the first half of the 17th century, New Amsterdam was the biggest market for the sale and purchase of enslaved people in Northern America (Özdil, 2017, p.67). We kept our colonies far into the second half of the twentieth century. It took a violent struggle before the Netherlands granted Indonesia independence in 1949. New Guinea, however, only became independent in 1963. Suriname became fully independent as late as 1975.

Whiteness in the Netherlands is constructed through this colonial past. Essed and Hoving write:

> *'[C]ultures of race and colo[u]r segregation reigned explicitly in all of the Dutch colonial and settler territories, legitimated by the elevation of whiteness and notions of European civili[s]ation in the West Indies' (Essed & Hoving, 2014, p.20).*

Thus, in order to justify our overseas wrongdoing, and in order to create a hierarchical system in which we could control the Indigenous and enslaved people in the colonies, the Dutch created a racialised Other. Gloria Wekker explains (with references to Frantz Fanon and Toni Morrison) that in creating this Other, the white Dutch also created themselves as the Other of the Other (Wekker, 2018, p.64). Hence, through the process of colonisation they constructed an image of whiteness[7].

Although the constructions of white and Other (or European and 'Other') were aimed at creating racial hierarchies overseas, 'race [becomes] a constituting presence not only in the colonies, but also principally in the metropole, where all kinds of class, national, and sexual differences are thought of in terms of race' (Wekker, 2015, p.44). From the 16th century on, people in the Netherlands came in contact with racist imagery of Black people, exhibitions of people from other continents, and racist ideas through travel reports of overseas colonisers. The Dutch bourgeoisie in the 19th century has a racialised self-image, constructed to ideas of modernity and a civilised order (ibid.).

Therefore, race – and thus whiteness – was already an issue in the Netherlands before the arrival of the first big group of non-Western immigrants (Indonesians and Moluccans after the Second World War)[8]. And when racism was prohibited by the constitution, and the presence of Black people and people of colour did become more common, the racist construction of whiteness did not magically

[7] Rudolf van Lier (1971), for example, showed that in Suriname the white Self was regarded superior and the colonisers felt entitled to anything and everything – resulting in a psychology of the Dutch male colonisers full of pride and with unbridled self-esteem (Van Lier in Wekker, 2018, pp.66-67).

[8] Moreover, there were also Black people living in the Netherlands hundreds of years ago. As research by the Amsterdam city archive shows, the first Black inhabitants of Amsterdam came here as free sailors, hired by the Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC) before slave trade was normalised. At the end of their journey, these Black sailors settled in Amsterdam and created a small Black community (Stephanie Archangel in Van Dijk, 2020).

disappear. As I show in several examples in the previous chapter – racism in the Netherlands persists, from institutional racism to everyday racism.

2.3 White Innocence

Despite this violent colonial history, and ongoing problems regarding racism in the Netherlands today, the Dutch generally do not regard themselves a racist people or country (hence, the silence on racism). Nor do many white Dutch people seem to be aware of the problematic construction of their whiteness. This brings me to the discrepancy between the actual construction and working of whiteness, and the 'white versions of whiteness' (Essed & Trienekens, 2008, p.53), which is best explained through Gloria Wekker's famous concept of 'white innocence' (Wekker, 2018). 'White innocence' refers to the way in which the Netherlands constructed a self-image of a small, innocent, ethically just country, that is colour-blind and free of racism (ibid., p.61). Since the Second World War, during which the Netherlands was occupied by Nazi Germany, we think of ourselves more as victims than perpetrators of violence (ibid.; ibid., p.75). This false image, as revealed in the previous section, rests on myths and paradoxes, which Wekker analyses by exploring the Dutch 'cultural archive'[9] (ibid., p.33). Two important ways for white Dutch people to deny racism are:

1) distancing from the colonial history;
2) framing racism as an extremist problem.

A further discussion of these two ways of creating a myth of white innocence follows. This discussion is necessary to understand how white innocence and white discomfort come about.

2.3.1 Erasure of the Colonial Past

The violent colonial Dutch past is often erased, romanticised or toned down (Özdil, 2017, p.67). This is in the first place done by emphasising trade, not slavery and definitely not racism, when talking about the VOC (Dutch East India Company)[10] and the colonial empire (Nimako et al., 2014, p.34). A very good example of this is how the 17th century is still referred to as the 'Golden Age', because of the thriving Dutch art and economy and the expanding Dutch empire. This reference (although more

[9] In her work, she explores the cultural archives on different levels. She looks at media output, novels, history books (also through the research of others), and at files she found in the archives. On top of that, she presents her own experiences.

[10] The VOC was a Dutch trade company in the 17th and 18th century which had the monopoly on overseas trade between the Netherlands and the global East. Together with the Dutch West India Company (WIC) it was responsible for colonial exploitation and enslavement, and, thereby, for economic prosperity of the Dutch metropole.

and more problematised in the past years) is common in schoolbooks, among historians and in museums. What is often not emphasised, however, is that enslavement and colonial violence formed the basis for this wealth[11] (Jordan, 2014; Özdil, 2017, p.67).

A second way in which white Dutch people erase the colonial past, is by turning a blind eye to the relationship between colonial history and current-day injustice. Wekker critiques how the study of the Dutch colonial history has been separated from general national history – an artificial separation of the colonies and the metropole (Wekker, 2018, p.41). By separating the two, both in research and in collective history – we avoid an analysis of imperial and racial structures in the study of the Netherlands itself (ibid.). This results in an on-going uneasiness and failure to deal with the colonial past in the Netherlands: because of the false 'white innocence' white Dutch people cannot deal with the horrors of the past and its effects on the present (Wekker, 2016, p.75).

2.3.2 Racism as a Problem of Extremes

Another myth that is commonly used to support the paradox of the Netherlands as a non-racist country is locating the problem of racism outside of the Netherlands, or at least outside of the 'average' Dutch person and society. This stems from the limited understanding (or framing) of racism as extreme violence, public hate, and fascism (Essed, 2017, p.59; Wekker, 2018). When the definition of racism is limited to these extremes, Dutch people can easily distance themselves from being racist. Racism then becomes something that is often located outside of the Netherlands: in South Africa, in Nazi Germany, or in America (Davis & Nencel, 2011, p.480; Özdil, 2014; Wekker, 2018, p.32). Özdil labelled this 'Dutch exceptionalism' (ibid.) – the framing of other countries as racist, compared to whom the innocent, tolerant Netherlands proofs to be free of racism. This is of course only possible in combination with the abovementioned denial of the colonial history, which shows both extreme racist violence performed by the Dutch, and a role of the Dutch in the foundation of both South African and American racism.

On top of that, when racism *is* acknowledged in a Dutch context, it is often framed as a problem of the working class, specifically of problematic individuals (Özdil, 2017, p.114; Wekker, 2018, p.32). Again, racism is assumed to be located in openly racist comments and political stances. Özdil (2017, p.144) remarks that the 'progressive' left that had a stake in government policy for the biggest part of the past forty years, limited their anti-racism work to muzzling extremist right-wing politicians and public figures. 'In other words, it was not much more than an exercise in pastorhood towards the flat

[11] Moreover, that this wealth was only limited to a small upper class. Philips showed that the majority of people in Amsterdam during the 'Golden Age' lived in extreme poverty (Philips, 2008).

racism of the lower classes' (Özdil, 2017, p.114)[12]. They failed to act against the deficient historical canon and exclusion in education. In other words: they did not take a critical look at themselves, as the left-wing middle class did not regard themselves or their 'tolerant' country to be part of the problem. Çankaya and Mepschen (2019), too, turn their anthropological focus to the liberal 'middle-class' in the Netherlands. They conclude that this group 'does' racism differently. While reducing racism to a white working-class phenomenon, caused by 'individual moral failing', these liberals perform their racism in more subtle ways like micro-aggressions (Çankaya & Mepschen, 2019, p.629) while ignoring structural and institutional racism.

2.3.3 TABOO ON RACISM

The above problems are all related to the taboo on racism in the Netherlands – and more broadly in Europe. Since the Second World War and the genocide of European Jews (as well as other racialised groups like Roma and Black people), 'race' became a taboo in Europe. Racism could never happen again, and therefore people and institutions no longer talked about race (Topolski, 2018). As Essed observed (2017, p.19;59), racism became synonymous with fascism, explicit hate and physical violence. The resulting approach can be described as 'colourblindness' (Essed & Trienekens, 2008, p.59). Dutch people and organisations generally regard it unethical to register race or ethnicity (for example of employees) (ibid., p.52). Dutch policies are hardly ever aimed at race, rather at ethnicity, or identity (Essed & Trienekens, 2008, p.55). And we prefer speaking about 'discrimination' above talking about 'racism' (Hondius, 2014, p.275). This taboo does therefore not mean that racism is non-existent, it rather means that racism cannot be named – and is therefore undiscussable.

The reluctance to talk about race and/or ethnicity in the Netherlands, makes an analysis of whiteness in the Dutch context complex (Essed & Trienekens, 2008, p.55). Different than in the United States,

[12] It is important to note here that the image of only working class and 'lower-educated' people voting for 'anti-immigrant' or 'anti-Muslim' parties and holding racist ideas, is crumbling since the introduction of political party Forum for Democratie in 2015. Since the rise of extremist-right wing parties, there has been a shift in their voter population. The voting population of the Partij voor de Vrijheid (an outspoken anti-immigration and anti-Muslim party that currently holds 17 of the 150 seats in parliament) has always been predominantly 'lower-educated' (De Haan, 2019). It is worth noting here that I am aware that level of education and class are not the same, but the narrative among 'progressive' left-wing often comes down to level of education together with class.

However, the newer and quickly growing Forum voor Democratie (which held 8 seats in parliament right after the last election), shows a different voter demographic. According to research during the last provincial elections, only a quarter of their voters are 'lower-educated'. One-third of their voters is 'higher-educated', and the rest falls in neither of these categories (ibid.). Forum voor Democratie seems to have made white nationalism 'salonfähig' (Ten Broeke, 2019) – which translates to having made racism and white nationalism acceptable among 'higher-educated' middle-class and elite. An opportunity which, according to voter demographics (De Haan, 2019), especially older white men are now using to defend their position.

where whiteness studies originate, racism in the Netherlands is often not (expressed as) biological racism (ibid., p.55), focused on physical traits and preserving the white race. Instead, cultural racism[13] dominates in Europe and the Netherlands (ibid.; Winant, 2001; Wodak & Van Dijk, 2000). This means that people are often not explicitly othered based on their skin colour or racial elements. Instead, they are framed as coming from a different culture, that often coincides with ethnicity or religion – to be framed as a threat to 'our' Dutch culture (Essed, 1996; Essed & Trienekens, 2008; Topolski, 2018).

2.4 Dutch Whiteness

Whiteness in the Dutch context is, therefore, a complicated concept. Essed and Trienekens (2008, p.63) conclude:

> *'Whereas in the US ethnicity and religion are cross-cutting yet embedded in the old racial distinction between black and white, African American and Caucasian, in the Netherlands 'race' is not mentioned, but inherently subsumed, repressed under the coverage of cultural and religious references.'*

Whiteness is related to skin colour, but at the same time to ethnicity, culture, religion, to the construction of Dutchness and Dutch identity. White Dutch people do not talk about their whiteness. Instead, they refer to Dutch traditions, Dutch tolerance, Dutch roots and the 'Judeo-Christian' culture. And this cultural racism, combined with the false belief in Dutch innocence, enables us white Dutch people to deny our racism – because racism is understood to be merely about skin colour, and we are supposedly colour-blind.

In line with this chapter's literature review, 'whiteness' in my thesis entails both:

1) whiteness as shaped from colonial times to the present day as superiority of both people with white skin, and 'Dutch' culture, religion, and ethnicity. This whiteness results in white privilege within Dutch society. And;
2) the denial of white privilege and racism that is inherent to the construction of whiteness in the Netherlands – through the collective myth of white innocence, and the consequently distorted self-image of white people.

[13] Essed gives a different definition of 'cultural racism' in later work, where she uses the term to describe the image of black people that is created in media, religion, art, and language – also labelled ideological racism (Essed, 2017, p.66). I will not use this definition in my thesis.

None of the characteristics of whiteness or white innocence I discussed so far are unique to the Netherlands. Similar aspects of whiteness can be found in other countries. However, as Essed and Hoving conclude in their introduction to *Dutch Racism*, the 'essences'[14] of Dutch racism 'in their expressions and particular constellations, […] seem unmistakably recogni[s]able as elements of the broader phenomenon called Dutch culture' (Essed & Hoving, 2014, p.25).

2.5 Context: The Second Anti-Racism Wave

To truly understand whiteness and its problems, it is important to apprehend the current Dutch context. As explained in section 2.1, many of the works I summarised above are an essential part of the second anti-racism wave: the authors were both important catalysers of, and influenced by the work of activists, artists, and critical journalists. Therefore, I will now further outline the context of this second anti-racism wave, recent developments, and how those raise the issue of white discomfort that I want to analyse in this dissertation.

Like I also explained in section 2.1, the second anti-racism wave was ignited by anti-Black Pete protests. However, this wave naturally entailed critique of many aspects of Dutch racism, like acknowledgement of colonial violence, institutional racism, everyday racism, decolonisation of education, xenophobia, ethnic profiling, and anti-Muslim hate. Along with a growing resistance against the Black Pete figure[15], these issues seem to have reached the general audience in the past years. This does not automatically mean that this larger audience agrees with the anti-racism critiques – but the often-described silence around racism has partly been lifted in many of the mainstream media and in politics. To give an impression: a search on Dutch-written news articles containing the word 'racisme' through the Nexis Uni[16] database, results in 1.977 results for the year 2010. The same search query results in 9.490 results for articles published in 2019, and 25.646 in

[14] The 'essences' of Dutch racism according to Essed and Hoving are 1) the Dutch sense of moral and cultural superiority, 2) the Dutch claim to innocence, and 3) the strong sense of Dutch entitlement (Essed & Hoving, 2014, p.25). The latter then refers to examples like the demand of gratitude from minorities, or a claimed 'right to offend' (Essed & Hoving, 2014, p.25).

[15] Over the past years, the opinion of part of the Dutch population regarding Black Pete has changed. In 2016, an opinion poll showed that 65 per cent of Dutch people wanted Black Pete's appearance to stay the same. In 2020, this was only the case for 39 per cent of the population according to an opinion poll by I&O Research (I&O Research, 2020) – although another poll in the same year by EenVandaag found that 47 per cent of people and 53 percent of white people in the Netherlands wanted Black Pete's appearance to stay the same (Kester, 2020, p.11). Media has recently given more space to Black activists to make their statements, and seem more supportive of their cause (see e.g. De Abreu et al., 2018; Elibol & Van de Ven, 2019; Giesen, 2019;). In 2021, most (but by far not all) municipalities had replaced the Black Pete figure in their city's Sinterklaas celebration with alternative figures (Nolles, 2021). And newspaper De Volkskrant estimated that only 1 in 10 primary schools still used blackface in their 2020 Sinterklaas celebrations (Nandram, 2020).

[16] I used this database as it is one of the few that has access to the main Dutch newspapers.

2020. Since the rise in public attention for racism is a recent development, this change is not yet widely addressed in academic literature, and it is difficult to grasp the magnitude (or effect) of the shift. Nevertheless, there are some positive indications. Activist and co-founder of The Black Archives Jessica de Abreu, for example, stated that Dutch people talk more about racism, and that there is more acceptance that Black people are simply here (in Elibol & Van de Ven, 2019).

Nevertheless (or possibly consequently), anti-racism protests and public conversation in the Netherlands peaked in the summer of 2020 – inspired by the #BlackLivesMatter protests in America. The first protest took place at Amsterdam Dam Square on June 1st. More than 10.000 people showed up – instead of the expected 600. In the following weeks, more than twenty demonstrations were organised all over the country. Some activists and other experts defined this moment as a 'tipping point' in anti-racism support[17] (NOS, 6 June 2020; Simons in Van der Linden, 2 June 2020). Activist and artist Naomie Pieter later said that, finally, there was an acknowledgement that something is wrong with our systems[18] (in Spijkers, 2020). Dutch politicians pushed for change, resulting in an upcoming parliamentary inquiry into the effectiveness of anti-discrimination legislation, and the future appointment of a National Coordinator Discrimination and Racism (Houthuijs, 2020 December 30). The protests also fuelled conversations and action in media, universities and other organisations (Ghorashi, 2020). Anthropologist Halleh Ghorashi (2020, p.4) states:

> *'Before the arrival of the Black Lives Matter movement in the Netherlands, institutional forms of structural racism had never been addressed so widely in the Dutch public space and within institutions. And never before has there been such broad solidarity between people from a variety of backgrounds, including White Dutch people, in collectively addressing racism'*

This does not mean that change is accomplished, or secured; rather that this is the beginning of what might lead to change[19].

