

Never Having Been Racist: Explaining the Blackness of Blackface in the Netherlands

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I can only say that my friends in the Dutch Antilles are very happy when they celebrate Sinterklaas, because they don't have to paint their faces. When I have to play Black Pete, I'm then busy for days getting the paint off my face.

—Mark Rutte, prime minister of the Netherlands, press conference before the Nuclear Security Summit in The Hague with Barack Obama, 2014

As with most fairytales children get acquainted with, there comes a point in time when they find out about its fictional nature. They may also be told about the allegoric properties of the story and the characters it depicts. In the Netherlands, kids around the age of seven are typically informed that Sinterklaas—who, like Santa Claus, arrives in the country every year to bring children gifts—is not “real.” Later on in their lives, they learn the more scholarly cosmogony according to which the imaginary character evolved out of older representations of the Catholic patron St. Nicholas of Myra. However, while children

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are told Sinterklaas is made up, nothing is ever said about the historical provenance of Sinterklaas's helpers—his “Black Petes.” As a result, Dutch kids grow up to become adults without ever having had the chance to come to terms with Black Pete's ontology, leaving their emotional investment in the figure untouched (Wekker 2016: 220).

Although the blackface character has been decried since at least the mid-twentieth century for stereotyping black people through its appearance and character traits (Helsloot 2005), such criticism was met with derision for decades. Serious consideration to abandon the figure surfaced nationally only after 2012, as charges that “Black Pete is racism” began to circulate more widely and gained international echo (Coenders and Chauvin 2017; Helsloot 2012). In response to the intensified challenge, defenders of the tradition have insisted that Black Pete is an innocent figure and sought to preserve the blackface character in the country's Sinterklaas celebration.¹ They have not only denied that the figure is a racist representation but have aimed to outright disassociate it from race itself. Indeed, in the Netherlands as in other Western European countries, defensive assertions of “non-racism” (Bonnet 2014) are typically predicated on the claim that race does not exist and is therefore irrelevant (Essed and Hoving 2014; Lentin 2008; Weiner 2014). In the currently dominant narrative about the festival, Black Pete's blackness—even when depicted with brown face paint—is due not to genetics but to Pete getting covered in soot as he descends the nation's chimneys to bring children presents (Rodenberg and Wagenaar 2016). The chimney narrative nevertheless has a harder time explaining Pete's nappy black wig, puffy red lips, and, since at least the 1960s, his occasional mock Afro-Caribbean accent.

The growing resonance of voices claiming that Black Pete is a racist caricature inherited from colonial times has left mainstream cultural producers in a quandary, as the latter see themselves as having to cater to opposing audiences. This essay focuses on the widely popular children's television program *Sinterklaasjournaal*, which runs daily from early November until December 5 each year, chronicling the adventures of Sinterklaas and his Black Petes as they set sail from Spain toward the Netherlands to bring gifts to Dutch children in their homes and schools. Based on an analysis of narrative changes in the program's 2014 and 2015

1. The mythology's child-appropriate innocence has made some progress since the 1950s, as the more menacing aspects of Black Petes—they used to put ill-behaving kids in bags and beat them with sticks—gradually disappeared to only leave in place Pete's foolish joyfulness. Although this shift could have seemed to reflect evolutions in real-world race relations, it mostly stems from a liberal shift in Dutch educational values over the past half century.

seasons, we show how the accusation of racism has led to the development of new storylines to safeguard the tradition's innocence and joyful nature (Smith 2014). However, these new tropes have aggravated instability in the main Sinterklaas narrative. Just as an everyday lie about to be discovered requires further lies to hide it, rescuing Black Pete has involved retelling and complicating the chimney story, which had been available in some form for decades together with racial explanations, so as to make it hold together as a set of stable and "nonracist" truths.

