



Search

[Netherlands](#) > [Social Sciences](#) > [Philomena Essed](#)

PHILOMENA ESSED



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Biography References Quoted publications

Engaged in academia as well as in advising, policymaking and rights' defence, Philomena Essed is one of the most prominent Afro-Dutch contemporary intellectuals. Her reputation, in the Netherlands as well as abroad, is based on her introduction and elaboration of the notions of "everyday racism" and "gendered racism" in her first book *Alledaags racisme* (1984), her second book *Understanding Everyday Racism* (1991) and in the studies and compendiums that she subsequently published on issues of identity and discrimination. Essed was born in the Netherlands in 1955 from Surinamese parents. Her father was the well-known paediatrician Max Essed. She credits her mother for her inspiring commitment to social justice. Essed travelled extensively between the two countries

during her childhood, until settling down on a stable basis in the city of Nijmegen at the age of fourteen. In 1974 she moved to Amsterdam and thus continued her studies in the Netherlands, completing her MA in Social Anthropology in 1983 and her doctoral thesis in Social Sciences in 1990 (cum laude), at the University of Amsterdam. She and her eldest brother Gerard, gynaecologist, would become the two university professors in the family. The beginning of the intellectual career of Essed mainly took place at the Centre for Race and Ethnic Studies (1985-1991) of the same university, which was until its closure in 1991 – an important reference point for critical studies on identity, race and ethnicity in the Dutch context. Essed continued to work at the University of Amsterdam in the area of Development Studies. Since 2005 she is a full professor in Critical Race, Gender and Leadership Studies at the Antioch University, PhD Program in Leadership and Change in the United States, while still holding research and social commitments in Europe, in particular as deputy member of the [Dutch Equal Treatment Commission \(CGB\)](#).

From the very beginning, the intellectual journey of Essed has been characterized by her capacity to bring to light crucial cultural and social phenomena, going straight to the heart of the most controversial issues. This was the case with racism – and especially its denial – in Dutch society to which, at very beginning of her career, Essed dedicated an essay that has been later acknowledged as one of the most influential Dutch feminist texts as an eye opener on the implicit racism that can take place, unacknowledged, within the feminist movement itself (Essed 1982).

At the beginning of the 1980s, Essed completed an extensive ethnographic study based on interviews with Black women living in the Netherlands and in the United States. During the interviews, they were asked to discuss their experiences as women of colour and moments in which, from their own point of view, they had been exposed to discrimination. In both countries, Black women reported to be repeatedly accused of stealing, cheating and laziness, and to be

seen as easily approachable sexual objects. They felt undervalued in their intellectual capacities. In the Netherlands, in particular, women said to feel continuously exposed to negative discourses about minorities and that, when protesting, they were generally accused of oversensitivity (Essed, 2004b). Such occurrences constitute what Essed defined as “everyday racism”. This is manifest in the experience of Black women living an “everyday life in a White-dominated society [which] involves a continual battle against the denial of racism, against Whitecentrism, against automatic in-group preference among Whites, against constant impediments to their aspirations, against humiliations, against petty harassment, and against denigration of their cultures” (Essed, 1991, p.10). Taking fully into account the standpoint of these women, the book *Alledaags racism* brought to public attention a bottom-up perspective on the construction of race-based discrimination in contemporary societies. In so doing, it originally suggested that those who are directly confronted with and recognise racism in their personal lives are the most competent in describing how this works and how it affects their lives in society at large. The relevance of the perspective of Black people for a general understanding of race based oppression is explained by Essed who states that: “Blacks are familiar with dominant group interpretations of reality. With their sense of history, through communication about racism within the Black community, and by testing their own experiences in daily life, Black people can develop [a] profound and often sophisticated knowledge about the reproduction of racism. These qualities make Black definitions of racism interesting as an object for academic inquiry” (Essed, cit., p.1-2). Essed’s work had an immediate and strong reaction within the Dutch public debate. Appreciated by activists, social workers and NGOs, it was instead virulently opposed by the media and Dutch academia (Prins, 2000). Intellectuals criticised the understanding of Essed of racism and her standpoint on the significance of accounts from individual Black

people. In general, they dismissed the relevance of racism in Dutch society at the time. In fact, most of these intellectuals seemed to share the belief that Black people tended to experience “as racist” what actually was not so, and to exaggerate the meaning of particular episodes which did not have forcefully to do with people’s skin colour.

