



condemned to death *in absentia* for his collaboration with the Nazis during World War II. Obviously, it would have been cause for grave concern if Joris had *not* trashed my book.

A few weeks later, the Flemish daily *De Standaard* published an article by Gie van den Berghe, a historian and ethical philosopher who has written extensively on the Judeocide during World War II and whom no one can accuse of having sympathy with radical and racist Flemish-nationalists like Joris. The article was an abbreviated version of a lecture that Van den Berghe recently gave on a conference called '*Racism, democracy's last taboo*' and in it he wrote: '*To deny that you see a black person as black – and a white person as white – is absurd*'.

While Van den Berghe rejects that the one human race is subdivided into different races, he takes it for granted that humans can differ in terms of their somatic type and that these differences can easily and objectively be observed. This may seem commonsensical knowledge for most Flemings. But as an academic in general and an anthropologist, it is part of my task to question so-called commonsensical knowledge.

### The Magical Power of Words

The title of this lecture is an allusion to a famous poem by the Flemish poet Paul van Ostaijen that I will not even try to translate here. The title roughly translates as *Marc greeting things in the morning*. It's a very visual poem about a little boy greeting the things that he sees. But by naming objects and people, the toddler is also marking his territory. He is not only exploring the little world in which he lives, but controlling it and dominating it, making it *his*, as the last words of the poem make clear: *dag klein visselijn mijn* – hello little fish of mine.

Saint John's assertion that in the beginning was the word and the word was with God, derives from the book Genesis in which God creates the world by assigning names: '*and God called the light Day and the darkness he called Night* (Genesis 1.5). By naming things, God makes His creation His.<sup>1</sup> God subsequently delegates the power of name-giving to the humans He creates who crown His creation: '*And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto the man to see what he would call them: and whatsoever the man called every living creature that was the name thereof*' (Genesis 2, 19-20). In the Bible, to name is to control and to domesticate: naming establishes a relationship of power between the one who names and the person or thing named.

There is nothing particularly Judaic or Christian about this. Ancient Romans used the expression '*nomen est omen*': a name is one's destiny. The English expression '*naming and shaming*' equally points to the fact that words act upon the world. This magical power of words explains how wishes, prayer and spells work. Spells are especially powerful because unlike prayers and wishes, they can literally bring about the very events they describe.

Goethe's *Faust* famously challenges the Biblical assumption:

*'Tis written: "In the beginning was the Word!"  
Here now I'm balked! Who'll put me in accord?  
It is impossible, the Word so high to prize,  
I must translate it otherwise  
If I am rightly by the Spirit taught.  
'Tis written: In the beginning was the Thought!  
Consider well that line, the first you see,  
That your pen may not write too hastily!  
Is it then Thought that works, creative, hour by hour?  
Thus should it stand: In the beginning was the Power!*

*Geschrieben steht: ???Im Anfang war das Wort!"  
Hier stock' ich schon! Wer hilft mir weiter fort?  
Ich kann das Wort so hoch unmöglich schätzen,  
Ich muss es anders übersetzen,  
Wenn ich vom Geiste recht erleuchtet bin.  
Geschrieben steht: Im Anfang war der Sinn.  
Bedenke wohl die erste Zeile,  
Dass deine Feder sich nicht übereile!  
Ist es der Sinn, der alles wirkt und schafft?  
Es sollte stehn: Im Anfang war die Kraft!*

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<sup>1</sup> It does not seem insignificant that Marc greets/names things in the morning, i.e. when it is light.

*Yet even while I write this word, I falter,  
For something warns me, this too I shall alter.  
The Spirit's helping me! I see now what I need  
And write assured: In the beginning was the Deed!*

*Doch, auch indem ich dieses niederschreibe,  
Schon warnt mich was, dass ich dabei nicht bleibe.  
Mir hilft der Geist! Auf einmal seh' ich Rat  
Und schreibe getrost: Im Anfang war die Tat!*

Faust stands for the archetypal Modern man who, by dint of his ceaseless striving, creates himself and his world by an act of sheer will. But even if he reverses the order between words and action, he leaves intact the intimate connections that are thought to exist between words, thoughts, power and action. If Modern man (and I use the term "man" here deliberately) challenges the assumption that he was created by God, he continues to reserve for himself the right to create, name and control others. The exploration and colonisation of overseas territories and of contemporary readings of the relationship between Prospero and Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* can serve as an example. Prospero is shipwrecked upon an island which a witch ruled by her magic until Prospero usurped it. He subsequently enslaves her son, Caliban, to whom he refers as *'This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine'* (5:1: 275-276). Shakespeare describes Caliban as a *'savage and deformed slave'* and whereas seventeenth- and eighteenth-century interpretations emphasised the "deformed" and nineteenth and early twentieth-century interpretations focused on "savage", for the past fifty years the emphasis has been overwhelmingly on the word "slave" instead (Vaughan & Mason Vaughan 1991: 278; cf. Brown 1997). As such, the relationship between Prospero and Caliban is now routinely described as one between an oppressing coloniser and an oppressed "native". Prospero and Miranda teach Prospero their own language as a disciplinary measure so that they can use him in their own cultural context (<http://english.edgewood.edu/330ds04/disc7/00000106.htm>). But it is a Trojan horse that allows Prospero to turn the tables upon them: *'You taught me language; and my profit on't is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you for learning me your language'* (1:2:365-367)!

