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ENC 1102.007

Dec. 4, 2019

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 happy to see these parades 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’s no other real way to put it, the helpers are white people in blackface donning 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) that makes many immigrants and native black Dutch people uncomfortable. There are many others that love Zwarte Piet, that 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 also argue that Zwarte Piet’s portrayal isn’t supposed to be black face, but rather that he is the color he is due to soot getting on his face from climbing down chimneys to deliver presents.

Zwarte Piet may not be a new character in the Dutch Sinterklaas celebrations, but he certainly was not there from the beginning. 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). Piet would punish children that misbehaved by beating them with a stick, stuffing them in a sack, and bringing them to Spain, where Sinterklaas lived. Before the release of Schenkman’s book, however, Zwarte Piet’s depiction was 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 which being when an activist, Quinsy Gario, was forcefully arrested for wearing a shirt that read “Zwarte Piet is Racisme” to a Sinterklaas parade. These criticisms has led to several proposed changes to the character. In 2006, several Dutch TV executives made the Zwarte Piet rainbow-colored instead, resulting in scathing responses from much of their audience (153). 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 most recent changes seem to be how Zwarte Piet will inevitably end.

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. ~~There are many Dutch people that view(ed) Zwarte Piet’s depiction as totally acceptable, irrespective of the stories and opinions of black people in their communities.~~ Many Pro-Zwarte Piet people have the mindset “to be unable to recognize racism is not a flaw… but rather a mark of purity.” (Hilhorst and Hermes, 224)

Those in the Pro-Zwarte Piet camp are not without their points though

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