Workings of whiteness: interview with Vron Ware

Bolette B. Blaagaard*

Centre for Law, Justice and Journalism, City University London, London, UK

In this edited interview, Vron Ware talks honestly about the political inspiration and personal engagement that flows through her entire body of work. From *Beyond the Pale* (1992) which introduced a new and challenging approach to the intersecting discussions on feminism and anti-racism, to *Out of Whiteness* (2001) which was written with sociologist Les Back and critiqued what the field of critical whiteness studies had become, to Ware's latest work on Britishness (*Who Cares about Britishness?* 2007) and the British military (forthcoming). Ware's political, feminist and anti-racist engagement not only keeps her alert and attuned to the undercurrent of racist attitudes in multicultural Britain, but also informs her methodology and her approach to doing research and to thinking through conversations with colleagues all over the world.

Keywords: Vron Ware; US and European whiteness; nationalism; anti-racism; women; methodology

Beyond the Pale [BTP] was one of the path-breaking publications asking questions about whiteness, femininity and power in colonial as well as contemporary times. What context did this work emerge from in terms of politics and academic traditions?

I was working on a magazine monitoring the Far Right from 1977 to 1983, and it was clear from their propaganda they were using very crude images of white women and black men to claim that immigrants were more likely to terrorize, to rob, and to rape. This made me curious as to why that combination of figures – the predatory black male and the white female victim – had such a strong hold on people's imaginations. So then I started to do historical research to find examples of how particular radicalized fears of rape and sexual assault had emerged in colonial settings – not necessarily all the time but during periods of crisis or political tension. I discovered, for example, that in Papua New Guinea the colonial administration passed something called the White Women's Protection Ordinance in 1926 just at the point where people were beginning to organize for political participation. Another example was when the British public was persuaded to support brutal repression in India after the 1857 National Uprising as a result of graphic reports, rumors and images showing the rape and killing of English women and children.

You could see it in fiction too, both in film and in literature, where writers like E.M. Forster and J.M. Coetzee used fear of rape as a device to expose the violence underpinning colonial society. In the 1980s there seemed to be a surge of films set in

*Email: bolette.blaagaard.1@city.ac.uk

the Raj or in colonial Africa, and this was a constant theme. So that was one context for BTP, following a trail back through colonial history to find out how gendered forms of whiteness had been articulated in relation to blackness, when and where these radicalized and gendered constructs were mobilized politically, and challenged as well.

But there was another whole set of images of white femininity that seemed to express quite different ideas about race and culture. I remember, for example, when Princess Diana was a young bride she went to Saudi Arabia and sat in a tent with the wives of the sheiks. Photos of that encounter were very striking; although they pointed to the clichéd contrast between this glamorous English woman and her veiled Arab counterparts, the conversation that reportedly took place was all about shopping in Harrods. But the juxtaposition opened up another strand of colonial history in which the figure of the white woman exemplified the superiority of Western Christian civilization, because she was independent, she was liberated, she could wear what she liked and she could vote, and so on and so forth.

So, different constructions of white femininity were jumping out at me, and it was exciting to trace the source of their power in colonial history once I started to look. But the information wasn't always there in the history books – it also required digging around and rethinking conventional accounts. It was part of a feminist critique of the way that history had been written without addressing gender. But at the same time I wanted to show how a gender perspective was inadequate on its own.

But the point of the book was to address what was going on at the time, rather than just deal with history. In the late 1970s there was a significant anti-racist movement in the UK, and I was involved in a women's group where we rather struggled to find the links between racism and sexism. There was very little material on gender and racism at that time, and almost nothing on the concept of whiteness. Most of the writing on feminism and anti-racism came out of parallel debates between feminists in the States. The work of writers like bell hooks and Angela Davis was influential in the UK, but in both countries questions of race and racism were assumed to be the preserve of black women. At that time, in England, if you tried to write about race and you weren't black, identity politics demanded that you confessed your own racism first, 'as-a-white-woman'. But there was also an argument that white women were absolved from the history of racism and imperialism because they were also victims of patriarchal power, along with black people.