[17] Although it does seem like the 2020 protests are more widely carried than any other Dutch anti-racism demonstration in the 21st century, it is important to note that there have already been big anti-racism protests in the eighties and nineties. In 1992, 80.000 people showed up to an anti-racism march in Amsterdam (De Kanttekening, 2019 February 18). Moreover, it is still early to determine if current events are an actual tipping point, as Seada Nourhussen pointed out before me (Nourhussen in Lilith Mag, et al., 2020).

[18] While also expressing her frustration that people have been working on anti-racism in the Netherlands for so long, but 'we only wake up when something happens in America' (Pieter in Spijker, 2020).

[19] Moreover, I should not paint too bright a picture. The rise in public acknowledgement of racism in the Netherlands goes hand in hand with an ongoing rise in support for extreme right-wing organisations and (sometimes radical) racist sentiments (AIVD, 2021). However, as I will explain in section 2.6, this thesis focuses specifically on self-identified progressive white Dutch people – hence, not on these more explicitly racist organisations and people.

2.6 White discomfort

I was already working on this thesis, and the concept of 'white discomfort' before 1st June 2020, the day of the first #BlackLivesMatter protest in the Netherlands. The day when speaker Jennifer Tosch addressed the white people in the audience with the earlier quoted words: 'Get comfortable being uncomfortable. Because we have work to do!' (see Stelk, 2020). As I already mentioned in the previous chapter, many similar calls followed shortly after. They are well-summarised in one line by artist Typhoon: 'Be brave in your discomfort' (in Lilith Mag, et al., 2020).

The same call for white people to face their discomfort can be found in academic literature. In the Dutch publication of *White Innocence* in 2018 (three years after the publication of the original book), Gloria Wekker added a chapter in which she reflects on the responses in the Netherlands to her book and on other racism-related publications. The keyword in her analysis is 'discomfort' as she observes different types of 'societal discomfort' (Wekker, 2018, p.256). One of her examples is a 58-year-old Dutch white man who wrote a column in which he explains why it is impossible for him to feel guilty – or rather: why he should not[20]. From here, it is easy to shift into the role of the victim: he believes that his good intentions, despite the experiences of racialised people, should be taken seriously and be elevated beyond any doubt (ibid., p.258). Wekker concludes that it is impossible for him to take emotional distance from his country as he sees it: as innocent. He shows nostalgia to a time in which people that look like him formed the epicentre of the world without being criticised for it (ibid., p.259). Further, Wekker observes 'micro-discomforts' in interactions between Black and white people (ibid). She describes a television interview in which the white host admits to her Black interviewee that she had been nervous about the interview and discussing the topic of racism. Many white people regarded this a sympathetic statement, while many Black people diagnosed her confession as part of her (performance of) white innocence.

One important remark that Wekker makes, is that white people need to work *through* their discomfort, rather than walk away from it (as we often do). I drew a similar conclusion in my previous Master thesis – where I interviewed five Muslim women (of different ethnicities and races) on how feminism in the Netherlands could/should become more inclusive to Muslim women. They considered the unease of white and/or non-Muslim feminists a result of those people reflecting on their own (privileged) positionality. I wrote:

[20] Important to note: Wekker never asked anyone to feel guilty, rather she wants people to question what they can do from their own positionality to enable transformation (2018, p.258).

'A focus on the unease in the conversation and on making this unease explicit, is crucial for learning how to overcome obstacles for forming a coalition. Therefore, an evaluation of this unease is essential for being able to even have a coalition' (Kolman, 2019, p.49).

In an interview on the Netherlands, Philomena Essed emphasises the value of discomfort in the journey to ending racism. 'Every discomfort', she states, 'results in a surprising discovery' (Essed in Papaikonomou, 2020 March 20). Similar remarks have been made by international authors like Sara Ahmed (2014, p.178), Barbara Applebaum (2017), and Robin DiAngelo (2018), who all state that white people should be able to sit in their discomfort rather than walk away from it.

These statements are supported by Heleen Schols' PhD research on the norms and narrative in struggles over Black Pete. One of her conclusions is that 'harmony, tolerance and avoidance of 'extremes' are recurrent notions structuring debates about racism and [making] up the dominant Dutch self-image' (Schols, 2019, p.279). The Netherlands prides themselves for always seeking compromise. However, this self-image of tolerance and compromise comes with the implication that conflict and confrontation are problematic. In her first case analysis – a public hearing in Amsterdam on the possible transformation of the Sinterklaas parade – Schols observes 'a willingness to seek solutions that would not cause discomfort to anyone' (ibid., p.263). However, when discussing a topic like racism that tends to easily make white Dutch people uneasy, this implies that racism cannot be discussed in depth as a wider structural problem embedded in Dutch society. Due to presumed 'neutral' norms and logic of interactions, criticisers of Black Pete are essentially told that they are free to express their critique, as long as they do so within terms that actually cannot accommodate their type of argumentation (Schols, 2019).

Schols' research is strikingly titled *Keeping things gezellig*. *Gezelligheid* (noun) or *gezellig* (adjective) are typical Dutch words that refer to a feeling of coziness, pleasantness and comfort – specifically in a social setting (Cairo, 2021, p.150). The Dutch pride themselves in their attachment to *gezelligheid.* But as Aminata Cairo, like Schols, observes: '*Gezelligheid* has become a Dutch norm and a powerful tool to get people to conform to who is in versus who is out.' When *gezelligheid* is the norm, anyone who voices critique in a thus far *gezellig* space is an outsider. The norm of *gezelligheid* urges people to just keep their mouth shut. 'It parlay[s]es everyone in a room and disrupts relationships' (ibid., p.153). Cairo recalls moments in which she spoke up about injustice after which the room fell silent and people averted eye contact with her. Cairo points out that many Dutch people wrongfully understand themselves to 'have the right to have it *gezellig* at all times' (ibid., p.153). While in reality, *gezelligheid* is a privilege – it does not pay attention to how cozy, how comfortable, those

spaces really are to the ones that are expected to keep their mouths shut while experiencing violence.

This brings me to an important point. White discomfort is not innocent, nor harmless. As Schols' and Cairo's works show, white discomfort – and specifically the avoidance of discomfort by white people – can make it impossible to properly address racism in the Netherlands. Discomfort can, for example, present as aggression, anger, white tears, or a refusal to listen to Black people or people of colour. In an essay for OneWorld, artist and curator Cole Verhoeven criticises how narratives in whiteness studies centre fragility, innocence[21], and sensitivity. She argues that treatment of white people like fragile and oversensitive beings is not part of a solution, but part of the problem (Verhoeven, 2020). She rightfully emphasises that in daily life, this alleged fragility is explosive, dangerous, irascible (ibid.). Discomfort can therefore become a weapon against antiracism.

The toxicity of whiteness is also addressed in the short story 'Movie Night' by Olave Nduwanje, which was published in Dutch and of which I translated some quotes in the following lines. In the story, two Black people in (what seems to be) the Netherlands discuss their 'hate-fury' for white people (Nduwanje, 2020). One of them, Nvugira, acknowledges that whiteness is constructed and states that '[w]hite people are trapped in Whiteness' (ibid., p.88). However, she adds:

> *'Nevertheless, I do hold it against them personally. Whiteness is a golden cage in which most white people prefer to stay. […] I hate white people for their cowardness, their fear for the pain of liberation and justice. I hate white people because of the fact that they refuse to saw through the bars of privilege and superiority' (ibid.).*

These statements address how white people's avoidance of anti-racism work (and conversations) can be experienced as violent. While I should be careful to not draw premature conclusions, the cowardness and fear Nduwanje refers to in this short story, could be intertwined with (among other things) the avoidance of discomfort. These realisations take the innocence out of 'white innocence', just like Wekker does when she reflects on the many times she has been interviewed by white journalists. They often ask her questions like 'Why should I learn about your ancestors' history? How does that relate to me?'. Wekker (2018) states that these are not innocent questions: this white innocence should have been long gone. Similar implications are made by Essed and Hovings when they diagnose Dutch people with 'smug ignorance': the aggressive rejection of the possibility to know about racism (Essed & Hovings, 2014, p.24)

White discomfort, then, is a complex phenomenon that seems to be built on the myth of white innocence. In turn, white innocence relies on two aspects discussed at length above: the distancing

[21] Verhoeven acknowledges that Wekker's use of 'white innocence' is of course cynical (Verhoeven, 2020).

from the colonial past, and the framing of racism as a problem of extremes. White discomfort, then, signifies that white people in the Netherlands are still not used to talking about racism. Moreover, the avoidance of white discomfort is violent and leads to extra labour for Black people and people of colour, and barriers in anti-racism work. Rather than avoiding white discomfort in the pursuit of *gezelligheid* white people need to work through white discomfort in order to fight racism. I would even go as far as say that white people *should* be uncomfortable when aware of their positionality in a racist Dutch society. However, this discomfort should not (negatively) influence their actions and responses, as it often does.

In agreement with Wekker, and a growing number of other researchers and activists, this thesis thus starts from the position that working through this unease and discomfort is an important part of battling racism. Since otherwise, as is now often the case, white people (also the 'progressive' ones, also the ones who claim to support Black people and people of colour) become defensive and avoid critically reflecting their own positionality. As the work of challenging racism cannot begin without sitting in the space of discomfort, this thesis therefore looks at this reflex of drawing back from discomfort. To understand this reflex, a comprehension of both the roots and the manifestations of white discomfort is necessary. In pursuit of this, this chapter has looked closely at the construction of white innoncence, and what makes white innocence possible in the Netherlands. The next chapter looks at international theory on white discomfort and develops an additional conceptualisation inspired by the Dutch context.

CHAPTER 3: THEORY

The literature on whiteness in the Netherlands showed that white discomfort – or more accurately: the way discomfort manifests through, for example, defensiveness or anger – stands in the way of anti-racism work. It is therefore important to understand what white discomfort is and how it functions. In this chapter, I will give an overview of existing conceptualisations from international theoretical literature on white discomfort. Although the existing theory offers much insight, I identify a need for a conceptualisation of white discomfort that is more historically grounded and focused on an understanding of whiteness on a collective (rather than individual) level.

To address this challenge, I turn to affect theory as a framework which offers a more nuanced conceptualisation of white discomfort suitable to the Dutch context. I specifically focus on the work of Sara Ahmed, and apply her approaches to emotions, whiteness, and discomfort to previous chapter's analysis of white discomfort in the Netherlands. The exploration in the second half of this chapter will then offer an additional lens for analysing white discomfort. The best way to explain how this thesis fits into the existing literature, is by borrowing the analogy of the elephant and the blind men from Francis Nyamnjoh (2012), who in his place borrowed it from many before him. In this story, three blind men encounter an elephant to observe what the animal is like. However, each of them senses a different part of the animal. One touches its trunk, the other its big front legs, and one its wiggling tail. All three now have an image of the elephant, but their impressions vary greatly. When they share their experiences with one another, they clash – each defending their own experience as the truth. Nyamnjoh uses the story to illustrate that:

> *'science is a collective pursuit, and […] no one has a monopoly on insights and the truth. Social truth being negotiable, it requires humility and mutual accommodation on the part of those who lay claim to it' (Nyamnjoh, 2012, p.65).*

In the same way, I do not claim to come up with *the* conceptualisation of white discomfort. Nor do I intent to present my conceptualisation as inferior over the conceptualisations of those before me. I merely aim to offer an additional lens to look at white discomfort, to add nuance to the existing literature, and to hopefully help us understand white discomfort – its roots and its manifestations – a little better.

3.1 White Discomfort: Definition and Manifestations

The first step in my literature analysis of white discomfort, is to explore different definitions of the phenomenon. A big part of the literature on white discomfort comes from critical race pedagogy and

critical whiteness studies (see for example Boler, 1999; DiAngelo, 2018; Matias, 2016; Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Tatum, 1992; Tatum, 1994; Vincent et al., 2017). White people's discomfort is studied and theorised based on racism conversations in the classroom or in anti-racism workshops, as well as personal experiences from Black people and people of colour. Most authors do not give an explicit definition of discomfort. Some seem to understand it as an emotion or particular feeling or a unique 'state' (see for example Matias, 2015; Tatum, 1992). Michalinos Zembylas mentions 'emotional resistance' and 'racial anxiety and stress' (Zembylas, 2018, p.86; p.100). Slightly different, Megan Boler (1999) seems to equate discomfort with other emotions like fear or anger. As I understand her writing, she follows the logic of 'I am angry, anger is an uncomfortable emotion, therefore I experience discomfort'. From what I gathered in the previous chapter, however, I would argue that discomfort is an emotional state or feeling in itself. Remember my own experience of entering the African Studies classroom that I described in the introduction: that feeling of uneasiness, of being aware of every move, feeling hypervisible, *that* is discomfort.

I do not mean to deny that discomfort can be intertwined with – and often presents itself in combination with – other emotions. Emotions like shame or fear could lead to discomfort, and discomfort could lead to emotions like anger or sadness. But anger or sadness are not always signs of white discomfort. Emotions are messy and it is difficult (if not impossible) to unravel which emotions stem from what – to think of different emotions as cause and result. In light of this thesis, I propose that discomfort can manifest in various ways – through various emotions. Literature shows that discomfort may manifest through anger, guilt, shame, sadness or fear (Applebaum, 2017, p.868; Matias, 2016, p.61). And, likewise, may present as different behaviours like picking fights, crying, denial, or simply withdrawing from the conversation[22] – behaviours on which I will come back in section 3.3. I propose in this chapter that all these feelings, emotions, and behaviours can be *signs and manifestations of white discomfort* rather than equated with white discomfort itself. To study the phenomenon, it is important to conceptualise white discomfort as more than simply a cumulation of other uncomfortable emotions.

[22] The incapability (or lack of willingness) of white people to deal with white discomfort is famously coined by Robin DiAngelo as 'white fragility' (DiAngelo, 2018). She defines white fragility as 'a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress in the habitus becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves.' (ibid., p.103). Her concept of fragility is therefore closely related to my concept of white discomfort. However, in this thesis, I focus on conceptualising and understanding the 'racial stress' (white discomfort) in the first place.

3.2 Roots of White Discomfort

Now I have drawn a definition of white discomfort, and distinguished this definition from discomfort's manifestations, I will turn to the literature on the roots of white discomfort. This will help me understand the workings of white discomfort. Existing literature provides a multitude of explanations for white discomfort, and why it often manifests in such violent ways.

A first explanation for white discomfort and its manifestations can be summarised as a fear of accusation. Oluo labels violent behaviour by white people in racism conversations as 'defensive impulses'. 'White people are scared to be labelled as racist' (Oluo, 2018, p.159). This implies that white people's focus in racism conversations is not primarily on countering racism, but rather on 'personal and image management' (Leonardo & Porter, 2010, p.148). The fear of having done something wrong, or most of all *being accused of* doing something wrong, could then be one of the roots of discomfort.

Megan Boler (1999, p.186) and Robin DiAngelo (2018, pp.71-87) explain that this fear of being framed as racist is rooted in a deeper myth: that of the good/bad or innocent/guilty binary. White people see themselves as good people. They believe they 'do good' and thus are good and therefore cannot be racist. When they are called out on racist actions, or on their white privilege, the good/bad binary causes them to understand the critique as others classifying them as racist. That is, being a bad person (DiAngelo, 2018). This distorts white people's self-image of the innocent, good person they supposedly are – hence the discomfort. Moreover, conversations on racism can shake white people's view of society, which is also understood in the good/bad binary. Tatum (1992, p.464) talks about the 'cognitive dissonance' that results when white people in the United States learn about racial inequality in their country. The new information clashes with their vision of the just American society where rewards are solely based on merit (ibid., p.6). These explanations are clearly in line with Wekker's concept of 'white innocence' in the Netherlands.