The Real Life of Stories

The credibility of the tradition's present racial innocence has been predicated on the claim that the Sinterklaas mythology has never been racist in the past, for the simple reason that it was never about race altogether. Yet, the politics of narrative change in the *Sinterklaasjournaal* at once hides and betrays Black Pete's racial blackness, which the chimney story has never managed to completely obliterate. The ambiguity was already palpable in the 1982 British documentary *We're Doing It for the Children*, when the interviewer asked white Dutch kids dressed up as Black Petes why they were brown. "Because we go through the chimney," some responded, confirming the mainstream narrative. One added, "And we come from Spain and lie in the sun all day. That makes you very brown." When the reporter asked where Black Petes come from, a boy speaking in unmistakably working-class Amsterdam vernacular answered, "They were his [Sinterklaas's] slaves, but not anymore." Until recently, different stories about Black Pete were thus able to coexist quite unproblematically, despite their mutual incompatibility and internal contradictions. But over the past several years, political critique within the Dutch public sphere has markedly raised the bar for narrative consistency. Indeed, anti-racist contestation has generated more demanding criteria for the story to qualify as harmless and disconnect its genealogy from colonial history: in an increasingly disputed narrative field, it takes more and more work never to have been racist.

Although interpretive ambiguity can enable mainstream stories to resonate widely and thus maintain their hegemonic status (Polletta 2006), the presence of counternarratives can turn that same ambiguity into a liability. As the Dutch case makes clear, nonhegemonic stories—such as that encapsulated in the "Black Pete is racism" slogan—can threaten the dominant narrative, not through replacement but by making its inconsistencies more salient and awkward. In response to the threat of subversion, further codification then tends to congeal narrative *doxa* into

narrative orthodoxy (Bourdieu 1990). In so doing, it ironically subjects discourse to a higher level of logical scrutiny, thereby making it more vulnerable to critique. When things get sore and truth comes to matter, what was once mere bullshit may suddenly come out as an outright lie (Barstow 2017; Frankfurt 2005). Recent narrative work in the *Sinterklaasjournaal* exemplifies the challenges that mainstream storytellers encounter once a crisis has turned previously benign narrative diversity into embarrassing contradictions within and between stories.

In this essay, we do not attempt to artificially “reconstruct the narratives that give meaning to the Sinterklaas tradition” (Rodenberg and Wagenaar 2016: 717). First, far from being stable and semantically self-enclosed, real stories circulate, compete, and interact within narrative fields that are themselves not insulated from extranarrative forces, thereby calling for relational analysis (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 224–35). Second, instead of arguing that some stories are hegemonic because other stories are simply too complicated or insufficiently resonant with the public’s cultural frameworks, as narrative analysis in the social sciences typically does, this essay introduces a deconstructive approach that apprehends the perception of consistency as an effect of power.

In the following sections, we veer away from the traditional question of why dominant stories dominate by bringing attention to the narrative work that guardians of popular stories must carry out to cope with the presence of emerging alternative accounts. By looking at recent transformations in the mainstream Sinterklaas narrative, we follow the process that sees various actors work at making changes in the main story to maintain its consistency in the face of critique, meanwhile creating new contradictions and challenges that inevitably require further narrative work. In contrast to reconstructionist approaches, we suggest that the appropriate paradigm to effectively capture the dialectics of real-life narrative change is less that of propositional logic than that of everyday lying, and that narrative analysis thus benefits from conceiving of itself as mytho-analysis.

The Sad Truth about Unhappiness

The Sinterklaas festival is an annual celebration of Dutchness and since 2015 has pride of place in the National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage. In Sara Ahmed’s terms, the festival can be described as a “happy object.” Contact with such predefined objects is presumed to elicit happiness, a feeling that is everybody’s own responsibility to experience (Ahmed 2012). The Sinterklaas holiday is imagined to provide all the Dutch with joy—at least those who are truly members of the nation. The supposed togetherness of everyone celebrating with everyone

turns all, including the Dutch nation itself, into potential happy objects for one another (Coenders and Chauvin 2017).

In the Netherlands, the norm not to spoil the happiness of others is often embedded in the injunction to “keep it *gezellig*” (Breedveld 2014). This adjective refers to a feeling rule inviting group members not to turn their backs on moments of convivial togetherness. Achieving a state of *gezelligheid* is thought of as something distinctively Dutch, adding a layer of patriotic exclusivity to the feeling of happiness. As a result, making the Sinterklaas celebration *ongezellig* or less *gezellig* is an act of national profanation eliciting violent reactions of censorship from the happy public that question the national belonging and racial loyalty of critics (Balkenhol, Mepschen, and Duyvendak 2016).