I found the poet Adrienne Rich really helpful, especially her essay 'Disloyal to Civilization' when she introduced the concept of female racism. It seemed to me to be a useful, provocative idea that 'yes, women have been complicit with racism' that was unusual in that period. But it wasn't just that. It was exciting to learn about the role American women had played in the abolition of slavery, and to find out that feminism had grown out of the struggle for emancipation. The idea that women who took a stand against slavery and segregation were in effect being disloyal to a civilization based on white supremacy... So I became interested in thinking about questions of agency, accountability and complicity in the context of British feminist politics, going back to the anti-slavery movement to find out how that played out there.

So going back to your question about where BTP came from in terms of both politics and academic traditions, it was absolutely rooted in the transatlantic history of race and gender. But there are such big differences between the US and the UK

that it has often been hard to use the same arguments in both places. The first time I gave a lecture on BTP in the US it was very much addressed to a contemporary feminist politics and, of course, it had a strong historical component. When I finished, Donna Haraway was in the audience – this was in Santa Cruz – and she put her hand up and asked: 'When did English women first think of themselves as white?' It was a deceptively simple question but I was completely thrown because it spoke more about the history of racial categories in America than the discursive way in which the English had historically named themselves as 'white'. The whole notion of racial hierarchy as a scientific discourse was devised in Europe where the concept of whiteness was aligned with European imperial power. In 1992, when the book came out, there was very little work done on what we now call 'the making of whiteness' either there in the US (apart from David Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness*) or in the UK. Haraway's question stayed with me, and of course it was a failure on my part to really spell out what I meant, but at the same time it was a moment when the difference between the US and Britain was really apparent. Since then there has been some fantastic work done on whiteness in the context of the US that looks exactly at that how the category changed over time: What did 'white' mean in that period? Who was 'white' and who wasn't? When did the Italians become 'white', or the Irish? And so on. But that doesn't necessarily work in the European context. Although the term 'European' is commonly used – as it is in the US too – to imply whiteness. This is something else that has begun to be challenged more systematically.

So how does whiteness look in the European context if these US categories don't suffice?

Well, I would say first that 'looking for whiteness' anywhere is never going to be the most productive approach. In fact, starting with 'whiteness' as something already defined and findable is likely to be misleading as it suggests an essentialism that's not useful. It's easy to be critical of the methodological nationalism of much US-based work in this area, but the best examples have illuminated the archaeological, ethnographic or theoretical labor involved in analyzing racial hierarchies in different locations. For example, I have found John Hartigan Jr's formulation of the concept of 'racial situations' to be tremendously helpful. It starts from the question: 'when and how do people make sense of racial categories in particular situations? What repertoires of meaning do they draw on, and why?' Now he was exploring these questions in the context of Detroit, but we can apply them anywhere and see where they lead. I have also found Matt Frye Jacobson's work invaluable as he has provided a model for thinking historically about whiteness as a category of belonging, of being fit for citizenship. It's not so much about what whiteness means in US history that is applicable elsewhere, it's the model of careful analysis within a specified framework – in this case, the national polity.

This is hard work, and we have to think carefully what it is we are looking for. Roger Hewitt has tried to define whiteness in a way that works in different countries. He agrees whiteness is usefully conceived through the historicized and gendered notion of citizenship, whether this is achieved through the status of settlers or natives. Whiteness does not necessarily arise from a conception of the ethnic majority or the dominant ethnicity, he suggests, but is 'augmented with the idea of 'born to

rule' or 'standard by which all others are judged' or 'grid through which all things should be perceived'. Actually he was writing about the different approaches needed to research the effects of the immigration of Eastern Europeans – classed as 'white' – into countries like the UK where anti-immigrant discourse has been articulated in racist terms, and the immigrant assumed to be dark-skinned. And it's not as though all those who resent the new migrants – or the asylum seekers for that matter – can be classified as 'white' either. Since individual European countries have different patterns of economic migration, different understandings of multiculturalism, and so on, it does not make sense to have a fixed blueprint for identifying whiteness – if that makes sense.

From Beyond the Pale *to* Out of Whiteness *and your last book,* Who Cares about Britishness, *and thinking of them in terms of your career trajectory from a reporter on an anti-fascist paper, researcher of critical whiteness studies and to your work on nationalism and anti-fascism. How do you see this route – are you returning to anti-fascism and nationalism?*

Well first, I never thought of myself as doing something called 'Critical Whiteness Studies'. In fact I remember where I was when I first heard the term and how my heart sank. I had always approached whiteness as a relational category, part of a system of meaning about race, class and gender rather than something to be studied on its own. It was fundamentally a political project too, about taking responsibility for something that is happening in your name.