Another possible reason for whites' discomfort and their problematic responses to this emotion, is that white people are simply not used to being addressed as a race. 'Given how seldom we experience racial discomfort in a society we dominate, we haven't had to build our racial stamina', states DiAngelo (2018, pp.1-2). This stands in contrast with the experience of Black people and people of colour, for whom racial discomfort is a common state of emotion – especially in conversations on racism with white people (Leonardo & Porter, 2010, p.153). In this light, it is important to remark that DiAngelo's famous concept 'white fragility' might sound more innocent than it is. Barbara Applebaum (2017) points out how we often conflate white fragility with white vulnerability.

'White fragility, however, is not only about having a low threshold for discomfort – a passive sense of being. White people actively perform fragility and continue to perform it in a way that consolidates white narcissism and white arrogance – signs of power and privilege, not weakness' (Applebaum, 2017, p.868).

The deeper lying cause of these violent responses is, according to Applebaum, the Western ideal of invulnerability. This ideal prescribes that being vulnerable, and thus experiencing discomfort, is a weakness that needs to be avoided. Anger, tears or defensiveness from white people in racism conversations are, thus, not innocent: they are a way for white people to maintain their positions of power.

3.3 Consequences of Manifestations of White Discomfort

Discussing the roots of discomfort automatically steers me to an analysis of possible consequences of manifestations of discomfort. If discomfort is rooted in a fear of losing power or harming one's image, and the discomfort therefore manifests as defensive behaviour, it may come as no surprise that this behaviour has harmful consequences – as my analysis of Applebaum's work at the end of the previous section implies.

From the literature, I conclude that manifestations of white discomfort can be harmful on two levels. Firstly, it can be harmful to Black people and people of colour that are part of the specific interaction in which white discomfort manifests. Ijeoma Oluo comments that discomfort often causes white people to 'act inappropriately' which results in microaggressions towards Black people and people of colour (Oluo, 2018, p.130). Zeus Leonardo and Ronald Porter (2010) make a similar observation on the language around racism among educators. White people will for example start an argument, deny the existence of racism, get defensive, mentally or physically withdraw from the conversation, or start crying (DiAngelo, 2018, p.119; p.133; Tatum, 1992, p.14).

Secondly, white people's discomfort, and their failure to deal with their discomfort, is harmful because it prevents white people from dismantling their whiteness, and hence from dismantling racism – as I already noted at the end of the previous chapter. In support of Applebaum's analysis that white people's defensives helps them maintain their power position, it has been noted by Cheryl Matias (2016, p.71), that 'the only way for [w]hites to restore the emotional equilibrium of whiteness is to re-position themselves once again as the victims'. Likewise, white people's eagerness to maintain their good self-image can be explained as a way to 'evade personal obligations for undoing institutional racism' (Vincent et al., 2017, p.334). If racism is only a dichotomous problem of guilty, bad overt racists, the 'good' white person on the other hand bears no responsibility.

DiAngelo, too, acknowledges the 'functions of white fragility' (DiAngelo, 2018, p.122): it silences the discussion, prevents critical self-reflection, and protects white privilege. White discomfort is inherent to examining white supremacy (DiAngelo, 2018; Matias, 2016; Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Saad, 2020, p.11). Therefore, as long as white people avoid any feelings of discomfort, they can never 'divorce their whiteness' (Matias, 2016, p.60).

> *'For how can one wholeheartedly engage in a cure if [they] cannot emotionally bear talking about the problem?' (Matias, 2016, p.63).*

In relation to both levels of harm, Matias observes how the emotionality of white people often dominates a space. She states that '[t]his hegemonic emotional domination renders the emotions of people of [c]olo[u]r as subordinate to the emotions felt in whiteness' (Matias, 2016, p.69). Leonardo and Porter (2010) make an analogous observation. They analyse the call for a 'safe space' in racism conversations by white people. The idea of a safe space for white people, however, implies the preventions of conflict and discomfort – and thereby a 'refusal to change through the other' (ibid., p.148). The request for a safe space does not only prevent any progress, it is also unreasonable given that conversations on racism are by definition uncomfortable and often even violent for Black people and people of colour.

3.4 On How to Work Through Discomfort

My literature analysis so far has helped me define white discomfort and its manifestations, pointed out possible explanations, and showed how the manifestations of discomfort can be harmful to non-white individuals and to the anti-racism struggle. In line with the previous chapter's analysis of white discomfort in the Netherlands, it helps understand how white discomfort can be problematic. What rests is the answers that different authors give on how to solve these problems.

The logical solution is for white people to face their discomfort and work through it. As Layla Saad (2020) teaches in her handbook *Me And White Supremacy*: white privilege is a comfortable position, so white people *need* to move out of it and get uncomfortable. 'You must roll up your sleeves and get down into the ugly, fertile dirt' (ibid., p.165). Boler (1999) suggests a 'pedagogy of discomfort' that invites white people to 'examine constructed self-images in relation to how one has learned to perceive others' (ibid., p.176), as well as to take action – making it clear why it is important to do the uncomfortable work. The motivation for white people to do this work could be 'critical hope' (Applebaum, 2017; Boler, 2004): the hope to learn and '[become] more human' (Applebaum, 2017, p.872). DiAngelo (2018) requires white people to make a shift from being fragile to being grateful for

feedback and a chance to learn. Applebaum, in line with her analysis of fragility in section 3.2, calls for a (re)valuation of vulnerability as a strength rather than a weakness. Oluo asks white people to '[b]uild a tolerance for your discomfort' (Oluo, 2018, p.155).

However, I found the most in-depth description of what working through white discomfort should look like in Cheryl Matias' *Feeling White* (2016). She emphasises that white people should do the emotional work of 'deconstructing their discomfort with whiteness' (ibid., p.72).

> *'If you feel discomforted, flustered, and/or defensive, you must first think about why you are feeling these emotions instead of emotionally reacting' (Matias, 2016, p.173).*

So white people should not just accept their discomfort and suppress their fragile responses: they should interrogate why they experience discomfort. That examination can 'change the power dynamics of the white colonial mindset' (ibid., p.167) in the classroom – or, I would like to add, in racism conversations in general. Understanding our own discomfort could hopefully help white people to realise that it is okay to feel angry, sad or guilty, as long as these feelings are transformed into antiracism work despite the additional discomfort this will cause (ibid., p.135). The classroom, or any space of racism conversation and learning, then becomes a place of risk rather than a 'safe space' (Leonardo & Porter, 2010). White people need to take those risks in order to facilitate change and growth (ibid.).

3.5 Discomfort in a Historical and Collective Context

So far, I have given an overview of literature on definition, roots, manifestations, consequences of those manifestations, and potential solutions to white discomfort. This overview represents a rich and valuable understanding of white discomfort. Many of the referenced authors, however, focus on individual psychology and responsibility. After all, most of the above literature around white discomfort has a pedagogical approach. Many (but not all!) authors focus on how to address whiteness in the classroom, how to teach white individuals to change their attitude, how to make them deal with their white discomfort. In this section, I will explain why a focus on the individual or micro level is important and valuable, but not sufficient for understanding and tackling white discomfort. If we recall the previous chapter, Wekker explains that white discomfort in the Netherlands is rooted in a false sense of white innocence, which in its turn is rooted in the Dutch historical, political and social context. The Dutch case thus shows that white discomfort is not merely a problem of individual psychology, but rather part of a collective, historically shaped, shared

problem. In this section, I therefore argue for the importance of an approach to white discomfort that is historically contextualised and that is rooted in a collective[23] understanding of whiteness.

To understand why it is important to look at white discomfort as a collective problem, I turn to philosopher Charles Mills, who is widely cited in whiteness studies. Although Mills does not explicitly write about discomfort, his work on the Racial Contract is useful (Mills, 1997). He argues that the social contract that is at the core of political theories by thinkers like Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke, is in fact a Racial Contract between white people, permitting those white people to exploit and oppress non-white people. Mills thereby places racism at the core of our society and political system. Consequently, he points out that 'if racism is as central to the polity as I have argued, then it will have a major shaping effect on white cogni[s]ers' (ibid., p.95). White people's ignorance on the topic of racism is hence, Mills argues, not an unfortunate outcome of the Racial Contract – it is a key element sustaining the contract. The Racial Contract is an agreement to not know about racism, and this ignorance is actively maintained through a variety of strategies. Following Mills' analysis of the function of ignorance, I argue that the manifestations of white discomfort – anger, denial, shame, silencing – are such strategies. These manifestations are not merely signs of white discomfort, but they can also be *mechanisms* of white discomfort. As section 3.3 showed, they are ways to preserve white ignorance, or white innocence[24]. But not merely on the individual level: Mills helps us understand that these manifestations of white discomfort have a function in the bigger setting of structural racism. White discomfort is, then, indeed harmful and working against anti-racism on the collective level, as the previous chapter found to be the case for the Netherlands as well.

Hence, in this thesis I explicitly state what *some* of the referenced authors (like Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Matias, 2016) already imply: white discomfort is a mechanism that is *rooted in* and *maintains* historical structures of whiteness that are larger than the individual. Hook uses the term 'affective technology' to explain that emotions are operationalised and systemically generated to uphold racism and whiteness (Hook, 2005). Matias (2016) points out the role of (dis)comfort in the operation of whiteness as an affective technology. It is important to acknowledge its relationship to the bigger collective structures of whiteness to enable a more comprehensive analysis of white discomfort, and to get a better grasp of how to work through discomfort.

[23] As I will further explain at the end of this section, by 'collective understanding of whiteness' I do not mean an understanding of whiteness that is consciously or explicitly shared by all. Rather, I refer to understanding whiteness as a problem on the collective level – the collective of white people, of (in the Dutch case) the Netherlands, and hence not on the individual level.

[24] The inclusion of Mills' work in this chapter should not be read as a conflation of white innocence or ignorance with white discomfort. Rather, I think Mills' work is relevant for understanding the relationship between the two, and how white discomfort can be understood as a mechanism.

Consequently, if white discomfort is a collective rather than merely an individual problem, I argue that it is valuable to broaden the dominant approach to white discomfort. Applebaum (2016) criticises the general field of critical whiteness studies for similar reasons. Especially in anti-racism education, she argues, the focus is too often on encouraging white students 'to acknowledge their individual white privilege' (ibid.). Hence, it is often implied that if someone divests from white privilege they are 'non-racist'. This results in a pedagogical approach in which 'white privilege pedagogy begins, but also ends with the demand for confession' (ibid.; Lensmire, et al., 2013). Leonardo points out that these approaches downplay 'the active role of whites who take resources from people of colo[u]r all over the world, appropriate their labo[u]r, and construct policies that deny minorities full participation in society' (Leonardo, 2004, p.138). One could say that these approaches do not make white people, as Wekker requested, work *through* their discomfort. Rather, white people are comforted – they should acknowledge their white privilege and can then be assured that they, indeed, are good people. It is essentially another form of denial – a manifestation of white discomfort. And, as Appelabaum concludes, a way in which critical whiteness studies despite good intentions 'can be complicit in what they attempt to disrupt' (Applebaum, 2016).

These critiques on whiteness studies reveal a challenge for the study of white discomfort: White discomfort and white innocence are collectively constructed problems. But we often try to solve them by focusing on the individual level or at a micro-level like the classroom (Zembylas, 2018). Michalinos Zembylas (2018) criticises the 'pedagogisation' of white discomfort (Zembylas, 2018). He observes the tendency among scholars and teachers to heavily focus on education within schools (the 'schooling of white discomfort') as a means to modify white discomfort in society in general. However, Zembylas argues that there are some false underlying assumptions within white discomfort pedagogies and critical pedagogies. Firstly, there is a misleading taken-for-grantedness of white discomfort – with insufficient critical analysis of the roots of this discomfort. Secondly, there is an assumption that education of individuals in the school automatically translates to the modification of white discomfort on the collective level of the society.

By reiteration the critical observations of Zembylas, Applebaum and Leonardo, I do not mean to say that white people do not carry individual responsibility for their behaviour, or for the manifestations of their white discomfort. Nor to dismiss the value of education in the struggle against racism. I do wish to underscore that a focus on individual actions and psychology alone will neither give us a full understanding of, nor solve the problem of white discomfort. The literature analysis in the previous sections shows that many authors already place white discomfort in a wider context of racism and society. I want to add nuance to their work by further exploring a conceptualisation that explicitly

acknowledges white discomfort as *rooted in* and *working for the maintenance of* a collective historical context of whiteness. I will do this guided by the central question of this thesis:

How can white discomfort be conceptualised to allow for a historically contextualised and collective understanding of whiteness in the Netherlands?

Let me explain some aspects of this question. *Firstly*, by 'historically contextualised' I indicate that I want to work towards an understanding of whiteness that acknowledges and includes the influence of the colonial and racist histories on today's people, and their feelings, actions, and self-image. 'Histories' does not merely refer to a far-gone era. It also includes the influence of, for example, yesterday's political news, or the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests. Zuziwe Msomi (2020) reminds us that whiteness as a social identity is 'ever incomplete' and the way whiteness presents in people is always changing depending on the context (ibid., p.163). So working towards a 'historically contextualised' understanding of whiteness and white discomfort means acknowledging how histories have shaped these contexts, but also realising that whiteness is not fixed as new stories are added to our shared history with the passing of each day. Moreover, whiteness will emerge differently in different contexts and spaces.

Secondly, 'collective understanding' refers to a conceptualisation of white discomfort that is grounded in the larger societal structure of whiteness rather than just in the white individual. *Lastly*, my work will focus on the Dutch context – for three reasons. 1) Because contextualisation is important for understanding whiteness and white discomfort, I find it valuable to work from a specific context rather than assume universal application of the concept of whiteness. 2) I showed in the last chapter that there is a need to better understand white discomfort in the Netherlands. Although discomfort is increasingly mentioned in Dutch research and media pieces regarding whiteness and racism, the emotion itself has not yet been closely studied in the Dutch context. And 3) a focus on the Netherlands could be a humble addition to the international literature on white discomfort. Again, because contextualisation is so important for understanding white discomfort and whiteness, and because no study yes has made such a deep dive into white discomfort in the Netherlands, a focus on the Dutch context offers the opportunity for nuances in the international research field.

3.6 An Affective Approach

Now that I explained the need for a conceptualisation of white discomfort that acknowledges the historical and collective context of whiteness, I will explain my approach to this challenge. I make a

case for using affect theory to approach whiteness and white discomfort. And I will clarify how this affective approach can be a valuable addition to the existing literature.

First, let me explain what affect theory entails. In behavioural sciences, 'affect' generally refers to '*feeling states* like emotions and moods' (Niven, 2013). But in the English language, we also know 'affect' as a verb, used to indicate that something produces an effect upon something or someone else. Both come together in affect theory. In the early to mid-1990s[25], 'affect' drew the attention of critical theorists that faced the limitations of poststructuralism (Clough, 2010, p.206). As Rei Terada argues, deconstruction in particular pronounces the death of the subject, and thereby fails to attend to affect and emotion (Terada, 2001). This statement is in line with Zembylas' work on white discomfort. He criticises the notion of race as social construct (Zembylas, 2018, p.89). Such an approach, according to Zembylas, risks addressing people as representations of their race, without attention for how their bodies – as well as the spaces, events and encounters people are part of – *become* racialised. He aims to shifts the attention from 'what bodies (supposedly) "are"' to what bodies *do*[26] (ibid., p.89).

I believe that 'affect' can provide the necessary nuanced lens on 'discomfort' that I call for in this thesis. *Firstly*, affect theory offers the potential to analyse 'bodily responses, often autonomic responses, in excess of consciousness' (Clough, 2007, p.2) – where attention for 'bodily capacities to affect and be affected' (ibid.) implies the acknowledgement of aliveness of the body and subject. An aliveness that I need in this thesis to understand discomfort as an action and a bodily response of white people. *Simultaneously*, affect as a concept enables me to conceptualise emotions like discomfort as more than internal psychological processes, to not just accept discomfort as a white person's emotion. It allows for an understanding of how white discomfort is 'constituted, circulated and perpetuated' (Zembylas, 2018, p.90). *Moreover*, it motivates me to look at the specific context in which discomfort is produced – to contextualise white discomfort, to see its relations to collective and historical contexts. This is a move away from the 'sentimentalisation' of white discomfort (ibid., p.99). Which is important because, as Matias (2016, p.41) writes: 'emotions are value-laden, positional, and are not exempt from the power relations that structure its expression'. *In conclusion*, as Zembylas (2018) argues, an affective perspective provides the opportunity to maintain a recognition of white people's responsibility (as living subjects) while also looking at the collective and historical context that triggers feelings of discomfort.