The following words by the anthropologist S.J. Tambiah, taken from an article on the relations between words and ritual, are therefore pertinent when we think of Modern western man:

*'There is a sense in which it is true to say that language is outside us and given to us as part of our cultural and historical heritage; at the same time language is within us, it moves us and we generate it as active agents. Since words exist and are in a sense agents in themselves which establish connexions and relations between both man and man, and man and the world, and are capable of 'acting' upon them, they are one of the most realistic representations we have of the concept of force which is either not directly observable or is a metaphysical notion which we find necessary to use'* (Tambiah 1968: 184).

Toddlers are notoriously autocratic: they do not negotiate, they demand and are apt to throw tantrums when thwarted. Ethnic groups as far a-field as Inuit in the Canadian Arctic and Fulani in Western Africa agree that this is so because they have no sense yet. This being the case, one cannot reason with them. It follows that one should accommodate them as much as possible. Jean Briggs (1970) describes numerous incidents in which Inuit informants approach her apologetically to inform her that a little boy or girl have set their eyes on one of her belongings and that they therefore must have it. Riesman reports how Fulani, too, insist upon giving in to toddlers' every wish if possible and alternatively trying to distract them, but never explicitly denying them anything.

Considering that we have the expression, "the terrible twos", I am struck by the similarities between these tyrannical toddlers (or toddling tyrants?) who go about marking and appropriating the world around them with no or little regards for the feelings of others involved, because they have no sense, according to Inuit and Fulani, and those Modern men who go about conquering the world and subjugating all those living there to their will, on account of what they themselves consider their superior rationality - and by extension, those men who think that they know who is and whom they can call "black".

## **Colonial Trajectories**

Contrary to what Joris and Van den Berghe suggest, "black" and "white" do not refer to an outer reality which we can easily observe objectively but have a history of which we must remain conscious and a trajectory, which we must try to retrace. The word "Moor",

from Mauritania, referred originally to inhabitants of Northwest Africa (what are now Northern Algeria and Morocco). During the Middle Ages, the term became synonymous with “Negro”. We know that in Elizabethan times, “Moor” could refer as much to inhabitants from North as from South of the Sahara. Or, to put it differently: from an Elizabethan prospective, the current Secretary-General of the UNO, the Ghanaian Kofi Annan was a “Moor”, but so, too, was his predecessor, the Egyptian Boutros Boutros-Ghali. Bearing this in mind, I do not hold with those who insist that only a “black” man can play Othello. It is not that I am opposed to updating the play; rather, I think that having a “white” person in blackface play Othello can remind us that Othello was *made* a “Moor” by his contemporaries, with everything that entailed as regards stereotypes.

As obvious as it seems to us that the average Irish as very pale, often freckled skin, reddish hair and blue eyes, as obvious it was to English and WASPs during much of the nineteenth century that they were swarthy, like gypsies, “blacks” and, by extension, apes. Indeed, the only thing that often allows one to see who is “black” and who is Irish in Victorian cartoons are the captions. To this day, and strange though it may seem to Belgians who have ever watched the baritone Bryn Terfel or a Welsh rugby team at work, not quite a few English still routinely describe Welsh as small and swarthy Celts - hobbits!

In the Belgian Congo and in Rwanda-Urundi, Greeks and Portuguese were not “real whites”, pygmies and Tutsi were not “black” and the term “Arab” could as well refer to inhabitants of the Arab Peninsula as to Muslims from Central and East-Africa – something of which the Muslims who protest against the Congo-monument in Brussels may or may not be aware. The only “real” “blacks” were “Sudan negroes” or “Bantu negroes”.<sup>2</sup>

How many Belgians now that the first president of Congo, Joseph Kasavubu, had Chinese forebears? A well-known Congo expert who shall remain nameless was visibly surprised when I told him that Mobutu’s second wife was of “mixed” descent. Apparently, he had never noticed the difference between her and “real blacks”. One woman whom I interviewed as part of my research on Euraficans during the colonial era, who has Angolan, Congolese, Belgian, French, Greek and Portuguese forebears, was piqued that Belgians are so stupid that they call her “black”; cannot they see that she is *métisse*? The answer is “no”: nowadays, the average Belgian classifies everyone who hails from South of the Sahara as “black” and like Evelyn Waugh in *Scoop* (1943), ridicules those who reject that label.