So *Out of Whiteness* was written to engage with the work on whiteness being done in the US, some of which took a very conservative turn in the mid 1990s. Les Back [co-author of *Out of Whiteness*] and I realized that we were quite alarmed by this development, so we decided to write something to clarify our own positions, and to go into questions of methodology and epistemology in more detail and depth. We developed a lot of our ideas through talking to each other over a period of five years or so. It was wonderful to work with someone who had come through a different route as a social anthropologist, and who also writes about music which has been such an important aspect of anti-racism. After this book I often felt quite reluctant to be drawn back into writing about whiteness itself – it can end up being too vague and abstracted.

One of our main critiques was that most of the literature was centered on the analysis of racism in the US as if the rest of the world did not have these problems and as if the US did not have a relationship with the rest of the world. It's been really productive to link up with people in other countries who are doing similar work on racism and white supremacy, and to have more of a global conversation about what it might mean to analyze whiteness in different countries.

But what was your question? About returning to anti-fascism and nationalism in my current work . . . well, the connecting themes have been pretty much the same. I lived in the US for six years, returning to London on the day after the bombings in 2005. New Labour's project to define Britishness was just getting going, and the backlash against multiculturalism was really underway. The question of national identity had become a contentious area again and I had always been interested in those struggles to open up what it meant to be British or English for that matter. Right now I

am studying the British Army's recruitment of non-UK nationals – which came out of a project on postcolonial Britishness I did with the British Council – and it's giving me a different perspective on nationalism. But I have to say, this is also an area where war, racism, nationalism, postcolonialism and globalization are all mixed up. For one thing, it helps to know about the history of the British Army in relation to empire-building and colonial rule in order to understand the way it operates today. It also brings you to the heart of social welfare and citizenship. One of the things I am trying to do is to find a network of people in Europe who are working on different aspects of this. If we, for instance, look at the figure of the 'soldier' it raises all sorts of questions about entitlement, what it means to fight and kill for your (or anyone else's) country.

What commonalities do you see between the research analyzing whiteness and the research developing the issues of nationalism in a European context? Do they overlap, perhaps?

One of the touchstones of nationalism and national identity within Europe is the memory of the Second World War. Now that we are moving out of the living memory of the conflict, it is acquiring new strands of mythic status as revisionists get to work. I cannot speak about other European countries in detail, but I can tell you for example that the British National Party, which managed to get a member elected to the European Parliament this summer, has recently turned to this past to prove their credentials as loyal Brits under siege from foreigners. In their party political broadcast, shown on national TV, they do not use the language of black and white (even though membership of black and minority ethnic people is banned). The legality of the ban has been questioned and the BNP has been forced to allow all ethnic groups to become members of the party. They present themselves as admirers of Winston Churchill, and take pride from the defeat of Nazism (even though the BNP is known to have a neo-Nazi lineage). But what I found most striking was their footage of British war memorials, and their claim that only those who were descended from those who risked their lives in that war had a right to belong to the UK and enjoy the fruits of citizenship. As the camera pans down the names of English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish casualties, the narrator effectively excludes all those who came from elsewhere. There is no need then to use racial terms – like the old 'rights for whites' – as the point is made in more subtle ways. Of course there is no reference to Britain's colonial army fighting on many fronts around the world. It's a deliberate distortion of history, and it relies on grossly over-simplified accounts of British military prowess and civilian bravery derived from six decades of mis-remembering what actually happened.

One of the stimulating effects of discussing these things in a European setting is the way that differences and commonalities reveal overlapping trends. We can learn so much from each other, as long as we understand that our histories overlap but are not in any way identical.

How have you managed to combine the political projects of feminism and anti-racism, an academic approach to research, and your training as a journalist, particularly in relation to issues of whiteness and national identity?