Antiracist critique is most definitely *ongezellig*. Racism, by definition, is not Dutch (Van Reekum 2014), following a logic of cultural aphasia that makes it impossible to incorporate the history of slavery and ethnoracial inequality within the narrative of a nation and a continent that imagine themselves as innocent, even benevolent (Bijl 2012; De Genova 2016; Stoler 2011; Wekker 2016). Thus, when protesters complain of racism at the core of a beloved national tradition rather than celebrating it like “everyone else,” their feelings ruin the happiness of the imagined majority. Mainstream reactions consistently attribute this demise of conviviality and endangering of Dutch national innocence to the influx of immigrants and racial others who “do not get it,” exemplifying the postcolonial-melancholic fantasy of returning to an imaginary past when things were still legible and free of conflict (Gilroy 2005). Notably, though, this critique coexists with a different trope that does acknowledge past conflict but projects it onto the present bodies of unhappy racial others (Ahmed 2012). Not the blackface character but the complainers, thought to be predominantly Afro-Dutch, are considered the cause of racial controversy. As race is not real, racism does not really exist; therefore, those who protest racism are the real racists. Black protesters are unable or unwilling to overcome forlorn colonial suffering and acknowledge the postracial present, the argument goes. Indeed, “a memory of racism can be what ‘gets in the way’ of happiness” (ibid.: 166). By not “getting over” past oppression, protesters are responsible for their own exclusion from the postracial nation.²

The main concern of the *Sinterklaasjournaal* in 2014 was what to do with its embattled Black Petes. Upon great national anticipation, the show’s producers hinted at an answer in the trailer for the new season. In the clip, the show’s presenter asks Sinterklaas over the phone, “The question that of course everybody

2. For a comparable discourse in the case of Canadian blackface, see Howard 2018.

is asking is: will the Petes come?” The anchor thus reframes societal quandaries about whether Black Pete will *change* into the more frightening subject of whether the character will remain part of the festival at all, echoing the views of some Black Pete defenders that what the critics really want is to get rid of the festival in its entirety. Sinterklaas responds that Black Petes will unquestionably be there, as the celebration will be “old-fashionably joyful” (*ouderwets gezellig*). He then assures that he will safeguard the tradition against extremist assaults.

In the *Sinterklaasjournaal*, racism remains an elusive specter—an accusation that cannot fully be named in front of festival-loving children but that appears through the threat of its consequences. For producers, the problem is not that Black Pete is a racist caricature but that they must now address the presence of people who think it is, without five-year-olds noticing. The show’s chief writer, Ajé Boschhuizen, once recognized in a popular Dutch newspaper that the *Sinterklaasjournaal* is really “an adult program in a children program.” Meanwhile, however, he justified not making explicit references to the Black Pete controversy by arguing for the show’s neutrality and by pointing to the innocence of its official target audience: “We didn’t want to make a political statement. My opinion is: debate this in talk shows and newspapers, but leave the kids alone” (Takken 2014).

Yet, far from being ignored, the controversy has become part of the show. Protesters have been repeatedly problematized and ridiculed through double-entendre schemes that sent separate messages to children and parents. In 2015, for example, the program introduced a character based on the critics of Black Pete. “Eppo Zanic” (*zanik* translates as nagger) was a grumpy old white man played by the famous Dutch comedian Freek de Jonge, known for his left-wing views and unrelenting social critique. As recently as 2011, de Jonge was photographed publicly holding up a “Black Pete Is Racism” T-shirt, making his presence inside the 2015 season of the show both surprising and symbolic. In a video call with the presenter, Zanic complains that he has not received any presents, even though he had, as custom dictates, placed his shoe out every night.³ He angrily inquires whether he is being punished for the black color of his shoe. When the presenter, a white woman in her late fifties, is unable to find a convincing reason why he does not have any gifts, Zanic says, “This is what I protest against!” He continues his tirade, complaining that he does not receive presents despite having done every-

3. For children to receive presents, they must place their shoe by the fireplace or the door. The shoe will then be filled with presents.

thing right (behaving well and singing songs for Sinterklaas). The presenter then asks whether he put his shoe in the right place. After he points to a spot near his bed, she reveals his mistake: next time, he must put it downstairs by the fireplace or by the door. The segment depicts Zanik as a whiner who lets trivialities stand in the way of his happiness. While he thought he was being treated unfairly because his shoes were the wrong color, he discovers this was a mere misunderstanding caused by his lack of cultural competence and inability to correctly take part in the tradition (see Ahmed [2012: 165–68] for a strikingly similar trope in the film *Bend It like Beckham*). The analogy with the protesters is obvious to any parent watching the show: while the complainers see Black Pete as a racial issue, the actual cause of their dissatisfaction is their failure to appropriately participate in and enjoy the celebration. If they were only pointed in the right direction, they could fully join in the “old-fashionably joyful” festival and share the pleasure of receiving gifts from Sinterklaas.