[25] Although the affective turn is something of the past few decades, it is the 17th century philosopher Baruch Spinoza that is the – either direct or indirect – source of most of the contemporary work in this field. See Hardt (2007) for more on Spinoza's contribution.

[26] Zembylas does this by using Deleuze's idea of assemblages to understand white discomfort 'as embedded in broader affective, material and discursive assemblages of race, racism and whiteness' (Zembylas, 2018, p.88).

As the above paragraph shows, I am not the first to take an affective approach to white discomfort. Whereas the work of authors like Matias, Zembylas and (in the Dutch context) Caïro are great illustrations of what an affective approach to white discomfort can look like, I think it is valuable to deepen these concepts. I will add to their work – and the larger body of work on white discomfort – firstly by approaching this affective exploration from the Dutch context. And secondly, by developing an affective conceptualisation of white discomfort from the basis: by questioning firstly what whiteness is, how white innocence fits into whiteness, what discomfort is, and how to conceptualise white discomfort. I will do this by using Sara Ahmed's approach to affect as a theoretical framework. Ahmed's work has been highly influential in the field of queer, feminist, and post-colonial affect theory. Her work is helpful for my thesis not only because it provides an extensive understanding of emotions as affects with regard to the role of power relations and social structures, but also because she writes about topics like race, whiteness, the Other and discomfort. As explained through the metaphor of the three blind men and the elephant, my findings will offer an additional lens for looking at white discomfort – in the hope of adding nuance and detail to our understanding of its roots and manifestations.

3.7 Affect Theory and Emotion

Discomfort is generally understood as an emotion, or a feeling – as shown at the start of this chapter. In *Politics of Emotion* (2014), Sara Ahmed redefines the understanding of emotions and how they are intertwined with power through an affective conceptualisation[27]. She does not do this by asking 'What are emotions?', but she rather explores the question 'What do emotions do?' (Ahmed, 2014, p.4). I will summarise her theory here, as it offers the groundwork for her (and my) understanding of people, spaces and emotions affect each other.

Emotions, for Ahmed, are shaped in the interaction between subject and object. Emotions are *intentional*, which means they are 'about' something: 'they involve a direction or orientation towards an object' (Ahmed, 2014, p.7; Parkinson, 1995, p.8). I (the subject) am angry *at* someone (the object), you are afraid *of* something, we are happy *about* something. The subject can in this case either be a specific individual, or a collective body (for example the nation, white people, society). The object can be human or material, but also imagined – we may be sad about a memory (Ahmed, 2014, p.7).

[27] Although the terms 'emotions' and 'affects' are sometimes used interchangeably, it is important to understand that most affect theorists deem them two different things. E.g. for sociologist Ariel Ducey (2007), emotions are mostly conscious state of feelings – a bodily state that we can experience and that requires a level of awareness. Affect, then, is the often-unconscious process that produces this feeling, or a change of our emotional state. Ahmed further develops the understanding of emotions by conceptualising emotions *as affect*.

Moreover, emotions are *relational*: 'they involve (re)actions or relations of 'towardness' or 'awayness' in relation to such objects' (ibid., p.8). Love or joy are examples of emotions of towardness, while anger, shame or guilt are emotions that move the subject further away from the object. Which emotion we experience – or more correctly: which emotion is shaped in our contact – depends on the shapes of the surfaces of both the subject and the object (ibid., pp.5-7). Ahmed borrows from Descartes' *The Passions of the Soul*[28] for this idea. Descartes describes how we do not love or hate an object because these objects in themselves are good or bad. Instead, our 'feelings take the 'shape' of the contact we have with objects' (ibid., p.5): we love or hate objects because they are either 'beneficial' or 'harmful' to us – which implies that our emotions are shaped based on the object's but also our own bodily surfaces.

Moreover, while emotions are shaped between the object's and subject's bodily surfaces, the surfaces of the subject's and the object's bodies are simultaneously *shaped by emotions*. Our bodies are shaped by interactions in the past. Emotions leave impressions on both the subject and the object (ibid., p.6). And by shaping our bodies, impressions influence our future affects – as the shape of our bodies will again influence the shaping of emotions in the future. *'*How the object impresses (upon) us may depend on histories that remain alive insofar as they have already left their impressions' (ibid., p.8). Furthermore, emotions influence 'what bodies do in the present, or how they are moved by the objects they approach' (Ahmed, 2006, p.2).

The above also implies that, for Ahmed, emotions are not situated 'in' the subject (as the psychological approach to discomfort implies). Nor are emotions merely influences from the outside entering the body. Rather, emotions 'produce the very surfaces and boundaries [of the body] that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects' (Ahmed, 2014, p.10). With this affective approach to emotions comes its own language and understanding of the research topic of my thesis. I will no longer focus on understanding 'mechanisms' and 'structures' of whiteness and white discomfort. Rather, affect theory helps me explore how emotions (in this case: discomfort) influence *our relationship to* racist structures. In her analysis of nationalism, Ahmed writes:

> *'Attention to emotions allows us to address the question of how subjects become invested in particular structures such that their demise is felt as a kind of living death' (Ahmed, 2014, p.12).*

Emotions like love, hate, anger, and – I would like to add – discomfort can then be understood as a form of 'cultural politics' (ibid.). In line with my analysis thus far, emotions are hence no longer an

[28] Simultaneously, Ahmed acknowledges and strongly rejects the distinctions between body and mind that Descartes makes in this work (see Ahmed, 2014, p.5).

individual experience, but rather a way in which individuals and collectives shape the world: 'world making' (ibid.).

3.8 Affect Theory on Whiteness

Now we understand Ahmed's conceptualisation of affect and emotions, I will introduce her understanding of whiteness. Whiteness, for Ahmed, is more than merely a skin colour. In her phenomenological analysis of whiteness, Ahmed explains whiteness as an *orientation* of (white) people's bodies[29] into space (Ahmed, 2007). 'Whiteness might be what is 'here', as a point from which the world unfolds' (ibid., p.154). Ahmed refers to Edmund Husserl's work to explain what orientation is (ibid., p.151). As I am currently sitting behind my desk, I am oriented towards that desk. The desk – and the writing appliances on top – are objects within my reach. My body is oriented towards these objects not just because I am casually facing them. My orientation towards these objects tells something about me and my general orientation towards the world. My history – my past experiences and placement in the world – makes that I am currently writing my thesis, and focusing on the specific topic of this thesis. And my orientation and closeness to my desk and notebook – the objects – tells something about my future and intentions. Moreover, when I am facing the desk, there is a whole world out of my sight. The other side of my room, my housemates in other spaces of the house, the city in which I live. While I do not see all of this, memory enables me to know that world is there. Our living community, 'my' city, the Netherlands are the background against which the object in front of me (my desk) appears in the present (ibid., p.151). My body is oriented because of my occupation in space and time (ibid., p.152) – this moment at this spot behind my desk is the 'here' from which the world unfolds to me.

This is where history comes in again. If we understand whiteness as an orientation, as the 'here' from which our world unfolds, we can understand the role of colonial and racial history. These histories, too, are backgrounds against which the objects in front of me unfold. Frantz Fanon explains the relation between phenomenology and race in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952/1986) by describing a scene in which he reaches for his cigarettes. At first sight, this appears to be a simple gesture motivated by a desire to smoke and enabled by his implicit knowledge on the location of the cigarettes and the matches (the objects he is orientated towards). However, Fanon is aware that all the elements of this action, and of the orientation, are provided 'by the other, the white man, who

[29] Affect theory often refers to people as bodies – white people then become white bodies, and Black people become Black bodies. However, in this thesis I regularly use the phrase 'white people's bodies' or 'Black person's body' to prevent the dehumanisation of the subject – and to emphasise the autonomy and responsibility of white people in light of white discomfort.

had woven me out of a thousand details' (ibid., p.111). Fanon argues that mere attention to the corporeal schema is not enough: we need to be aware of the 'historic-racial' schema below. Ahmed goes one step further. She argues that the racial-historical schema is not *underneath* our corporeal schema. Rather, the corporeal schema is *racialised* (Ahmed, 2007, p.153). Colonialism made the world a white world. When we are born, we inherit this world and this 'here' from which the world unfolds (ibid., p.153). The white world is the implicit knowledge we have. Remember how Dutch whiteness is shaped in colonial times, and later by the turn to cultural racism. This is all part of the 'here' and the white world white Dutch people inherit. If we go back to me sitting behind my desk, the world out of sight is not just my housemates and my neighbourhood. It is also this history of whiteness, the colonial traces of the Netherlands, and the ways the news reported on racism in the past days. It is a history that I inherited when I came into his world. And this history – the whiteness – is part of how I orient towards the desk and notebook (and this thesis) in front of me. Or – in other instances – towards society, a classroom, or the world at large. Even when I am not actively thinking about my knowledge of the colonial past (like I am not actively thinking about my housemates in the room next door), the colonial history still structures my corporeal scheme. Because, as I explained earlier, '[b]odies remember such histories, even when we forgot them' (Ahmed, 2007, p.154).

Moreover, since the world has been made into a white space historically, whiteness determines which bodies (which people) can reach out into that space. 'If the world is made white, then the body-at-home is one that can inhabit whiteness' (Ahmed, 2007, p.153). As Fanon and Ahmed both point out, the capacity for 'doing things', or taking action is not dependent on intrinsic capability, but on 'the ways in which the world is available as a space for action, a space where things "have a certain place"' (ibid.). As a result, white bodies (white people) take up more space, by reaching out further and further into the space, because the space was made to accommodate their movement. This is how colonialism made the world a white space in the first place. And how white people's actions maintain the whiteness of many spaces. Hence, when we 'inherit' whiteness as an orientation, 'we inherit the reachability of some objects' (ibid., p.154).

I would like to build on Ahmed's conceptualisation of whiteness to include an extra layer that is crucial for the Dutch context. In the previous chapter, I explained that whiteness in this thesis – but more so: in the Netherlands – refers not just to structures of white, Dutch, Christian-secular privilege. Moreover, whiteness is also the denial of that privilege through the collective myths of white innocence. I believe that this white innocence, as described by Wekker, is part of the 'world out of sight' for white Dutch people. The myths or stories of white innocence are part of Dutch history, and thus part of the 'here' from which the world unfolds to us. Those stories also shaped the white spaces in the Netherlands. As I just explained, spaces are not just shaped by the people in the space,

but by other objects like stories, too. The stories of racism as a problem of other countries and other times, or of extremist individuals all impressed upon Dutch spaces like universities and museums. These spaces now accommodate the 'innocent' white body even better. I propose to think of white innocence as a lube that makes it even easier for the white body to move through white spaces. It enlarges the 'space available for action'. After all, the innocent white person moves through the world more carefree and, hence, with more ease.

3.9 Affect Theory on Discomfort

After exploring Ahmed's conceptualisation of whiteness, it is time to look at her understanding of discomfort. Discomfort, like other emotions, is intentional and relational. It is an emotion that is shaped between the surfaces of two bodies, or between the surfaces of a body and the space this body is in. Ahmed begins her understanding of discomfort by describing what comfort is.

> *'The word "comfort" suggests well-being and satisfaction, but it also suggests an ease and an easiness. Comfort is about an encounter between more than one body, which is the promise of a "sinking" feeling' (Ahmed, 2006, p.132).*

When we are comfortable, we fit in with our environment in such a way that we can no longer tell where our body ends and the world begins (Ahmed, 2006, p.132). Ahmed uses a striking analogy of sitting in a chair (Ahmed, 2014, p.148): when the chair is comfortable, we are unaware of the surfaces of our bodies, we simply sink into the seat. Contrariwise, discomfort is when we do not sink into our surrounding. When the shape of a chair does not accommodate our body, we suddenly become hyper-aware of the surfaces of that body. We suddenly feel our bum, our back, our shoulders. The misfit between our body and the space makes the surfaces of our body 'surface'.

As I explained, Ahmed understands that the surfaces of both body (subject) and the space they are in (object) are shaped by histories and previous impressions. This is how the idea of normativity reflects in Ahmed's conceptualisation of (dis)comfort. The spaces of many institutions and societies in the Western world can be understood as 'white spaces': they allow white bodies to extend into these spaces that have already taken their shape (Ahmed, 2006, p.135). Whiteness became a form of public comfort for white people (ibid.). White spaces are shaped by the many white people that passed the space, leaving their impressions, shaping it to their forms – like a chair shaping to the body that perches on it day after day (Ahmed, 2007, p.158). We are, however, not the only ones entering these spaces. When non-white people enter white spaces, their bodies do not easily extent into the space. Discomfort results. The surfaces of their bodies surface, and they become hyper

visible. 'The moments when the body appears "out of place" are the moments of political and personal trouble' (ibid., p.135). Discomfort enables people to feel the categories they fail to inhabit – white, straight, cis, able-bodied, male. 'When you don't sink, when you fidget and move around, then what is in the background becomes in the front of you, as a world that is gathered in as specific way' (ibid., p.154). In other world: that 'world out of sight' becomes uncomfortably (sometimes even painfully) clear and noticeable.

3.10 White Discomfort as an Affect

Ahmed's conceptualisation of discomfort is predominantly aimed at describing the experience of oppressed groups: of queer people in heteronormative spaces, of people of colour in white spaces. How can this theory be translated to the case of white discomfort in the Netherlands? White people's bodies are normally at home in white spaces (apart from other factors). Comfort is their norm. If we recall the normative role of *gezelligheid* as described by Schols and Cairo (in the previous chapter), we can imagine the white Dutch person in the white space as settled in a comfortable chair with a blanket wrapped around them. White *dis*comfort emerges – based on earlier descriptions – when, for example, the topic of white privilege is addressed in the white person's space. Suddenly the blanket is gone, *gezelligheid* and comfort are lost. If discomfort is a sign of the body not fitting its surrounding, the question arises which categories the white person's body does no longer fit into during a conversation on white privilege or colonial history.

Based on the discussed literature, I would argue that this is where white innocence comes in. If, like I argued above, white innocence is an intrinsic part of Dutch whiteness, if it is part of the way the world unfolds before white Dutch people, if their bodies are shaped by stories of white innocence – then those bodies suddenly no longer fit the space when white spaces are filled with stories of racism, white privilege or colonial histories. When I entered the African Studies classroom, as I recalled at the opening of this thesis, I felt hypervisible because for once – unusual to me – I did not fit the norm. The space, filled with predominantly Black students and quickly also with stories of Dutch guilt, did not accommodate my white Dutch body. Even though I was not surprised to hear of violence committed by the Dutch, even though the 'world behind me' already contained stories of colonial critique, I suddenly felt the absence of white innocence as a lube to help me move through the space.

Ahmed's conceptualisation of whiteness as an orientation, and her understanding of white spaces accommodate the need to acknowledge historical contexts. I also believe it offers flexibility to acknowledge this context is continuously changing as history progresses. After all, new events and

stories can reshape the 'world out of sight' that lays behind whiteness as a point of orientation. Moreover, the spaces through which we move are subject to change when new people pass through and affect them. This interaction of white bodies and white spaces helps realise that people's whiteness can influence their action and emotions differently in different situations. Although spaces in the Netherlands are predominantly white, different spaces are shaped differently. Every space contains different object, and the space can change when a new object (a person, a story) enters the room. Hence, Ahmed's affective conceptualisation of whiteness gives us the tools to make a contextualised analysis of whiteness in a specific moment and place – whether it is the Dutch context or a specific event in a specific room. Lastly, whiteness as an orientation implies that whiteness is not a problem of the individual alone. Whiteness is the orientation from which the world unfolds for me as an individual. But the whiteness I inherited and the predominantly white world before me are shaped through history. A space is not just white because of the people in that space at that moment, but because of all the people that affected the space in the past.

