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Zwarte Piet:

The Dutch Preference of Fantasy over Friends

The Christmas season and its equivalents will be starting soon for many countries around the world, with some having started already. The Netherlands is especially enthusiastic with its celebrations of “Sinterklaasavond” (“St. Nicholas’s Eve”), with some towns being decorated by early-to-mid November, and parades of Sinterklaas and his helpers striding down the streets to fun, festive music. Not all are merry this season, though. A point of contention in the Netherlands is the helpers of Sinterklaas, who are called “Zwarte Piet(en)” (literally “Black Pete[s]”), and how these helpers are portrayed. There is no other way to put it: the helpers are white people in blackface, minstrel clothes, creole earrings, and black, curly wigs – an image reminiscent of “the popular minstrel shows and vaudeville acts that dominated the nineteenth-century American stage” (Raboteau 146). This makes many immigrants and native black Dutch people uncomfortable. There are many others that love Zwarte Piet and argue that Piet’s depiction is purely innocent with no intent of racism behind it and the desire to keep the character unchanged is from wanting children to enjoy the season the same way they themselves enjoyed it (Hilhorst and Hermes 223-224). Those that are pro-Zwarte Piet (herein called Pro-Pieten) also argue that Zwarte Piet’s portrayal is not supposed to be black face, but rather that his color is due to soot getting on his face from climbing down chimneys to deliver presents. What is needed for the country (and is being avoided) is an honest dialog on how the caricature Zwarte Piet is harmful to both white and non-white communities.

The exact year of Piet’s origin is unknown, but the modern depiction of him as the worker/servant of Sinterklaas originated from the 1850 Dutch children’s book, *Saint Nicholas and His Servant*, by Jan Schenkman (Raboteau, 144), wherein Piet would harshly punish children that misbehaved. Before the release of Schenkman’s book, however, Zwarte Piet’s depiction was even more sinister: a personification of “a tamed Satan” (144), parallel to the origins of many other Christmas figures in nearby countries (144-145). Nowadays Piet does not punish children, but rather tries to cheer up children whilst keeping track of who has behaved and who has not (145). This shift in Zwarte Piet’s personality has not deterred people from criticizing Zwarte Piet though. The most iconic of these criticisms was when an activist, Quinsy Gario, was forcefully arrested for wearing a shirt that read “Zwarte Piet is Racisme” to a Sinterklaas parade. These criticisms have led to several proposed changes to the character. In 2006, several Dutch TV executives made Zwarte Piet rainbow-colored instead, resulting in scathing responses from much of their audience (153). In 2013, the UN released a report asking the Netherlands to change or get rid of Zwarte Piet, due to the damage it could do. In response, about two million (about 1/8 of the Netherlands’ total population) Pro-Pieten joined the “Pietitie” (“Pete-tition”), a pro-Zwarte Piet Facebook group that has been quite vocal about its position. In recent years, more accepted alternative looks have arisen, with people of many skin colors now taking part: one look is to just not paint the faces of the Pieten and to get rid of the wigs and earrings, while another is to spatter a bit of fake soot on the Piet’s face, again with the wig and earrings absent. Today, these two alternatives, especially the latter, have become quite prevalent in the more populous western municipalities of the Netherlands while eastern municipalities have been more sporadic in adopting these adjustments (Coenders and Chauvin 1252). These changes seem to be what will stick with Zwarte Piet’s image.

On the surface, there is clear good intent behind the Netherlands’ semi-final decision, but it does not address the mindset that allowed for Zwarte Piet to flourish. The Netherlands never had a civil rights movement, a wake-up call for those in power to hear the voices of those that are negatively affected by their traditions and policies. There have been many reports from black Dutch citizens of bullying, harassment, and social isolation. Perez Jong Loy, a black Dutch man, tells of his 7-year-old self being surrounded by bullies on his first day of school on the Dutch mainland (Raboteau 154); the bullies repeatedly called Jong Loy “Zwarte Piet” to provoke him (154). Jong Loy tells of how old Dutch women would rub his “face with spit to see if the color would come off” when he was a child. (154) Over 50 years later, whenever Jong Loy goes into small towns, “little children at the height of [his] knees look at [him] with terror and unbelievable panic, like [he is] a monster. They point at [him], trembling, and say ‘Mama, look, it’s Zwarte Piet!’ The parents don’t correct them.” (154) It is this lack of a correction of any kind that is a problem. A young child should not necessarily be punished or ridiculed for saying something racially insensitive (especially if they have lived away from anyone with a skin color different from their own) because they perhaps did not even know that people could have a skin color different from their own, especially if all they have been exposed to is someone like Zwarte Piet. The adults, however, do know that actual people have different skin colors than their child’s; they should know (or at least be able to realize) that to be compared to a caricature like Zwarte Piet based off a trait they were born with can be dehumanizing.