I think I have managed to avoid any kind of formal training – I started working at *Searchlight*, the anti-fascist paper, as a volunteer because I wanted to be a journalist. Since then I've done various other jobs, including six years in a feminist NGO working on urban planning and design. In 1992 I managed to get an academic post, and have taught geography, sociology and women's studies in London and the US.

Now I have a research fellowship which is allowing me to draw on all these experiences. I like the element of investigation and tracking people down to interview them. But I am finding ethnographic work quite challenging because you have to be very focused. Cynthia Enloe gave me the best advice – she has been an inspiration to me, both because of what she writes and the way she works. When I asked her how I should go about this project, she said: 'Vron, you have to feel your way'. She basically reassured me that there was no prescription telling you how to do it. You start with a hunch and a motivation and then you follow it. Officially, I am interviewing recruits from Commonwealth countries, but how to use this material in order to write something that is not just descriptive and anodyne – that will be the hard part.

The temptation is to think that there is a proper way of doing interviews. I also asked Roger Hewitt for advice, as he has done a lot of ethnographic studies of racism. I was wondering if I was making the most of the situation and going about my interviews in the 'right' way. His advice was similar to Cynthia's: to 'be yourself', to 'follow your nose'. I think the most important aspect of ethnographic work is to be attentive to details and make the most of all your encounters, not just the ones with the people you are supposed to be interviewing. I think that might be more relevant to journalism though, as I find myself thinking about how to tell stories, bring issues to light, rather than collect 'data sets'.

Once I dropped in on a group of recruits who were practicing for a night firing exercise. While I was waiting for them a young officer came over to chat to me. He told me a bit about targets and techniques and so on, and then he said: 'we do find that people from Antigua and other Caribbean islands, they usually fail the first time. We have to spend a lot of time with them'. When I asked him why he thought that was, he said: 'Well, they blink a lot. And they move around and they can't focus. They don't listen to instructions'. Now this was really useful information, on many levels, but I wasn't actually interviewing him, we were just chatting. At that point he didn't know why I was there. When I told him he seemed put out that I wasn't interviewing the white British soldiers. If I had asked him outright about racism or about what he thought about the non-British recruits, I doubt he would have been so open.

I try to spend a lot of time hanging around. But I am learning a lot from simply listening to people – listening to how they talk. I feel like I am learning about these deep, deep racist attitudes across the country, but it's also fascinating to observe how racism, sexism and homophobia are being dealt with institutionally.

What does this approach bring to your work? Could you have written Beyond the Pale *and* Who cares about Britishness? *in a classic sociological approach?*

I organized a seminar where two speakers spoke about their research on white middle class families who chose to move their children to schools that were ethnically mixed and had a multicultural ethos. Both presentations were sociological and based

on ethnographic research. It was interesting to see what was useful in that approach. But in order to have a real conversation, you had to sort of jump off the ethnographical data and engage politically with some quite difficult questions. Neither of the speakers felt comfortable talking about whiteness as a political category or how that might be constructed. Or about the relationship between a certain white, class, circumscribed identity and the material circumstances of people's lives. They hadn't asked those kinds of questions, but had gone around it by thinking about 'cultural capital'.

We didn't really get near half the questions the research posed. For instance, several people in the audience asked 'what do you mean by "mixed"?' There is a sociological answer which is technical, and which defined a 'mixed' school as having a significant enrollment of black and white pupils. But it leaves no room for thinking about the demographic group of people who have a black parent and a white parent and who might think of themselves as 'mixed'. So we came up against the limits of that kind of research that has proper research questions and findings but doesn't tell you much that you didn't already know or suspect. It simply maps out something and put it in different language. It doesn't challenge racism. To make real political change (and here I am using the theme of the seminar as an example) it might be more effective to work on either a particular school or engage more with how divisive the education system has been.

In terms of moving between being an academic and journalist... they present different opportunities, I suppose. In the academic world there is an envy that journalists are in a position to write a lot and reach an instant audience. And among journalists there's mistrust towards academics, because they use long words and talk in abstractions. I think the main thing is not to sacrifice complexity in favor of making things simplistic, easy to understand. *Who Cares about Britishness?* was specifically commissioned as a non-academic book, so I didn't use footnotes or engage with theoretical work to any great extent. But I wrote it with an academic teaching agenda in mind. There are lots of short pieces that I felt were illustrative of theoretical or conceptual issues.