I argue that affect theory, thus, offers an interesting and valuable lens for looking at white discomfort. It allows for historical contextualisation, as well as a connection between the individual's feelings and the bigger collective context. After all, the fact that white discomfort regularly manifests as intense responses like anger, sadness, or the urge to flee, says something about the *emotional investment* of (Dutch) white people in their comfort, and in their white innocence. Looking at white discomfort as an affect offers an opportunity to further explore the roots and mechanisms of white discomfort.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

After having explored the theorisation of white discomfort, this chapter speaks to the empirical methodology of my thesis project. The first section of the chapter begins with an explanation of how and why focus groups in the Netherlands were chosen for data gathering. I will specify the set-up of the focus group. Then, I will explain my method for analysis of the collected data. At last, I will attend to the ethics of my research setting.

4.1 From Theory To Practice

To further explore an affective approach to white discomfort in the Netherlands, I organised focus groups. To understand my choice for focus groups, it is important to realise that research method is informed by theory (Belzile & Öberg, 2012; Kuby, 2016). Although not much has yet been written on the study of affect through focus groups, this method was particularly useful for my thesis based on the characteristics of focus group research. A focus group can be defined as 'group discussions, in which participants focus collectively upon a topic selected by the researcher, and presented to them (most commonly) as a set of questions' (Wilkinson, 1998, p.182). Focus groups on the topic of white discomfort enabled me to analyse my research topic on two levels.

Firstly, I had the data gathered through the content of the participants' answers to my questions. In this case, the questions were aimed at better understanding: What is white discomfort to them? Where do they think it comes from? How do they experience it? How do they personally relate to whiteness and the Dutch colonial past? As Wilkinson (1998) explains, focus groups are useful for getting insight in both a group's views and understandings, as well as how these views are 'advanced elaborated and negotiated in a social context' (Wilkinson, 1998, p.187). They do not just help us understand *what* the collective views are, but also *how* these meanings are constructed (Liamputtong, 2015). This was valuable for this thesis, because it gave me the opportunity to gain insight into the beliefs and possibly myths on which participants based their views (Catterall & Maclaran, 1997). Hence, I could observe the myths of white innocence underlying white discomfort and how they were advanced. A group setting was then additionally valuable since Wekker explained white innocence to not simply be an individual problem, but rather a collectively shaped problem. Moreover, focus groups helped me gain more relevant insight into the participants' views than one-on-one interviews. As explained by Wilkinson (1998, p.190), the group setting motivates people to disclose personal details and strong views because they either get encouraged by other group members or defend themselves when their ideas are challenged by others.

Secondly, the focus groups allowed me to analyse the actual discomfort within the group setting – during our conversation on racism, whiteness and white discomfort. In the previous chapter, white discomfort is conceptualised as not just an individual emotion that happens within a person, but it is performative, it is an *action* between people. If emotion is understood as something we *do*, then the focus group setting should allow observation of these actions (Kuby, 2016). As explained by Wilkinson (1998, p.193), focus groups allow one to observe 'the process of collective sense-making' (Wilkinson, 1998, p.193). Hence, focus groups enable an analysis of the role emotions (or affect) play in that process of collective sense-making. The group setting permitted me to analyse whether discomfort took place – by observing tone of voice, body language, and emotional engagement between participants (Catterall & Macalaran, 1997) – and how it was shaped. I checked for discomfort in two ways: by simply asking participants which emotions they experienced and whether they were uncomfortable (Linnenbrink-Garcia et al., 2016, p.169), and by being aware of signs of discomfort.

Although a focus group offers many opportunities to analyse affect, it is important to also acknowledge the limitations. In my thesis so far, I have emphasised that white discomfort is a result of how our society – the space – is shaped historically. White innocence is an important aspect of this, and white innocence is constructed on a collective, national level. The people I gather for this research are of course no perfect representation of the Dutch society (as I will explain later in section 4.3), nor can the space of my focus group perfectly reflect the Dutch society. However, Zembylas does explain 'how "larger-scale" tensions [are] maybe negotiated within the microscale of the classroom' (Zembylas in Kraftl, 2016, p.156). The same can be possible for focus groups. I recognise the irony of my choice for a focus group after critiquing (a big part of) pedagogical research for focusing too much on the individual, or the small classroom space. However, I did make the connection to how whiteness is historically shaped on the bigger (national) level explicit. I asked participants to relate themselves to the colonial historical past, and how this relates to their discomfort. (I will discuss the questions of the focus group set-up more extensively in section 4.4.) I thereby did what Matias (2016) called for: I made white discomfort explicit in the conversation on racism. I urged the white participants to question the roots of their discomfort[30], by making the connection to the bigger whole.

Nevertheless, focus groups by default have a relatively low reliability and validity (Wilkinson, 1998). Despite this, however, using focus groups for data gathering can still be a way to see how useful the

[30] I also acknowledge the complication that participants in these focus groups already knew I was studying white discomfort. Hence, they might have 'toned down' the performance of their whiteness or the manifestations of white discomfort.

concepts of this thesis are in actual conversations on white discomfort—albeit limited. Rather than looking for perfect representations of Dutch views and people, the focus group offers a space for small insights that can later be built upon for a different project with a wider scope. What is offered by the focus group data gathering method is a place to start – in light of the literature and theory insights garnered previously. It is a place to begin exploration rather than a closed process.

4.2 Research Methodology

For the methodology for conducting the focus group, I drew inspiration from Alice McIntyre's *Making Meaning of Whiteness* (1997). In her research, McIntyre regularly engaged with a group of white female teachers to discuss racism over a longer period of time. I did not have the time (due to COVID lockdowns) to meet up with my discussion groups on multiple occasions, but I did use her methodologies, as I think they fit the goals of my research.

McIntyre based her methodologies on *Participatory Action Research (PAR)* methodology, that emerged in the sixties and seventies (ibid., p.20). This method – inspired on Paulo Freire's pedagogy for the oppressed – is usually used to engage with oppressed people and develop knowledge on an equal foot. PAR does not just produce knowledge by questioning the participants, but also engages with the participants to produce knowledge and take action (whether individual and/or collective) to tackle the problem at hand (ibid.). While McIntyre was heavily inspired by PAR methodology, there is of course a big difference between PAR and her own (and mine) research: McIntyre and I both engaged with the oppressor rather than the oppressed. However, important elements of PAR are still very useful for my research. Firstly, because the aim of this thesis is to gain knowledge that can be used to actively change the position of white people in the racism conversation in the Netherlands. The PAR methodology leaves space for already envisioning a change in the participants of the experiments. In this case, I explicitly (together with the participants) formulated the goal of the group gatherings: to explore our own discomfort and find ways to work through it. (On top of me gathering data to analyse.)

Secondly, the participatory aspect of the PAR-method inspired me to engage with the participants in the group on an equal level. As McIntyre formulated it: it is important to 'demystify the expert' (McIntyre, 1997, p.25): when it comes to white discomfort and whiteness, I should not be the person educating the rest of the group. Rather, we all had an open conversation from our shared positionality as white people. I was simultaneously 'a participant, a coordinator, and a researcher' (ibid., p.26). This was valuable for my study. On the one hand because it suited the process of exploring affect theory in the Dutch context, and openly looking for how whiteness and white

discomfort were shaped within the group. On the other hand, it left space for my own positionality as a white cis-woman, and for me to acknowledge that I cannot separate myself from the topic I am investigating.

Moreover, PAR methodology acknowledges how the roles of facilitator and participant merge, which is in line with my affective understanding of discomfort: my presence, my body, and my actions influenced the shape of the space and affected the participants. This was both a weakness and a strength. On the one hand, I already extensively read and theorised on the topic of white discomfort before the start of the focus group. Hence, I was aware of the possibility of me influencing the group discussion and altering it in the direction of my theory. I explain how I dealt with this in section 4.4. Moreover, the knowledge I gained through the theoretical chapter gave me a power advantage in the group. Although my academic knowledge does not make me immune to white discomfort, participants could have perceived me to be an authority. Multiple participants indicated being a bit nervous to talk about a topic that they were 'no expert on'. This might have prevented me from fully becoming a part of the group, and heightened the risk of me influencing the conversation. On the other hand, being a white Dutch person myself gave me an advantage in conducting this focus group. Farquhar (1999) describes how in focus groups around sensitive topics, having a facilitator that shares characteristics like race with the group can help participants to feel safe and therefore share their views openly[31].

4.3 Participant selection

In Chapter 2, I showed that although all white people may experience these emotions, it is specifically the self-proclaimed 'progressive', 'liberal', 'left-wing', or 'non-racist' middle-class that protects the status quo through their manifestations of white discomfort. Hence, I focused on gathering white Dutch people that regard themselves as progressive – that means: who have no explicit racist attitudes and who do not vote for (extreme) right-wing parties like VVD, PVV or Forum voor Democratie. After all, the purpose of the group (exploring our own white discomfort) could only be achieved if all participants agreed on the collectively set purpose. Moreover, by recruiting people with similar characteristics in terms of race and ideology, I hoped to encourage them to share their

[31] Farquhar writes this with vulnerable groups (i.e. queer women) in mind. As I pointed out, my research instead centers the dominant population of white Dutch people. Similarly, white discomfort is not a 'sensitive' topic in the same way as sexual health is in Farquhar's research: even though white people might feel vulnerable, they still have the power advantage in a racist society. Nevertheless, her methodological observations are relevant for my research as white people in the Netherlands do (according to my literature analysis) *perceive* their position as sensitive, and will therefore respond differently to a white facilitator.

experiences and views – as they will feel more comfortable talking about racism among people with the same race and political views.

Nevertheless, it would be interesting and valuable to organise a focus group with both white people, and Black people and people of colour. In the previous chapters, I showed how white discomfort often occurs when a non-white person enters the space. Asking the same questions as I did now in a racially mixed group, would offer the opportunity to observe this discomfort – and make it explicit by questioning white participants about it, while asking the Black participants and participants of colour how they experience and analyse this white discomfort. Msomi criticises whiteness studies for 'a predominant focus on drawing from white constructions, productions and reproductions and meanings of whiteness' (Msomi, 2020, p.16). In her research, she interviews both Black and white students to explore constructions of whiteness. For this thesis, however, I decided to not organise a mixed focus group because the Black people and people of colour in my surrounding were dealing with a lot of emotional stress and exhaustion from the Black Lives Matter protests and their aftermath. I did not want to add to this by making them do the (unpaid) emotional labour of confronting white people or their discomfort. Nor did the scope of the half thesis allow for me to organise and analyse two types of focus groups. However, I certainly suggest this set-up for future research.

I composed the focus group by approaching people in my own network of friends, family, and colleagues. And I approached two participants with the help of friends, who introduced me to their family members. This way, I had a better insight in how well people fitted the above criteria. Moreover, by selecting participants who either knew me or knew another member of the focus group, I hoped to make people feel more comfortable and safer in the space – which increased the chances of them sharing their views openly.

I organised two focus groups, one with six and one with five participants besides myself (one participant fell ill and could not join). The exact division of participants in terms of age, gender, level of education and class is shown in Appendix A. Two factors stand out in particular: there is a strong underrepresentation of working class people, and an overrepresentation of theoretically educated (university) people. This is partly due to the bias in my own network and people that were willing to participate. However, as I explained at the start of this paragraph, it is also theoretically educated middle-class white Dutch people that are especially interesting for my thesis.

It eventually turned out that one focus group contained more participants with prior knowledge on racism, anti-racism work and whiteness then the other. Hence, the discussion in the second group showed some differences to the first. The most important one was that participants were more

critical of each other than in the other group, as well as more critical in their process of self-reflection. However, both groups eventually came to similar conclusions regarding white discomfort and its roots. Therefore, two focus groups satisfied the saturation requirement – 'when additional information no longer generates new understanding' (Liamputtong, 2015, p.44).

4.4 Focus group set-up

Keeping all these considerations in mind, I came up with a set-up in which I invited the group to my former workspace. I chose this space, because it is a 'neutral' space in the sense that most participants did not have an emotional connection to the place[32], and therefore it had the smallest influence on people's affective state or how comfortable they were (Kraftl, 2016, p.153). I welcomed all participants with coffee and tea and some snacks, and asked them all to sit down in a half circle[33]. The session was recorded on video and (as a back-up) audio, to enable myself to analyse both speech and body language. I opened the session by introducing ourselves, setting the purpose of the gathering, discussing ethical issues, and setting some ground rules (to which I will come back in section 4.6). From there on, I guided the conversation through a semi-structured interview method: I had some questions prepared but allowed myself to change the order of the interview based on the answers and the natural course of the conversation (Hesse-Biber, 2007), while also making sure I got the information I need.

In 90 minutes, both groups worked through three conversation parts. Firstly, I let the participants respond to two videos of Black people talking about racism and the Netherlands. Secondly, we talked about our own positionality as white people in the bigger historical Dutch context. These questions were all open, and I tried to steer the participants as little as possible. Thirdly, we talked about manifestation of discomfort, and I explained my conceptualisation of white discomfort to see if people recognised themselves in it. What could 'working through' discomfort look like? The initial question set-up (which I altered based on the course of the conversation) can be found in Appendix B.

Throughout the whole session, I was attentive for 'sensitive moments' (Kitzinger & Farquhar, 1999), as these offer an opportunity to move past 'everyday talk' (which would be white innocence in this thesis). I, for example, planned on addressing potential discomfort in the room by asking 'You look

[32] With the exception of me and a former colleague who joined the conversation (but who also does no longer work at the theater). Plus, of course, the people that might have been in this space before to visit programmes or for work purposes.
[33] This is for practical reasons: people all need to be able to see the screen, and this way I can record all their faces with one camera.

uncomfortable? Is that true?' or 'Does that make you uncomfortable?'. However, not much discomfort was clearly shown or explicitly reported when I asked – as I will address in the next chapter.

4.5 Data analysis

As I explained at the start of this chapter, the group sessions allowed me to analyse the data on two levels. Firstly, I was able to analyse the content of what participants said: how did participants understand discomfort? Were my conceptualisations useful to them? And how was whiteness reflected in their words? Secondly, the focus groups allowed me to analyse the affects of the participants in the conversations. The group setting allowed me to see how emotions were shaped within the space, and how they shaped the space. To make sure my method of analysis matched my theoretical approach for this thesis, I used methodologies both from authors focusing on data analysis, and from authors that work with affect theory.

Moreover, I drew inspiration from the discourse analysis methods of James Paul Gee (1999; 2011). His work was useful for this thesis for two reasons. Firstly, Gee's understanding of discourse includes the notion that concepts and values 'are the products of historic meaning making' (Gee, 1999, p.36) – even though people using them in their discourse are often not aware of this historic process. The attention for historical context of discourse allows me to include the construction of whiteness through the colonial past. Secondly, Gee does not just analyse content (or text), but his focus is wider: he attends to Discourse with a capital D – that includes non-verbal cues, contexts, interactions, actions (ibid., p.23; p.96). This allowed me to analyse emotions or affects.

The first step in the analysis for this research was to transcribe the recordings of the focus groups[34]. I made the transcribes myself, since I was present in the space and had a memory of the atmosphere and noticeable moments during the meetings. Since the analysis focuses on affect, it was important to transcribe in a way that included emotions and actions. As Candace Kuby (2016, p.127) explains: if affect theory understands emotions as things we *do*, as actions, then 'researchers not only need to focus on words said but on the performances of the body and the situated contexts'. 'Emotions are made visible on our bodies through posture, facial expression, voice, movement, and through the performance of language' (ibid.). Hence, I included these elements in my transcriptions. In order to

[34] The transcripts of the focus groups are not included in the appendix, as it would be unable for me to guarantee the anonymity of the participants. If the examinators of this thesis are interested in looking at the transcripts, they can request them through me. Do keep in mind that the original transcripts are in Dutch – if English translations are required, take into account that it will take me some time to provide those.

do this, I used transcription conventions as suggested by Rapley (in Liamputtong, 2015, p.170) – see Appendix C.