And yet, in Africa as elsewhere, social identity is no based on biological facts or physical traits but on social conventions. According to the Talmud, the mother establishes the Jewishness of the child. In a similar vein, children born from liaisons between “white” men and “black” women in slave and colonial societies derived their social identities and “race” from their mothers, not their fathers. Only legal action (marriage to the mother, recognition or adoption of the child) could create a social bond between the father and his child, but it could not undo the “racial” differences that were supposed to divide them. Contrary to what many may assume, it is not the case that the offspring of a “mixed” “white”/“black” couple looks “brown”. Some look “white”, with pale skin, blond hair and green eyes, others are routinely mistaken for “Arabs” or originating from Northern Africa. For all we know, Othello, too, was of “mixed descent”!

### **Does White stand to Non-Colour as Black stands to Colour?**

In our postcolonial societies, we continue to classify individuals of “mixed” descent with their “black” rather than “white” parents or forbears. The very use of the concept “white” contributes to this. Etymologically, “white” is derived from a Proto-Indo-European term which means “bright”, and which is related to shining and light. The Dutch word *zwart* and the English *swarthy* have the same Proto-Germanic origins. “Black” can be traced to the Proto-Indian-European term meaning “burn”, “gleam”. Interestingly, the same root produced the Old English “blac”, “white, bright”, from which “bleach” is derived, the common notion being “lack of hue”. In old

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<sup>2</sup> Many ex-colonials who hold on to the old colonial myth that “Bantu” refers not only to a language group but also to a “race”, are convinced that the former president, Mobutu was a “real black” and therefore taken aback when told that he belonged to the roughly 20% of all Congolese who speak a non-Bantu language as their native tongue.

English, it is not always easy to know whether “blac” meant “black, dark” or “pale, colourless”. From this perspective, burning and bleaching are not opposites but lie on a continuum: the transformative powers of the sun scorch as much as they bleach.

“Optically, neither “black” nor “white” are colours: “white” is composed of separate, primary and homogeneous colours, while “black” is an absence of light. With the advent of colonialism, Europeans seem to have rejected the Newtonian insight that white is a composite and redefined it as a non-colour, as neutral (a meaning which is also conveyed by “blank” in either Dutch or English or the French “*blanc*” in the sense of a void), while insisting that black is a colour ([www.etymologyonline.com](http://www.etymologyonline.com)). The idea that different “races” had different types of blood which could be diluted through mixing, probably accounts for this. The confusion between black as a non-colour and blood as a red liquid explains why in humans, “black” was considered such a strong colour that “one-drop-of-black-blood” could permanently taint those who were “white” and as such, colourless. This explains why those of “mixed descent” are seen as “coloured” and “black” rather than “white” even if they are genetically as much related to their “white” as to their “black” parent.

It takes as few as three or four generations before offspring of “mixed” couples can be classified unhesitatingly as “black” or “white”. In 1810, “black” residents accounted for about 30 percent of the population of Buenos Aires. By 1887, their numbers had plummeted to 1.8 percent. Popular myth has offered two historical hypotheses: a yellow fever epidemic in 1871 that devastated “black” urban neighbourhoods, and a brutal war with Paraguay in the 1860s that put many “black” Argentines on the front lines. A recent analysis of DNA samples suggests that most “black” Argentines did not vanish, but faded into the “mixed-race” populace and became lost to demography. Some ten percent of Buenos Aires residents are partly descended from “black” Argentines but have no idea (*The Washington Post* of 5 May 2005).

To most of us it may appear obvious that most inhabitants of Buenos Aires call themselves “white” even if at least ten percent of them have “black” ancestors, because they look “white” to us. But anyone who employs the American logic of the “one drop of black blood” according to which everyone with “black” forebears is “black” even if they look “white”, may be tempted to perceive “Negroid” traits in many of Buenos Aires’ “white” inhabitants, in much the same way that some think they can discern Jews by their hooked noses and Celts by their small stature and swarthy appearance.

Discolouring or colouring people is never a neutral act. Calling someone “black” or “white” is always a political act, whether in ascribing those terms to others or to oneself. Obviously, Argentineans have the right to call themselves “white”, like Africans and Afro-Americans have the right to call themselves “black”. It is precisely because humans have the right to choose their own identity that it is dangerous to claim that one can establish, simply by looking, who is “black” and who is “white”. It is possible that many Belgians will describe within a single family the father as “white”, the mother as “black” and their children as “white”, “black” and “brown”. But it is very possible that the parents and children themselves will reject any identity based upon the colour of their skin because they want to stress what unites them as a family rather than what sets them apart somatically.