As this segment illustrates, the *Sinterklaasjournaal* carefully shunned embodying critics as racial others and, paradoxically, chiefly located contestation in white characters. Racial substitution carries out ambivalent narrative work, however. On the one hand, it makes the mockery more acceptable by pretending to aim it at other white people while anatomically showcasing the argument that the conflict really has nothing to do with race. On the other hand, by racializing the protesters as white, the *Sinterklaasjournaal* sends the message that the only debate worth addressing, *especially* when resulting from the uninvited intervention of racial or national outsiders, is that occurring between legitimate members of the white-Dutch majority.

Ironically, the only time racial discrimination was explicitly brought up in the show by nonwhite people (nevertheless impersonated by white actors) was during the 2014 season, when the Black Petes themselves complain to the show presenter that they are not feeling welcome. In the segment, the Petes comment on the prospect of being forced to “go back to the country [they] come from” (Spain) because the Netherlands is already saturated with Black Petes (“It is too bad but full means full”). By appropriating language commonly used in Dutch anti-immigrant discourse, the scene suggests that it is in fact the antiracist activists who are the xenophobes, seeking to expel Black Pete from the Dutch national imagination. While the message could have inadvertently veered toward a critique of anti-immigrant politics, this door is safely shut during the ensuing dialog when Petes on the boat taking them back to Spain acknowledge that, in times of labor-market redundancy, priority should indeed be given to those already settled in the

country (“They have their own Petes in the Netherlands now, right?” “And your own Petes always come first”). Eventually, anti-Black Pete activism is dismissed outright as one of the Petes yells at the presenter that “enough has been said about this whole Pete issue!”

Soot Theory

By trivializing “complainers” in front of its child viewers, the *Sinterklaasjournaal* inserts itself into the debate on the social relevance of race and racial inequality in Dutch society. Although race has never ceased to be a day-to-day principle of division and a de facto axis of social structuration over the past decades, it was abandoned as a legitimate category of differentiation in the Netherlands as in most of Europe. This situation informs the “absent presence” of race in much European discourse (M’charek, Schramm, and Skinner 2014). Responses to accusations of racism feature the blanket denial of race as the current strategy of choice on the continent (Lentin 2008). In the meantime, race constantly threatens to resurface in discourse in the form of embarrassing Freudian slips and half-transparent displacements. Boschhuizen, the show’s chief writer, rejected in an interview any suggestions of racial connotations to Black Pete, only to justify himself by pointing to the improbable placement of mildly stigmatized regional linguistic features in the mouth of a figure otherwise suffused with black racial markers: “This has nothing to do with blackface. Blackface is impersonating a black person [he uses a word that would translate as “negro”]. This is something else, this is a fairy tale. In fairy tales, women are always witches or evil mothers-in-law. Fairy tales need stereotypes. But we don’t do accents—at most a southern Dutch accent. We don’t make fun of another ethnicity” (Takken 2014).

Due to the *Sinterklaasjournaal*’s immense popularity, the show plays a crucial role in defining the Sinterklaas tradition for the entire nation, including how it addresses antiracist critique. Even as the 2014 season retained blackface characters, it was confronted with a newly urgent need to account for their blackness in nonracial ways, giving increased prominence to the chimney narrative by adopting a storyline in which new Petes must now be recruited on-site, owing to a shipwreck that prevents the original Petes from arriving in the Netherlands on time. One of the requirements for becoming a Pete is being able to find one’s way through chimneys. The show depicts the new recruits sliding down a mock chimney to test their Pete skills. These recruits (still racially white when they apply) accumulate black dirt on their cheeks, their faces becoming darker with each episode. When, after his first trip down the chimney, one of the new recruits asks

Grandpa Pete—the eldest of the Black Petes—whether he is already fully black, Grandpa Pete responds, “No, what matters is that you are capable of going down the chimney. The color of the Pete is of secondary importance.”