Then, I had to analyse the transcripts. I did a first reading of the transcripts, to see which observations and topics stood out (Liamputtong, 2015; Gee, 1999). After highlighting the words, phrases, and actions or emotions that stood out, I went on and looked at the context of these specific parts of my data. Since affect theory implies that our affects and actions are shaped in our interactions and our actions shape our surrounding, understanding words and other actions in their specific context is crucial (Kuby, 2016). Gee refers to the context of an interaction as 'situation' (Gee, 1999, p.82). To understand a situation, I had to take a variety of factors into account: 'the physical setting in which the communication takes place and everything in it; the bodies, eye gaze, gestures, and movements of those present; what has previously been said and done by those involved in the communication; any shared knowledge those involved have, including shared cultural knowledge' (Gee, 2011, p.11). So in my analysis, I paid attention to all these elements to understand what was being said and done in the focus groups – and to grasp the space of the conversation.

Gee's definition of situation and context leaves space for analysing interactions and dynamics within the group, which is important for focus group research (Liamputtong, 2015; Smithson, 2008, p.365). In the case of this research, this turned out to be specifically significant when there was a difference in levels of knowledge on racism and whiteness among people in the group. Taking these dynamics into consideration helped me to understand more thoroughly how whiteness and white discomfort were shaped within the space of the group conversation. Moreover, I made sure to pay attention to my own role in the conversation as well. As I already acknowledged, and as my data gathering method implied, I did not regard myself a neutral observer. As the researcher and moderator of the conversation, I affected participants' actions (Liamputtong, 2015, p.175).

Lastly, it was very important for this thesis to connect my analysis of the conversation to a macro level: whiteness in the Netherlands. I was interested in how Dutch whiteness had shaped the space of the focus groups, and the bodies of the participants – as well as their potential discomfort. I found Gee's cultural model tool useful for this goal. Cultural models are, for him, 'our "first thoughts" or taken-for-granted assumptions about what is "typical'' or "normal' (Gee, 1999, p.59). '[T]hey mediate between the "micro" (small) level of interaction and the "macro'' (large) level of institutions' (ibid., p.58). Although Gee's focus seems to be on the mind, I found that a translation to the body and how it is shaped by (collective) histories can be made – as the focus group was a micro display of how spaces are shaped by white bodies performing white discomfort. And how, therefore, the micro space of the focus group reflected the macro space of Dutch society.

4.6 Ethical considerations

In line with the University of Cape Town Faculty of Humanities' Guide To Research Ethics, all participants were provided with a consent form containing information about the aims of the thesis project, how I recorded the session, and what the data would be used for. At the start of the focus group, I addressed some important ethical issues: participants could stop their participation at any given moment, I recorded the session on film, people were never obliged to share their thoughts or experiences, and people were always welcome to contact me afterwards if they wanted to talk about their experiences. Moreover, I set rules of engagement: we treated each other with respect, we would not insult each other or talk over each other. Since these were anonymous sessions, we would not 'gossip' about other participants afterwards. And, finally, there would of course be no physical violence. I also invited the participants to add to the rules, to ensure a safer focus group setting (Farquhar, 2011). However, no additions were suggested. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic the recordings were safely kept in a locked cupboard, and the participants were labelled with the letters A – F (first group) and G – K (second group) to ensure anonymity.

Although this study did not entail risk to physical harm, participants could have been emotionally or psychologically troubled due to the sensitive topic (even though the participants are, in regard to racism, not part of the 'sensitive populations', Farquhar, 2011, p.50). As a researcher, I am responsible for preventing any harm. Hence, I used the above precautions (setting rules and making sure people kept to them), and used my own four years of professional experience as dialogue organiser and moderator. I prepared some strategies for interrupting when the conversation gets too tense or even potentially violent[35]. Before conducting the research, I signed University of Cape Town's Ethical Clearance Form.

In light of ethical considerations and potential emotional distress of the participants, this research did however pose a dilemma. I regard it important to reflect on this and on how I dealt with it. As I explained in my previous chapter, white people are easily distressed in conversations on racism or the colonial past. This is, after all, the reason I write this thesis. There is a fine line between protecting the participants from emotional damage, and preventing discomfort from entering the group. The first is of upmost importance, but the latter would make the affective analysis of discomfort impossible. Moreover, since the collectively set goal of the focus groups is to explore our own discomfort, it is important to be critical of possible manifestations of white fragility – or

[35] For example, I could have made the participants turn their chairs around, so they no longer face each other (Dirkse et al, 2017), or we could have taken a short break. These strategies turned out to not be necessary.

misleading request for safe spaces by white participants that may avoid critical reflection (Leonardo and Porter, 2010).

I acknowledge that there is of course a difference since I now invited people into this focus group for my own academic interest, and I should therefore protect them against extreme distress. I did this by making the dilemma explicit at the beginning of the session: I explained that people were always free to leave if they feel too distressed, but that it was natural to experience some discomfort since the topic of the conversation was discomfort. Moreover, if intense signs of discomfort would have occurred, we would have worked through them collectively by questioning where this discomfort came from, and by sharing if multiple participants recognised these feelings. In summary: I protected participants as far as reasonably possible from having severe emotional distress, and focused on de-escalating potential distressing situations, but I did not prevent discomfort altogether.

CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS

In this chapter, I will present my analysis of the focus group data. As introduced in the previous chapter, I analysed the content of the focus group conversations – as well as the signs of discomfort (and white innocence) during the meetings through the lens of affect theory. In this analysis, I will dance between the theory developed in chapter 2 and 3, and the focus group data to further explore the conceptualisation of white discomfort in the Netherlands.

During the focus groups, there was little physical display of discomfort. Neither did participants self-report on being uncomfortable during our conversations when I asked about it. Hence, there were only a limited amount of clear manifestations of discomfort for me to analyse. There were, however, a multitude of signs of white innocence which, I will argue, can be interpreted as signs of avoiding white discomfort.

Moreover, we did, of course, talk a lot *about* discomfort. Hence, the biggest part of my analysis will focus on the content of participants' answers: their experiences and views, and the way they present them. I will present my analysis in this chapter via a couple of themes observed in the data. Firstly, I will talk about the relation between the self and the collective. I will analyse how this relates to white innocence, to a wish to be 'good'. I will analyse the often-mentioned fear of 'saying something wrong'. And I will then analyse ways in which participants seemed to try to 'escape' their discomfort during the conversations. Altogether, my observations and analysis paint a picture of white discomfort in which individual and collective levels of whiteness are intertwined, and where an affective understanding of white discomfort helps us see how emotional investment in white innocence can sometimes cause individuals to act in defense of whiteness.

5.1 The Self and the Collective

I will start this analysis by looking at a moment that clearly displays white discomfort. This situation occurred in the second focus group, after the group watched a video of a 1981 interview with famous American author James Baldwin for Dutch television show Kenmerk. In the fragment, Baldwin (in IKON, 1981) makes statements like:

'If you use us as an example – by which I mean the American example – you should learn from all of the horrors perpetrated by your children. America comes out of Europe.

[…]

*All you [white people] really have, after all, are space shuttles, banks, and weapons. What you don't have anymore is me (tapping his chest). […] Me. Me. Me. I, the slave. I the n****r. I, the black cat, who believed everything you said (.) <once>'*

Before starting the fragment, I asked participants to notice what feelings the video invoked in them. When the video ended, the following happened[36]:

FOCUS GROUP 2

Kolman: Well, yell it out.

(Soft laughing)

H: Well, this really touches me a lot. I know this fragment. (Scratching their chest) This is not the first time I see it. (Deep sigh) (4) And this happens every time (.) I notice it really touches me (tears in her eyes). Pfffft. Then I think (.) (with a deep voice) Ye::::ah. What's underneath that is very much that I think (with shaking voice) O. It's really that feeling of- Many feelings of guilt come up there. Or the feeling of I am a member of the wrong people. Or ehm. I carry that whole history in my genes. It's in our culture. It's in our language. And that you experience really how deep this goes.

Kolman: Hmhm.

H: And ehm (.) Well that. that. that you really need to realise that and experience that. That you need to take that in instead of wanting to cut it away (makes movement of pushing something away) to avoid being there. But simply that you're (gestures towards their own torso) a part of it. And that is <painful>. That is very painful.

J: But good.

H: Yes but also that I really think 'o yes this'. This is really how it is.

[…]

Kolman: So the discomfort also comes from the feeling that he's addressing you?

H: Yes. Yes. Yes.

G: Then why do you feel addressed? Because I don't really share that experience.

H: Because (.) Well. I really feel addressed because I think ehm (.) we are all part of that bigger story.

[36] The transcript fragments in this analysis are all translated from Dutch to English. Since people often end their sentences mid-way and some words have very specific meanings in Dutch, a perfect translation is impossible. However, I tried to capture the essence of the interactions as good as possible. Where necessary, I will explain the meaning of certain words in their specific context.

This transcribe fragment is a clear example of something that turned out to be relevant throughout both focus groups: the identification of the individual – in this case: participant H – with the larger collective of Dutch white people. Participant H even referred to the feeling of being part of 'the wrong people'. Their[37] discomfort was rooted in feeling personally addressed. And they felt personally addressed because Baldwin's words pointed out to them that they are 'part of that bigger story'.

A similar connection between the individual and collective identity was shown in the first focus group, after watching the same Baldwin fragment. Unlike participant H above, participants of group 1 did not explicitly report experiencing discomfort. Nor did they show distress in the way that participant H did. However, some of them did report on feeling 'attacked' by and 'annoyed' with Baldwin's words and expressions. Some emphasised that his words are, in their eyes, not constructive. One participant even called his approach 'aggressive'[38]. When I asked *why* it bothered them when they felt like he was personally accusing them, one participant gave an interesting response.

FOCUS GROUP 1

Kolman: And ehm (1) I hear different people say that they find his tone accusing (0,5) Or 'I'm not responsible for. For what happened in the past'. Ehm (.) Then why does it bother us if we (.) let's say (.) what does it do to us if we feel like he implies that? What happens there?

E: I think that I. It's weird of course. You kind of get that feeling of well HELLO that's not how I am. Engage in a conversation with me for once. I'm not like that at all. You know? Like you need to defend yourself in who you are. While this is also about the whole of the Netherlands and a conclusion is drawn on that of course. So secretly I do feel a little attacked in that moment. Personally. While (laughs) if you say 1981. Well (.) I wasn't even born yet. (Laughs.) But still, it does feel <like that>.

Shortly after that, I explain that my interpretation of Baldwin's words is indeed that his 'you' refers to white Dutch people in general, as an overall group. When I repeat the question, it leads to this conversation[39]:

[37] To guarantee anonymity of all participants, I use the gender-neutral singular pronouns they and them to refer to individual participants.

[38] I need to be careful not to immediately categorise these responses as discomfort. In chapter 3, I explained that we should not conflate emotions like anger and irritation with discomfort. And that discomfort, in my understanding, is a distinct emotion. However, anger or defensiveness *can* be signs of discomfort – as these emotions can be ways to avoid discomfort or ways in which discomfort manifests. Simultaneously, calling a Black thinker aggressive or annoying relates to issues of tone policing, and racial stereotypes which are outside the scope of this thesis.

[39] When I ask about the 'bad feeling' the video invoked, I asked about a 'naar gevoel' (in Dutch), which indicates an uncomfortable bleak feeling.

FOCUS GROUP 1

Kolman: I find it interesting that [Baldwin's] reproach (.) why is that such a bad feeling? That sounds like stating the obvious. But why is it such a bad feeling? (2)

D: For me because you're being addressed on something that you yourself think you're not a part of.

Kolman: Hmhm.

A: Also because you yourself think that you don't discriminate. But (1) yeah (1)

Kolman: Hmhm. Okay. Interesting. Do other people think the same?

E: Yes. Secretly, it does feel almost personal. While I am capable of reasoning that it's not meant personal. Because it's also (.) he knows for example that the Netherlands consists of many many people that do not all think the same. But it still feels that way.

The quotes above indicate that – like in the other focus group – the uncomfortable feelings that Baldwin's words invoked come from individual's identification with 'the Netherlands'. Baldwin addresses a 'you' which seems to refer to 'you white Dutch people' or 'you the Netherlands'. The reason that some participants felt attacked or experienced other uncomfortable emotions is (partly) that they identify with this group – as a part of the group, they felt like he was criticising them personally. The role of identification with the Netherlands is shown explicitly when, later during the same session, one participant recalled the first time they heard someone call the Netherlands a racist country. Another participant replied:

FOCUS GROUP 1

C: I was shocked the first time as well. Because indeed (.) Indeed. You identify with the Netherlands. And you think 'huh, not me right?'.

And in a last example, a participant identified with collective Dutch history. After I shared my own experience of discomfort when I entered the African Studies classroom for the first time, participant A recalled their own experience of visiting South Africa:

FOCUS GROUP 1

A: But you experience that mainly when you're among those people. I experienced the same in South Africa. That I don't really feel (1) Well I don't feel responsible. What you (nods at participant B) already said. For what my fore- forefathers did. But I did also not really feel like somebody who was happy to be (1) ehm. Blank *there. Or to be white. I did have that feeling of OEH. I do have (2) Well. A bit of shame maybe. For my past.*

What is interesting here is that the participant first distanced themself from that Dutch past – or from their ancestors' actions. But then eventually called it 'my past'. So by their own reasoning, they *do* identify with the Dutch colonial history[40].

The examples in this section showed the importance and overall presence of the identification of individual participants with the collective of whiteness or the Netherlands. This echoes my emphasis, in my theory chapter, on understanding whiteness as a collective – also with regard to understanding white discomfort. I will further analyse how this identification plays a role in white discomfort in the coming three sections, by adding one extra aspect (or step) to my interpretation of white discomfort in every section.

5.2 White innocence

On top of the identification of the individual with the collective, the above quoted moments unveil an extra factor that is important for comprehending the participants' white discomfort. The participants did not only mention their identification with the collective – with white people or with the Netherlands – as a source of discomfort. In addition, especially in focus group 1, participants mentioned multiple times that this negative collective identity collides with their self-image of being an innocent non-racist person. ('Huh, not me right?' – 'I'm not like that at all'.) So the process that unfolds is as follows: White people are confronted with the implication that either the Netherlands or white (Dutch) people are racist. Their identification with this collective identity implies to them that they, too, are not innocent. This implication or realisation does not match their innocent self-image. And, hence, a friction arises that leads to discomfort.

This observation reminds me of Wekker's description of the myth of white innocence, as well as the good/bad and innocent/guilty binary described by Boler and DiAngelo. Using the theoretical lens from chapter 3, we could say that the participants' bodies are shaped by a presumed innocence, or an image of their 'good' Self – as part of their whiteness. The space of the focus groups was a space where their bodies 'fit': among a group of white people in a room that did not immediately remind (them) of colonial history or racism. That whiteness – including a sense of white innocence – was

[40] Also noticeable in this quote is the initial use of the word 'blank'. This is a typical Dutch word used to refer to white skin colour and race, rather than simply 'wit' ('white'). The word became the opposite of the Dutch version of the n-word during colonial times. Nowadays, the word is still used by many white people and media to refer to skin tone. Nzume (2017, p.17) explains why this is problematic. 'Blank' in Dutch namely also means 'neutral' and 'free from colour' (ibid.). At the start of the twentieth century, Dutch dictionaries associated 'blank' with purity and high quality (Blakely, 1992, p.661). White and black are descriptive terms, while 'blank' and the N-word are normative words (Özdil, 2014, pp.70-71). In the case of this fragment, the participate corrects themself when using the word – so we here witness unconscious traces of the colonial past and language in our conversation on racism.

imbedded in the space, was revealed in the moments when people suddenly got uncomfortable. These moments imply that they were (more) comfortable before. From the conversations, I can conclude that all participants acknowledged that the Netherlands has a violent colonial past. I did, after all, select people that self-identify as relatively progressive. The mere mention of colonial history did not seem to shock them or make them noticeably uncomfortable. So, their body did still 'fit' the space when this colonial past was spoken of. However, certain implications seemed to shift the space in such a way that it no longer accommodated their bodies. In this case, these were implications (either by others or by themselves) that related them personally to this colonial past, or that related this colonial past to racism in current-day Netherlands – a collective with which they identified. In those moments, the space became a space that no longer accommodated their white innocence.