The two things I consider to be really important in both professions are curiosity, having an open mind, and alertness – or attentiveness – in terms of being open to things going on around you, like visual imagery, conversations in public spaces, newspaper headlines. Sometimes I have picked up, for instance, a magazine on the train or in a waiting room – something I wouldn't normally see – and encountered material that could be used to illustrate something. This sounds like a fairly random use of artifacts and encounters, but that is what I mean about alertness – being open to what is happening around us in the present. It's important to have curiosity to go further – to see who, and when, and where. That is really how I try to work, I suppose.

So where is it going now? Where do you see these studies going – studies of Postcolonial Europe and Critical Whiteness Studies?

In Europe we are talking about the majority white population, who – broadly speaking – draw on similar sets of resources in terms of thinking about what it means to be white (and European). Again, though, the very different colonial pasts need to

be taken into account. So, Austria didn't actually have its own colonies in Africa but had a colonial relationship to countries in south-eastern Europe, in the former Austro-Hungarian empire. I think there needs to be more transnational conversations about the historical memory of colonialism, looking at that particular question of how different countries' colonial pasts are being re-visited, reworked, forgotten etc.

Each country has a different relationship to its own colonial history; patterns of racism in the current period – questions of immigration controls, persecution of minorities, attitudes to Islam – all this needs to be analyzed within national contexts without losing sight of how Europe itself is constituted. It's taken for granted that our national identities – English, Welsh, German, Dutch, French – are assumed to be 'white' unless specified otherwise. We've seen how the idea of irreconcilable differences between Christian and Muslim cultures conveys deep-seated beliefs about the boundaries of European national identities – and how questions of gender and sexuality are central to that. Although there have been important battles in each country to assert the presence of black and ethnic minority citizens, they are invariably referred to as first, second or third generation immigrants, or allochthonous, or gastarbeiters.

'British' is more inclusive, partly because people have fought to make it so, but also because the term British did actually apply to colonized people too. It's astonishing that so many people forget that and don't take account of what 'British' might mean outside the UK, however, residual or nostalgic even. They have forgotten the 1948 British Nationality Act that gave British citizenship to everyone living in British colonies as well as the UK. But people still call themselves Black British or Asian British just to make it clear.

In the UK there has been a worrying focus on the white working class as a victim of the country's immigration policies. This needs a strong and clear analysis in response. For one thing it makes it seem as though this is a homogenous group, as well as a racialized one. Their class and race-based resentment is constantly represented as a rational, understandable response to decades of unfairness.

This is really divisive. It allows immigrants to be seen as the source of many social problems, particularly poverty and unemployment. The emphasis on whiteness, and the notion of being 'native' or 'indigenous' people is really alarming. Rather than try to change the terms of this discourse the government keeps repeating that it is important to listen, and to be fair. They can use this to justify greater and greater regulation of immigration and asylum policy as a result.

I think a discussion around the idea of the fear of white decline would be a productive way to go, particularly in this economic climate. It is certainly relevant in the US, Australia and Canada too. There's an urgent transnational conversation to be had there. It is imperative to think from different countries, from different national and regional locations. Since most of the literature on whiteness and white racism is from the US, it is not necessarily translatable. But we can take the best of it and then think it through from these different places as we develop our own work. It is really important to talk and to make other ways of connecting, making alliances as scholars and feminists and being open to learning from each other.

Vron Ware's bibliography:

Dr. Vron Ware is a research fellow at the Open University, London. She has done groundbreaking work on racism, (post)colonialism, feminism and whiteness published in books such as *Beyond the Pale. White Women, Racism and History* (2002, London and New York, NY: Verso Books), *Out of Whiteness. Color, Politics, and Culture* (with Les Back) (2002, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press) and *Who Cares about Britishness? A Global View of the National Identity Debate* (2007, London: Arcadia Books). She sums up her research interests as race and gender, whiteness, history and politics of antiracism, transnational feminism, postcolonialism, British/English national identity, Islamophobia, feminism in the Muslim-majority world, communicative citizenship, intercultural dialogue, cultural diplomacy, life-writing, landscape, place, social ecology, urban/rural divide, heritage. Her latest research explores the relations between militarism, nationalism and whiteness.