## **Stumbling Blocks**

And this brings me back to contested colonial heritage. I systematically bracket terms like “black” and “white” in much the same way and for very much the same reason that the German artist Gunter Demnig uses *Stolpersteine* (stumbling blocks). Demnig sets the blocks, which are really brass plaques with the names of the victims of the Holocaust engraved on them in the pavement in front of houses where they used to live, to commemorate all the victims of the Holocaust, including gays, gypsies, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Jews and political opponents ([www.stolpersteine.com](http://www.stolpersteine.com)). The plaques cause passers-by to stand still and reflect. In a similar way, bracketing terms like “black” and “white” forces readers to break up the flow of the reading act. The act reminds readers that these words are not neutral.

In 1999, during the conference *Belgium’s Africa: Assessing the Belgian Legacy in and on Africa*, I participated in a discussion on the future of the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren. The immediate reaction of the anthropologist Jean Rahier (2003) was that

he was so outraged by the exhibition that he thought it better to simply tear the museum down. My response to this was that this would simply risk obliterating one of the few *lieux de mémoires* (Nora 1997) that is still very much in the Belgian, public eye and that it would seem better to try to integrate a contextualisation within its set up.

In 1370, according to the legend, Holy Communion wafers in the gothic cathedral of Saint Michael and Saint Gudula in the centre of Brussels began to bleed after being stabbed with daggers by the Jews of Brabant at their Brussels synagogue. The Jewish community of Brussels was accused of and punished for this profanation of the Holy Sacrament. The remains of the hosts were venerated for centuries as the Miraculous Sacrament (*Sacrament van Mirakel*) in the cathedral. The relic of the Miraculous Sacrament played a significant role as a national symbol for the Catholic identity of the country. Charles V and the Habsburg family donated the 16<sup>th</sup> century stained glass windows of the chapel of the Miraculous Sacrament. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Archdukes Albert and Isabella enriched the chapel with numerous gifts and were buried in front of the altar of the Miraculous Sacrament. The first two Belgian king, Leopold I and his son Leopold II, offered two stained glass windows. Although the relic lost its national significance after 1870, the local devotion to the Miraculous Sacrament survived up to the Second World War. During all that time, the stained glass windows, paintings and tapestries kept the alleged history of the “blood libel” alive. In 1977, Cardinal L.J. Suenens inaugurated a bronze plaque to show that the Catholic Church now distances itself from the Medieval hatred of Jews (Dequeker 2000; [http://www.cathedralemichel.be/eng/cult\\_archi\\_miracle.php?lang=eng](http://www.cathedralemichel.be/eng/cult_archi_miracle.php?lang=eng)). This can be interpreted as a stumbling stone that leaves the historical monuments intact while acknowledging their deeply disturbing nature.

It is painful to watch those beautiful historical art treasures that inspired these infamous accusations. But it would be even more painful to destroy them since it would risk obfuscating the scandalous events that created them. If we were to destroy all the testimonies to hatred of Judaism and anti-Semitism, we would play in the hands of those anti-Semites who deny their historical existence and significance. The plaque transforms monuments of Catholic triumphalism into monuments of penance. It may be insufficient but it is still a beautiful gesture, to acknowledge Europe’s “longest hatred” (Wistrich 1991).

I think that we would do well to treat Belgian immaterial and material colonial heritage in a similar way. The origins of the term “negroes”/“niggers”, “black” and “white” owe as much to the colonial past as the monuments erected for Leopold II and the Congo pioneers. In fact, the same can be said for the seemingly neutral term African as in “African woman”. For, as Ali Mazrui (1986) reminds us, we routinely differentiate between the continent “Africa”, which includes the regions north and south of the Sahara and the cultural and/or “racial” entity “Africa” which we restrict to Sub-Saharan Africa. As such, most of us will immediately equate an African wo/man with a “black” one, irrespective of the ways in which inhabitants from sub-Saharan African identify themselves.

However, using too many stumbling stones risks turning a walking or reading route into a hurdle race and distracts from the original purpose. We should not deny, forget or neutralise Belgium’s material and immaterial colonial heritage anymore than we should do with its history of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism. But neither should we destroy or wall it in as it were. Instead, we can little stumble blocks to remind and pay tribute to those who were subject to colonial violence in its various physical, psychological and social aspects.

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P.S. An abbreviated version of this lecture was published in weekend edition of *De Standaard* of 26 November. As far as I know, it was the first article on the opinion papers, written by an occasional contributor, accompanied by a photograph of the author (taken, on a previous occasion, by a photographer employed by the newspaper), apparently to draw attention to the fact that a "coloured" person questions usage of terms like "black" and "white". The editors did not publish my reaction, which can be read on [www.avrug.be](http://www.avrug.be).