Baldwin and his words had this space-shifting effect. Although he was merely present through a video, him being a Black person directly addressing Dutch white people ('you') created an indirect but powerful interaction between him and the participants at the time. The emotions of the participants are then shaped in that interaction between them (the subjects) and (the video of) James Baldwin (the object). Baldwin did not allow us to sink into the surrounding in this interaction on racism and whiteness. The video altered the space in such a way that the bodies of white people were suddenly centred. Baldwin's words made the surfaces of our bodies surface. The space became a space in which *all* white people were connected to the colonial past and racist present – white innocence was lost.

In a way, Baldwin's words made the space into a mould – the mould of the Dutch white person unmistakably connected to a colonial past, to racism in America, to slavery. And this is a mould that the 'innocent' white body – shaped by years of white innocence and moving through white spaces – does not fit in. Which also explains why some participants – being pressed deeper into this mould with every new sentence – experienced his words as non-constructive or even aggressive. (Which is not an excuse for these statements. I will come back to the question of individual responsibility in the next chapter.) Moreover, Baldwin's 'you' created the boundary between his and our bodies – by singling out white people as a group distinct from him. He, the traditional Other, was now speaking back to whiteness. He mirrored the distancing that whiteness has historically always performed – making whiteness visible in a space where whiteness, until then, had sunk into the white surrounding. Recall how participant D said that Baldwin's words gave them a bad feeling 'because you're being addressed on something that you yourself think you're not a part of'. This participant acknowledged that racism in the Netherlands exists, however (in line with Wekker's analysis of progressive white Dutch people) they regarded it mainly a problem of other people, of the extreme-

right. Responses like ‘Huh, not me right?’ and ‘I’m not like that at all’ show that some participants initially (subconsciously) placed themselves outside of the problematic aspects of whiteness.

The different responses by different participants then depend on how Baldwin’s words affect them personally. The different shapes of individuals’ bodies cause white discomfort to manifest in various ways. In almost all cases, his words create a distance between him and the white listener. Participant H, who got emotional after watching the video, had seen the video before. The information was not new to them. They are involved in anti-racism work and informed on topics like white privilege. Their past interactions with anti-racism activism and education, and with Black people and people of colour already shaped their body. Their self-image seemed to accommodate the acknowledgement that no white person is innocent (so neither are they). Nevertheless, when seeing the video, they become emotional. They display discomfort and sadness, and report on feelings of guilt and shame. So even though they (claim to) acknowledge their whiteness and white privilege, they are not constantly aware of that whiteness when in white spaces. After hearing Baldwin’s words, their whiteness surfaces and they are reminded of being connected ‘to a lot of injustice and pain’ (their words).

On top of discomfort shown during our sessions, participants also reported on examples of discomfort in past experiences. One participant, for example, recalls a moment that was crucial in losing parts of their ignorance. During a workshop weekend they attended, some people of colour called out other attendees and the workshop leader for creating an unsafe space. ‘I thought “what’s happening?”’. This indicated that until that moment, despite the attendance of multiple people of colour, the participant felt comfortable in the space and was not aware of any racism-related problems. Only when people started addressing these issues, they became uncomfortable. This is an indication that until then, the space had accommodated white innocence, and their white ‘innocent’ body. This event also changed the shape of their body. The participant recalls this workshop as a moment that made them aware of many issues they were blind to before, and that motivated them to further educate themself. So, their peers of colour affected their body with their remarks – their emotions left their impressions. And this experience became part of the ‘world out of sight’ of this participant’s whiteness.

In this section, I demonstrated how identification with the collective will lead to white discomfort if ‘accusations’ towards the collective collide with the innocent self-image, or the shape of the ‘innocent’ white body. The comparison of different examples showed that if and how white discomfort manifests is context-dependent: different white Dutch people have differently shaped bodies, and spaces can continuously change form. Therefore, my affective approach to white

discomfort proves to be useful so far – as it enables an analysis of both the specific context, and the influence of personal and collective histories on this context in which discomfort is shaped.

5.3 Wish To Be Good

I have so far observed that 1) the discomfort of focus group participants sometimes comes from their identification with the collective and 2) this identification leads to discomfort when the image of the collective in that moment collides with the participants' innocent self-image. I want to add a third factor that might seem obvious at first hand, but is worth addressing: the participants highly value their innocent self-image. Or, in other words, there is a strong desire to be a good person – or at least to maintain the image of being a good person[41]. When analysing why being related to racism or colonial violence made us uncomfortable, participants in both groups came up with the answer that 'actually you don't want someone else to think badly of you' (participant A) or 'after all, you do want to be respected by others, or at least to be liked' (participant J). In chapter 3, I found that this desire to be liked, and fear of being accused is a much-discussed theme in white discomfort literature. Dutch people are seemingly no exception to this.

The participants emphasise that people have a general desire to be liked and aversion of being criticised – also with issues unrelated to racism. However, some also emphasise that being associated with racism is a very severe accusation. Participant F shares that 'racism already has an extra big heavy layer because we are taught that it's a kind of (1) well almost crime'. To which participant D replies: 'Yes it's very bad indeed. It's very bad. So the moment you're addressed on that it really hits you'. In Dutch, the last part of their quote was '*komt het echt binnen'* which literally translates to 'it really comes in'. From an affective perspective, this is interesting because these words refer to the feeling of something literally hitting you – like it presses *into* their body, penetrates it even.

Their remarks are in line with Wekker's description of the construction of white innocence – that frames racism in the Netherlands as a problem of the extreme right and defines racism as explicit racist ideologies. The comparison of racism to crime even reminds of the taboo on racism since the Second World War – which equates racism with genocide and Holocaust as discussed in chapter 2. In a space (the Netherlands) where historically people have been taught to understand racism in this

[41] It is likely that both desires (*being* a good person, and *being perceived as* a good person) are at play. I think it is important to keep this in mind in the analysis of white discomfort. Besides a more self-centred wish to feel good about ourselves, there can also be the genuine empathy for the Other. And, connected to this, the discomfort with playing a role in any harm done to them. In the end, the question of whether we can really separate the desire to be a good person from the desire to see ourselves as a good person (and feeling good about ourselves) requires a complicated moral exploration that I cannot easily answer for the participants of my research.

way, I imagine racism to add sharp edges to a space. Using Ahmed's metaphor of the uncomfortable chair that does not fit the body, I imagine racism to add extra bumps or a sharp splinter to the seat. At least, and this is an important sidenote, in the experience of the white Dutch person – from whose perspective accusations of racism take this painful shapes in relation to their 'innocent' bodies.

5.4 Do Not 'Say Anything Wrong'

There is one last source of discomfort that was mentioned by multiple participants in both groups: the fear of 'saying something wrong' or simply 'using a wrong word'. This fear has different (or multiple) roots for different people. But they all somehow relate to the feeling that they are talking about a subject that is 1) sensitive and 2) not something they have a lot (or enough) knowledge on. Participants describe the feeling of entering a territory that is not known to them, while being very aware that a 'wrong' choice of words might easily offend or hurt someone. From an affective perspective, this fits the analysis of the white body in the non-white space. Racism is a topic that makes the space tense (from the white perspective) – that makes white bodies hyper visible, as well as the words they produce. The participants find this uncomfortable for two reasons. Firstly, they indicate there is a fear of hurting others. They explain their discomfort comes from a place of empathy and guilt. Discomfort, then, comes from a realisation that their knowledge on racism lacks. After all, they were living (and still are living) under their own white ignorance for so long. In recalling their moment of becoming aware of their white ignorance, Participant K says:

> *FOCUS GROUP 2*
>
> *K: And since then I actually still think like (.) maybe I don't know enough about what I'm saying now. Or maybe I say something wrong because I don't know enough. Because I didn't see it for so long. […] I think I'm afraid to do something wrong or something like that. Or to hurt someone there. That mainly*.

A second reason for not wanting to say something wrong, is the fear of people getting angry at them, of being classified as a racist. These two reasons can, as I said before, be interrelated. This second reason, however, is not about empathy, but rather about the more selfish urge to not be attacked. It is a fear that is addressed before by multiple authors, see my literature analysis in chapter 3. When considering what would happen to the conversation if Black people and people of colour would be present, the following was said:

FOCUS GROUP 1

B: My first response was when you asked that question (1) I would be scared to say something so I would try to keep silent with all my might. Also because you know that the discussion is conducted in such a way that every chosen word can cause a giant riot. While you might not mean it that way. But in that moment used a wrong word.

A: That's a problem for me in the whole racism. Like (.) even if I mean it so well. I always need to watch my words. While I mean the same thing. If I phrase it one way or the other. In the end I mean the same thing. But it's very quickly worded the wrong way. I find that quite DIFFICULT sometimes.

In conversations on racism, white people do not sink into the surrounding. These participants are aware that a misstep, even when it is coming from a place of ignorance or good intentions, will be called out. In the event that Black people are present, they cannot move through the space as easily as they normally can, as a white person in predominantly white spaces – especially because the 'lube' of white innocence is gone when racism is discussed.

Importantly, white people would not feel the same discomfort talking about other topics they are no experts on, like climate change or physics, because those topics do not put their white body in the spotlight. At another moment in the conversation, Participant A says:

FOCUS GROUP 1

*A: What I also experience as uncomfortable is that someone immediately gets defensive [*zijn stekels uitzet] *when you (1) Yeah. (1) How should I put that? Well yes indeed. 'Because I'm Turkish.' 'Because I'm Black.' Or (1) immediately make it about them. If I get upset with you (looking at Kolman) you also don't say 'that's probably because I'm white'*.

What is particularly interesting about this quote, is the phrasing '*zijn stekels uitzetten*' (getting defensive) which literally translates to 'putting out their spines'. This is telling for the way many white people perceive Black people or people of colour when they talk about racism. The body of colour can, then, *in their perception* be a sharp body, a thorny body that can potentially harm others – specifically the white Other. Those spines (from the perspective of these participants) fill up the space in racism conversations. A wrong move, a wrong choice of words, can thus easily lead to hurting oneself. The white body's space to move is limited, and moving is potentially harmful.

Lastly, Participant I brings up another reason for being uncomfortable with this fear of saying something wrong. They refer to the feeling that they as a white person are not allowed to ask critical questions anymore.

FOCUS GROUP 2

I: And I really want to know what my role in this [anti-racism work] *<u>can</u> be. But I also want to <u>understand</u>. But in order to understand I do need to be able to continue asking those critical questions. And I notice that I no longer really dare to ask those anymore.*

The discomfort for them, they explain, is not just in the above two reasons, but in the conviction that in any conversation or discussion people should be able to give critique and ask questions. I could analyse their words as the white person being uncomfortable now their space to speak is limited, since they are not used to being restricted. When I confront Participant I with this question, whether their critique is not simply a defense mechanism, they reply:

FOCUS GROUP 2

I: 'Yeah. Well I don't know. (2) I (laughing) would say it's scientifically very accurate to question oneself like 'okay but how valid is this point of view?' You need to investigate that.'

The conversation has a difficult twist to it, as classifying their argument as a defense mechanism does exactly what they are uncomfortable with: classify any argument they make as an invalid response from a white person. The same could be said visa versa. In light of this thesis, I think it is important to take note of their argument, and be open to answers that do not fit my theory.

Altogether, in light of my theoretical work, it is interesting to see that so many participants experience the discomfort of being afraid to speak about racism. This is telling for how (these) white Dutch people experience the space of racism conversations. The space of the racism conversation is not a space where the 'innocent' white body is at home, nor a space where it can easily move around. This echoes my conceptualisation of white innocence as part of whiteness, and as a lube that helps the white body move through the space.

5.5 Escaping White Discomfort

While the participants spoke openly about their white discomfort and their views on whiteness, there were numerous instances in which participants showed signs of what Wekker would classify as white innocence. In different occasions, especially in the first focus group, participants distanced themselves from Dutch history. Regarding Baldwin: '*I wasn't even born yet', 'But that [fragment] is of course old right?'* and *'I'm not responsible for what my parents did someday in the past. Let alone my distant ancestors. I do understand the history. Am interested in history. But he puts it very black-and-white.'.* Participants also distance themselves from the group of white people that

are ‘actually’ racist. Again: ‘*Not me right?*’ Talking about racism conversations, participant D says ‘*from both sides everyone gets thrown in the same pot. […] That gets me a little antsy*’.

When I ask what the conversation would have been like if Black people or people of colour were present in the room, participant B predicted it would create an us-them divide that would make them (the participant) uncomfortable.

FOCUS GROUP 1

Kolman: But talking about racism (.) it is of course an us-them.

B: YES. Yes. (1) But I would have the same with PVV voters. If it then-

Kolman: Yes. Yes. But back to that discomfort for a moment. Where does that come from? You say because there would suddenly be a ‘they’-

B: Maybe. Maybe not even yet. Or that it’s more nuanced. It’s not black-and-white.

They clearly separate themself from the PVV voter – the real or at least bigger racists. The ones that feel like a ‘they’ to their ‘we’ – the ‘we’ of more innocent white Dutch people. Imagining a white ‘we’ and a ‘they’ existing of racialized others makes them uncomfortable. It does not feel good to be in one pot with outspoken racists and a violent white history. Perhaps also because it does not fit the colourblind ideal that, as described in chapter 2, is part of the Dutch self-image. A call for nuance like this participant makes is also a call for not being part of that big white group. Discomfort arises because (as I discussed before) their self-image does not match the view on whiteness that fills the space in the hypothetical situation.

By bringing up white innocent arguments (or excuses) – separating themselves from the past, or from current-day racism –participants shape the space to fit their bodies again. They are, as one participant strikingly describes, defending themselves – either intentionally or unconsciously. Defending themselves against the discomfort of being confronted with their whiteness and their connection to racism. They shape the space back into a form that fits their innocence. They are escaping their white discomfort. They are re-establishing the whiteness of the space. As Participant F admits, after being accused of racism ‘*you’re almost more occupied with yourself than with the person that accused you’*. And in this process, as Wekker and other Dutch authors observe, white people sometimes make it impossible to discuss racism well – unless someone confronts them and shapes the space back by calling out their tendency to avoid a real critical look at themselves.

The tendency to flee discomfort – which may very well be an unconscious reflex – manifests in more ways. An important way to break discomfort during the conversations is humor. Participants tended to end a vulnerable, serious analysis of themselves with a joke. And on multiple occasions everyone

in the groups gladly joined in for a laugh. Sometimes we laughed a bit louder than the joke justified. Perhaps because a laugh felt (at least to me) like a moment of relief. Laughing is a way to break the tension in the room. To make the atmosphere 'lighter', as Cairo (2021) also notes in her analysis of *gezelligheid*. Laughing created space to breathe again when the mould pressed too close on our bodies. And indeed, like Cairo explained, we restored the *gezelligheid* that we white Dutch people prefer.

A last way for participants to avoid discomfort, or escape discomfort, is changing the subject. One participant in particular (but not solely) was very inclined to switch from talking about our own experiences, responsibilities and discomfort to raising questions on a societal level – or on the actions of the Other. This moved the focus from looking at ourselves to looking at racism from a distance. This, again, created space to breathe. To wiggle around in the chair and shape it to our bodies again. One participant told me afterwards that they were surprised every time I urged the group to focus on ourselves again, because they did not notice the topic had shifted. This implies that there is a natural (often unconscious) urge for (some) white people to seek that space of comfort again, as it is the space that they are used to. This is telling for how normative comfort or *gezelligheid* are to us, how used we are to the comfort of our white innocence.

Before I continue to analyse these tendencies to escape whiteness, it is important to note that in many other instances, participants did not apply these avoiding tactics. They often faced their white privilege and discomfort by taking a critical look at themselves and the rest of the group – making themselves vulnerable by opening up about problematic behaviours, thoughts or insecurities. They were perhaps making steps towards 'working through' and deconstructing their discomfort, as authors like Wekker and Matias request.

Nevertheless, this section showed that there were various instances when we as white Dutch people evaded white discomfort and held on to our white innocence. This firstly echoes my theoretical work on how 'normal' comfort is for the white Dutch person: often when the space becomes uncomfortable for the white ('innocent') body, white people seem to make an effort to reshape the space back to restore their comfort. Secondly, another important part of my theoretical work comes to light here. By escaping white discomfort, white people maintain the whiteness of the space. Would we maybe have made more progress in understanding our own discomfort if we had continued uncomfortable conversations rather than go for a laugh? Would we not have learned more about ourselves if we continuously kept focusing on our *own* behaviour and discomfort? Hence, by avoiding discomfort white Dutch people *can* protect collective structures of whiteness. An emotional investment in comfort is then closely intertwined with an emotional investment in

whiteness: white discomfort, and specifically its manifestations, can indeed play an active role in maintaining whiteness, as I argued in chapter 3.