Many Pro-Pieten insist that race plays no part in their decision to support Zwarte Piet, but rather a desire to stick to tradition, which may be true for some; what is undeniable is a sense of opposition to “otherness” being prevalent amongst them, which in turn can lead to very racist attitudes developing. If a black person audibly objects to Zwarte Piet, they can expect Pietitie members and other more vitriolic Pro-Pieten to say things such as “if the [Z]warte [P]iet haters do not like our culture, they can just go back to [A]frica right, [sic] couldnt [sic] be simpler” (Hilhorst and Hermes 226), “let’s tie a rock around his neck and throw him in the ocean,” or “let’s find a high enough branch to lynch that n\*\*\*\*r. Get him a ticket back to Africa” (Raboteau 152). (These two latter comments were in response to Quinsy Gario’s peaceful protest.) There are comments, however, of those in the Pietitie praising black people that voice support of Zwarte Piet (226). There are also very negative comments in the Pietitie that bring immigrants from Islamic countries into the conversation, despite there being very few vocal Muslim opponents of Zwarte Piet (Hilhorst and Hermes 225). The “other’s” actual viewpoint on Zwarte Piet is seemingly irrelevant to many Pro-Pieten. If the “other” becomes too different to what “true” Dutch people consider Dutch tradition, they may be assumed to have other beliefs that go against Dutch tradition. Tradition is not an argument to keep a practice though. Not letting black people and white women vote was tradition in the United States for around as long as Zwarte Piet has been around. Tradition begets stagnation.

Pro-Pieten are not without their points though. Many of them claim that most black Dutch people do not mind the traditional depiction of Piet; this follows the results of an opinion poll conducted in 2014, wherein only 27% of black Dutch people residing in Amsterdam found Zwarte Piet to be “discriminatory” (Raboteau 152-153). While the controversy surrounding Zwarte Piet is not as serious, keep in mind that most African-Americans did not actively participate in the American Civil Rights Movement (153). “People struggling to pay rent and feed their kids see the protest against Zwarte Piet as a struggle for intellectuals”, says Tjin-Bromet (152). Zwarte Piet is not an immediate, glaring issue to them, but it could be a factor in their struggles that distract from Zwarte Piet. A study from 2012 found that “Dutch Caribbean and Surinamese immigrants were significantly less likely to be invited for a job interview compared to native Dutch candidates even though professional qualifications were similar” (Hayes et al. 22), which is exacerbated by how “experiences with racial discrimination have been proposed to lower bonds with … societal institutions that have generally been found to decrease [criminal activity], such as the educational system and labor market” (21). These two issues stifle financial and societal growth for both immigrants and native Dutch citizens (a large majority of black native Dutch people are of Caribbean and Surinamese descent;) economic and social opportunities would then be reduced for themselves and future generations. It is a vicious cycle that a caricature like Zwarte Piet helps perpetuate. It is up for debate how much Piet helps perpetuate it, but it certainly does help.

Plenty of pro-Zwarte Piet people will say that children cannot be racist because they are too pure, and to put race into the equation ruins the holiday for the kids; this misses the point that it is not the kids who have an ingrained attachment to Piet being a caricature of a black person, it is the adults. Whether Piet is kept the same or altered will not affect white Dutch children’s enjoyment of the holiday, but it will certainly improve the holiday for at least some black Dutch children, which makes it worth it. Some may also cite a research article by Judi Mesman et al. wherein for the first (and so far, only) time a test was conducted to see if Zwarte Piet influenced a child’s perception of black people. Mesman’s findings were that the younger a child is, the less likely the child was to categorize Zwarte Piet with a black person based on race (Mesman et al. 7-8), and children significantly more often categorized Piet with clowns (12). This study has several flaws though: only 201 children were tested (1), of whom were overall quite homogenous in age and background (3), the test had only four choices for the children to apply associations to (white person, black person, clown, Piet) (4), and this test on whether children make certain associations lacked an Implicit Association Test, so checking if the children’s decisions really are their own is more unclear (12). The study isn’t inherently bad, but a more comprehensive, widespread test needs to be conducted before any conclusions can be drawn.

The Netherlands prides itself on being loving and accepting of those that would normally be less accepted in many other countries (i.e. anyone in the LGBT+ community), but the Zwarte Piet situation shows that for many, that is simply a façade. If the Dutch wish to come off as a bastion of tolerance and love to the outside world, the populace needs to understand what is wrong with Zwarte Piet, and how the celebration will not effectively change if Piet is altered, aside from no longer being incredibly insulting/dangerous to a portion of both the native and immigrant populations. A dialog on how harmful the character is to many needs to be had, else the Netherlands will never be that bastion they strive to be. This is not a call to end Dutch culture; this is a call to evolve it.

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