On the other hand, this denial of racism expressed by media and scholars revealed the general reluctance to acknowledge the discriminatory side of Dutch people’s attitudes, as far as this was in contrast with the dominant representation, at that time, of the Netherlands as a tolerant and moderate country – as the ideal place for multiculturalism to develop. Racism was commonly portrayed as something which did not concern the Netherlands, but rather countries like the United States, Great Britain, South Africa and so forth. In this sense, Philomena Essed, unveiling hidden and yet frequent instances of racist discrimination, was posing under threat such an optimistic view. Moreover, she was also describing the specific character of Dutch racism, pointing the finger to the connection with the colonial past and to the superior mindset which typifies it.

The vivid reaction to her work, pushed Essed to translate her book into English with the title *Everyday racism: Reports from women of two cultures* (1990). It also reinforced her motivation to conduct a second, larger study of everyday racism, this time involving only Black women with a college degree or higher. She wanted to challenge the myth that discrimination was a function of low education. This more methodologically and theoretically driven study was *Understanding Everyday Racism: An interdisciplinary theory and analysis of the experiences of black women* (1991). It became a classical, still on curricula today. Essed’s methodology, allowing the researcher to access emotionally charged experiences has been discussed at great length in the book *New Racism*, by Norma Romm (2010). During the 1990s, Essed has gradually expanded her thinking, beyond racism, to a wider conception of social injustice grounded in a multi-dimensional understanding of identity and the analysis of

intertwining systems of domination, for instance in the publication *Contradictory Positions, Ambivalent Perceptions: A Case Study of a Black Woman Entrepreneur* (1994). Her production of these years, such as *Diversity: Gender, color and culture* (1996), *Race, gender and academic leadership* (1997), and *Ethnicity and diversity in Dutch academia* (1999) reveals also a strong interest in the dynamics of academic knowledge production and in how the dismissal of existing discrimination has an influence on that.

In the beginning of the new millennium she started to live and work both in the United States and the Netherlands, combining her position as senior researcher at the University of Amsterdam (1993-2005), with the one as visiting professor at the University of California – Irvine (2001-2005) and, more recently, her full professorship at Antioch University (since 2005) with her affiliation with the Graduate Gender Programme of Utrecht University (since 2006).

From the year 2000 on, Philomena Essed intensified her contribution to a new scholarship made by several international thinkers working together in the perspective of critical race theory, feminist theory and postcolonial studies, towards an ethnic and gender inclusive idea of Black Europe and of social justice. It is along this line of thought, that one may see her latest publications, such as: *Social justice and dignity* (2010), *Intolerable humiliations* (2009), *An ABC on people of Afro-descent in Europe* (2008), and *Gendered normativities in racialized spaces: Cloning the physician* (2005b). The same character is expressed in the high number of edited volumes she has published in recent years, such as: *Race critical theories* (2002, with David Theo Goldberg), *Refugees and the transformation of societies* (2004a, with Georg Frerks and Joke Schrijvers), *A companion to gender studies* (2005a, with David Theo Goldberg and Audrey Kobayashi), *Clones, Fakes and Posthumans: Cultures of Representation* (with Gabriele Schwab – in press with Rodopi) and finally *Dutch Racism* (a volume in progress with Isabel Hoving). By now, her work is known in a range of

countries – including the US, Canada, South Africa, Sweden, Finland, Russia, the UK, Switzerland, Brazil, and Australia – and many of her publications written in Dutch or English have been translated into French, German, Italian, Swedish and Portuguese.

In addition to her academic work, the career of Philomena Essed is marked by a vivid engagement in policy and justice oriented actions of governmental and non-governmental organizations, nationally and internationally, on issues of ethnic and gender equity. Some of the organisations for which she has served as a member or advisor are: the Dutch institute **E-quality: Experts in gender and ethnicity** (1997/8), the Dutch national *Temporary expert commission for women's emancipation* (1998-2001), and the Dutch *Selection commission of members of the judiciary* (SRM, 2003-2010). As an expert on race, gender and racism in Europe, Essed had the honour of addressing national and international governing bodies including *The European parliament* (Brussels, 1984); *The United Nations economic and social council* (New York, 2001); *The House of Representatives of the States-General* (The Hague, 2004); and the *United States Helsinki commission, commission on security and cooperation in Europe* (Capitol Hill – Washington, 2008).

Finally, among the most recent acknowledgments of her contribution to intellectual and social advancement, it is important to mention that in the year 2011 she has received a Knighthood from Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands, and a PhD *honoris causa* from the University of Pretoria – South Africa.

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