5.6 In Conclusion

The focus group data offered valuable input for my analysis of white discomfort in the Netherlands. With the help of the affective conceptualisations of white discomfort and whiteness as developed in chapter 3, this chapter identified multiple (intertwined) roots of Dutch white discomfort: 1) the identification of the individual white person with the collective of white Dutch people; 2) a collision of the innocent self-image with the association of this collective with racism; 3) the white person's desire to be good or be perceived as good; 4) the white person's fear to 'say something wrong'. Moreover, by looking at manifestations of white discomfort and white innocence, I observed the tendency of the white Dutch people in the focus group to sometimes escape white discomfort through the performance of white innocence.

These findings echo much of my theoretical conceptualisation of white discomfort as an affect in chapter 3. Most importantly, this analysis showed the connection between the white individual and the historical and collective context of whiteness. While white discomfort mostly manifests on the individual level, this manifestation is sometimes rooted in an identification with the collective. The individual is shaped by collective Dutch myths like colourblindness or the taboo on racism, which I discussed in chapter 2. All these myths, stories and collective history are part of the 'world out of sight' that define the point of whiteness from which white individuals enter a space.

Simultaneously, when white individuals try to escape white discomfort by restoring white innocence in the space that they are in, they do not just prevent a critical investigation of their own privileges and white discomfort; they also help restore and maintain whiteness and the myth of white innocence in that space. Hence, through their individual behaviour as performed while affected by white discomfort, white people help maintain whiteness and therefore problematic racist structures.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

This thesis was an exploration into an additional way to look at white discomfort, specifically to get a better understanding of white discomfort in the Dutch context. After a literature analysis of the Dutch context and theories on white discomfort, I used Sara Ahmed's affect theory to conceptualise white discomfort as an affect. In this understanding, white discomfort is not merely a white individual's emotion. Rather, approaching white discomfort as an affect provides the tools to understand how white discomfort results from the friction between a historically shaped body, that orients into the world from the point of whiteness, and the historically shaped and continuously changing space this body is in. Dutch white innocence is, I argued, a crucial part of this whiteness. In the analysis of my focus groups, this conceptualisation of white discomfort proved a fruitful lens for understanding the participants' answers and actions. I will now present a summary of the findings on white discomfort in the Netherlands, after which I will present the two main conclusions of this research. I will then consider what this implies for the Dutch context, and end with two recommendations for future research.

6.1 Roots of Dutch White Discomfort

During the focus groups, different roots of white discomfort were revealed. The exact cause of white discomfort of course varies per person per time. After all, I believe white discomfort to be shaped between a specific body and space. The following conclusions cannot simply be generalised for all white Dutch people. But they are hints of how white discomfort is shaped in the Netherlands, and how an affective approach can help us understand these mechanisms.

A big part of the participants' answers and actions leads back to 1) white discomfort being rooted in the identification of the individual with the collective of white Dutch people, or simply with the Netherlands as a country. This leads to discomfort when 2) the association between racism and this collective then collides with the innocent self-image. This paints an image of the white person's body, orienting into the space from a point of whiteness that includes the myths of white innocence. This body is comfortable as long as its surrounding accommodates these myths. The white person's body can then sink into the surrounding space like it would in its favourite comfortable chair. However, when issues like racism or colonial violence are raised in relation to either the individual themself or to the collective that they identify with, the space reshapes into forms that no longer accommodate the innocent white body. The white person's body is no longer comfortable in its chair. Rather, it feels like its being pressed into a mould that does not accommodate their body's shape.

The discomfort is then enhanced by 3) the white person's desire to either be good or be perceived as good (most likely, a combination of both). White people are strongly emotionally invested in their positive self-image. Because racism in the Netherlands is framed as a problem of extremist and intentionally racist individuals, the association with racism is experienced as an intense 'accusation'. Being connected to racism is not just any critique, it can feel like being accused of a crime: The pressure of the mould on the body is perceived as very intense.

Lastly, the focus groups also showed that white discomfort in conversations on racism may be rooted in the fear of 'saying something wrong'. (Or: in the feeling that there is no longer any space for white people to ask questions and be critical.) Participants report on feeling hypervisible: as a white person in the anti-racism space, they might easily hurt someone, or be called out after saying something wrong. This, too, is related to the loss of white innocence. I earlier described white innocence to work as a lube for the white body moving through white spaces. It enhances the space for action and makes it easy to reach for objects. However, when racism or colonial history are addressed, the white innocence is easily lost, and this limits the white person in their ability to move through the space.

6.2 Conclusion I: Affect theory and white discomfort

The analysis of my focus group data brings me to my first central conclusion of this thesis: my conceptualisation of white discomfort as an affect can, indeed, offer a valuable additional lens for analysing white discomfort in the Netherlands. Most importantly, it enables an understanding of the relationship between the individual white person's emotions and actions, and historical and collective contexts. The findings in the previous section show how the individual and the collective are intertwined. It turns out that to understand white discomfort, it is crucial to take both the individual and the collective context into account – as I argued in chapter 3. By acknowledging that bodies and spaces are shaped through history, the individual is grounded in a larger context. But simultaneously, affect theory allows for the individual to stay 'alive'. Within a specific context and space, affects influence their behaviour, but their behaviour is not determined. This is important to acknowledge individual responsibility in anti-racism work.

Moreover, the conceptualisation of white discomfort as affect acknowledges that contexts and spaces are continuously changing. The analysis showed that different white individuals might experience or not experience discomfort in similar situations, and discomfort may manifest differently among different persons. By looking at how people's bodies are shaped over time, we can make sense of such varieties. Moreover, white discomfort can – as we know by now – suddenly enter

a space: affective theory can account for this because a space can change shape when someone starts talking about racism or when racisalised people make their entrance.

My conceptualisation of white discomfort is explored through the Dutch context. However, I hope it can be a useful additional theoretical lens for international approaches to white discomfort as well.

6.3 Conclusion II: False Innocence

My second conclusion is that white individuals, through their manifestations and avoidance of white discomfort, protect and maintain problematic collective structures of whiteness. In line with the remarks of Dutch experts like Wekker, and white discomfort scholars like Matias and Applebaum, I too want to emphasise that white discomfort can manifest in harmful ways. During the focus group sessions I observed how people sometimes (although uncionsciously) evade discomfort by manifesting white innocence. People disconnected the colonial past from the present reality, their ancestors from themselves, and they dissociated from today's racism by shifting the focus to extreme-right voters and parties. These are all ways to avoid discomfort: by removing themselves from the problem of racism, white (Dutch) people can re-establish their white innocent and sit back in their comfortable chair from where it feels safer to observe and discuss racism. They regain the space for action (and space to breathe). My literature analysis in chapter 2 and 3 showed that escaping white discomfort can also present in more aggressive ways than simple denial: white people sometimes get angry, violent, or cry white tears.

These conclusions on the workings of white innocence align with Chapter 2's context analysis of whiteness in the Netherlands. I explained that whiteness in the Netherlands refers to both a) how whiteness is historically shaped and therefore how white privilege is maintained b) the myths of white innocence that are inherent to whiteness in the Netherlands. The above findings show that white Dutch people tend to be invested in the structures of white innocence. If these structures (and thereby, their self-image) are under threat, white discomfort can manifest in ways to protect these structures – to move back to their comfortable place. These performances of emotional investment (anger, white tears, denial), however, also protect (or restore) the whiteness of the space. If white innocence is restored, it becomes impossible to truly address the problems of whiteness and to reshape the white world. This influence goes further than simply disrupting one conversation – as the changes to the space could have been small but long-term. In other words: in line with my analysis of Mills in chapter 3, individual's investment in white innocence, and the resulting manifestations of white discomfort, are harmful as they uphold racist structures of whiteness.

6.4 Implications for the Netherlands

So what does my understanding of white discomfort imply for the Dutch context – where white discomfort regularly is harmful? At first, I would like to address the question of individual responsibility. Although I showed that white discomfort is rooted in bodies and spaces that are shaped historically and collectively, it is still individual Dutch white people that experience these feelings and that make choices in how they move through spaces and perform actions. One of the challenges of the analysis in this thesis, was the risk of creating an image of white people as victims of white discomfort, thereby absolving them of responsibility for their actions. This was, for example, a challenge when discussing how the white (presumed innocent) body was pressed into a mould that it did not fit – a mould with sharp edges even. This image easily creates sympathy for the white person: who would not get defensive or angry in such a highly uncomfortable situation?

However, I argue that this image says more about the over-sensitivity of white people than about the actual violence they experience in such moments. Discomfort in an inherently unpleasant experience. However, white people still have the responsibility to reflect and realise that this discomfort is nothing compared to the pain and discomfort often experienced by Black people and people of colour in white spaces. As Ijeoma Oluo once wrote: 'Our humanity is worth a little discomfort, it's actually worth a lot of discomfort' (Oluo, 2018, p.155). Approaching white discomfort as a historically contextualised and collective problem, does not take away individual responsibility. My affective approach allows me to see how both levels are relevant. Even if responses like fleeing from discomfort may be unconscious reactions, white people have a responsibility to hold themselves, and each other accountable.

This raises the question of what *working through* discomfort may look like. This research did not equip me with the opportunity to give a step-by-step guide – I merely made an attempt at understanding white discomfort better. However, there are some insights that might be useful. First of all, white discomfort in itself is not a problem. In fact, if white discomfort is shaped in the friction of white bodies with stories and ideas that deny white innocence, white discomfort is indeed a sign that whiteness is challenged – as Essed (in Papaikonomou, 2020 March 20) already implied. Moreover, if white discomfort is related to white people wanting to be good people, committed to anti-racism, this too is a good sign. After all, it seems only reasonable that the knowledge of having white privilege and profiting from centuries of colonial violence makes white people uncomfortable. A complete lack of discomfort could even result in white smugness: when white individuals' believe

that they are already aware of racism, and therefore no longer investigate their own role in racist structures (Keskinen, 2020).

For the individual, *working through* white discomfort may then simply look like undergoing the discomfort that comes with acquiring knowledge on racism, and doing anti-racism work. It means staying seated in the chair, even if it is uncomfortable. Matias' call for white people to deconstruct and inquire their own discomfort may offer a helpful tool – like it was for me and the other participants in the focus groups. This is necessary to break down the myths of white innocence regarding the self and the collective they are part of – which will then, eventually, lead to less discomfort (when the self-image and shape of the body no longer strongly collides with the anti-racist space). And it will allow for spaces to become less white: without continuous resistance of white people, stories of white privilege as well as Black bodies and bodies of colour get a chance to fill up the space and leave their imprints.

However, the education and effort of white individuals is not sufficient. White discomfort may often manifest on the individual level, it does not merely concern the invidual's behaviour. As I have shown in this conclusion so far: Firstly, the individual's behaviour is rooted in (but not determined by) historical and collectively shaped contexts of whiteness. Moreover, very importantly: by evading white discomfort, white individuals protect and maintain collective structures of whiteness. Working through discomfort is therefore not a challenge of millions of white Dutch individuals, but a collective problem that requires collective action. Collaboration and government policy is required.

6.5 Limitations of this research

I tried to present a rich research, but it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this dissertation, especially of a half thesis written in COVID-times. Firstly, as I discussed in my methodology, the participants of the focus groups are not representative of the Dutch population. Intentionally, and in line with the research, they were all self-identified progressive white people. Through circumstances, there was an over-presentation of theoretically educated participants, and (due to COVID) there were no participants from the bigger cities in the West of the Netherlands, which might be relevant as the populations in these cities differs in terms of racial demography. Lastly, I made the conscious choice to not include Black people and people of colour in my focus group. Being a white researcher myself, this undoubtly limits the perspectives on white discomfort that are presented in this research.

6.6 Suggestions for future research

Following from that is my first suggestion for future research. I already addressed this in section 4.3. Since the presence of Black people and people of colour will significantly influence the shape of the space – it might be valuable to repeat the research with mixed groups. It is likely that this will offer more opportunity to observe signs of white discomfort. Moreover, it will be interesting to hear the impressions that Black people and people of colour have of white discomfort, since they are likely to have witnessed it often (and might be more aware of it than white participants themselves).

A second suggestion follows from the findings in this thesis. Now I showed how an affective approach to white discomfort can help in understanding the relation between individuals' actions and emotions and collective and historical structures – it would be good to further explore how whiteness is collectively shaped. More specifically, how white discomfort is actively deployed as a technique by Dutch institutions like the government to maintain whiteness. In a country where it took the King until 2020 to apologise for excessive colonial violence in Indonesia (NOS, 2020 March 15), where the government had to step down last year because 'ethnic profiling' by the national tax agency had harmed tens of thousands of people but refused to call it racism (Radio 1, 2020 December 17) (and where the same prime minister is back in function), and where the 'Golden Age' is still compulsory teaching material for many pupils (RTL Nieuws, 2020 June 12) – more attention for government policy is necessary. Hook's conceptualisation of whiteness as an affective technology (Hook, 2005) could be helpful, in combination with this thesis' conceptualisation of white discomfort, to explore how white discomfort is part of governmental logic.

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APPENDIX A

Age	Gender	Level of education	Class (self-identified)
50	Man	MBO	Middle class
27	Woman	University	Upper class
34	Man	University	Middle class
64	Man	University	Middle class
31	Woman	University	Middle class
58	Woman	Secondary school	Middle class
28	Man	University	Middle class
60	Vrouw	University	Upper class
27	Non-binary	University	Working class
60	Man	University	Middle class
35	Man	University	Upper class

Overview of participants' age, gender, level of education, and class.

APPENDIX B - Focus group set-up

11.00 Welcome everyone – sign consent forms, provide drinks and snacks

11.15 Sit down

- Introduce ourselves
- Collectively formulate goal of the gathering
- My introduction: emphasise I want to get their point of view, people can always leave, I'm always available for conversations afterwards, anonymous so don't 'gossip' about today
- Can always leave, but it's okay (and logical) to be a little uncomfortable
- Free to share personal experiences, but it's your choice (you don't *need* to do anything)
- Set rules of engagement

11.25 Video of BLM Netherlands

- What are the first feelings we experience when watching this? Where do these feelings come from?

11.35 Video of James Baldwin

- What are the first feelings we experience when watching this? Where do these feelings come from?

11.50 Talk about discomfort

- Do people recognise this in relation to race and colonial history?
- How would they define it?
- If I say: 'the Netherlands is a racist state'. How does that feel?
- Have you ever been accused of racism? Confronted with your own whiteness? If so, how did that feel?
- How would this conversation have been if a POC was here right now? If differently: Why?
- Give Ahmed's description of discomfort. Do they recognise this feeling? Ask the question: if we suddenly don't 'sink into' the chair when we talk about racism, what changes?
- My point: we tend to regard emotions as individual, psychological. But I think it is rooted in our surrounding, history, beliefs. What are these when it comes to discomfort?
- If it doesn't come up: bring up my theory about white innocence

12.15 Talk about manifestations of discomfort

- From what we discussed so far: is it a bad thing that we experience discomfort?
- Give some theory: how it is potentially problematic when people respond angry, withdraw from conversations, etc. Give a list of DiAngelo's fragile responses. Do we recognise ourselves in these?
- Some authors say white people should work *through* discomfort. How do you feel about that? What would this look like?

12.30 Closing

- Ask all to write down something they take from this session, so they can remember it.

12.35 End: Typhoon's spoken word video: 'Be brave in your discomfort'

- End recording. Still space for people to hang around, have snacks, talk.

Additional questions to possibly use during the session:

- Point out when people show signs of discomfort. Ask them if they want to share where this discomfort comes from?

Appendix C

Table of transcription conventions by Rapley (in Liamputtong, 2015, p.170)

Descriptive text	(( ))
Indicates emphasis	Underline
Decreased volume	° °
Short pauze	(.)
Falling intonation	↓ word
Rising intonation	↑ word
Faster relative speech	<word>
Deleted utterances or speaker turns	…