The introduction of the “Chimney Petes”—as these new characters are often called—thus attempts to retroactively deracialize Black Pete through the staging of a nonracial genesis of the contested figure. According to Boschhuizen, “They become black in phases. Phase 0: totally white. Phase 1: through the chimney once, some stripes. Phase 2: stained face. Phase 3: fully black” (Takken 2014). Ironically, however, the enterprise of narrative deracialization communicates at least two new stories about race. On the one hand, by suggesting that Black Petes really are fair-skinned Dutch adults with a growing amount of dirt on their faces, the new depiction results in reracializing Black Pete as white. On the other hand, the recruits’ successive stages of transformation are suffused with parodic signifiers of blackness that make clear that the process is at once chromatic and racial. Upon arrival, the newly recruited, still unstained Petes are already wearing afro wigs. Later on, while their blackened faces are accounted for by the chimney tale, their persistently clean clothing and unsoiled red lips are clearly at odds with the soot story. Although the Petes are presented as remaining white in reality from beginning to end, their eventual blackness becomes confusingly racial. The enduring racial character of the “chimney Petes” is also reinforced by the presence of many traditional, unmodified Black Petes in the show. Thus, instead of providing an alternative to the racial cosmogony, the “soot Pete” character conveys the message that the origin of racial blackness is dirt, while also suggesting that black skin belongs to the realm of the racially inauthentic.

The Key to Whiteness

Throughout the *Sinterklaasjournaal*, people, faces, and even animals are white by default; black paint or dirt comes on top of natural whiteness. However, the chimney story—the centerpiece of the hegemonic chromatic narrative—began creating problems of its own after it was explicitly used to account for blackness in the 2014 season. A new trope introduced to solve a narrative anomaly, it became the source of further anomalies. How was it possible for Sinterklaas and his Black Petes to distribute presents in a country with so few chimneys? If they couldn’t enter homes through the chimney, how could they get in? And if they didn’t use the chimney, would they not remain white?

A new storyline was adopted in the 2015 season. Instead of white people growing increasingly dirty (or black), the soot fades on some of the Petes, and their

white faces become clearly visible beneath the dirt. To justify this, the program introduced door-opening magic stones that enable Petes to enter homes the normal way when they distribute presents. Real kids acting in the show participate in the story by finding stones throughout the country that allow for the unblackening of Black Pete. As the season progresses, some Petes become gradually less black (just as one doesn't turn black after descending a single chimney, it takes time for one's skin to clear up once one quits the practice). Nevertheless, most Petes in the show remain fully covered in blackface. It is suggested that the blackface Petes—those most ostensibly incarnating racial blackness—simply have a preference for going through chimneys. In contrast to the whitening Petes, the Petes who prefer the chimney route nevertheless all retain red painted lips. Both types wear an afro wig. It remains ambiguous how the Petes not fully covered in blackface are ontologically related to those who are.

When their chimney soot fades, Petes are revealed to be white. Indeed, the show exclusively recruited white actors, as it depended on their white skin to show that Black Petes are not “really” black. As it happens, the only black actor to recently appear on the show was Dolores Leeuwijn, a Surinamese-Dutch woman in her forties in her public proponent of gradual change and plays a mock TV reporter in the 2015 season. She decided to quit the program in 2016 when it became clear to her that the producers were not sufficiently following through on Black Pete's eventual disappearance or chromatic makeover. In the same period, several other actors—some of them famous stage comedians with liberal audiences—announced that they too would not feature in the 2016 season.

Innocent Colors and Multicultural Horses

The recurrent return of race within attempts to obliterate it was perceptible in yet another strategy the *Sinterklaasjournaal* deployed to address the controversy over Black Pete: using black and white colors to depict racial harmony. The 2015 season was replete with plays on the meaning of black and white, such as when Sinterklaas's white horse becomes unrecognizable in the midst of other white horses and when the Petes prove unable to steer the steamship through white fog. Such narrative tropes trivialize antiracist critique while rendering not-so-discrete racial references plausibly deniable by protecting them behind a shield of chromatic innocence. The story of Grandpa Pete is perhaps the most telling.

During the 2014 series, it becomes apparent that, after a lifetime of assisting Sinterklaas, Grandpa Pete (the eldest of the Petes, introduced in the show that year) is too physically impaired to climb up the roofs and slide down chimneys.

In the last episode, it is decided that instead of joining the other Black Petes in distributing candies and presents, Grandpa Pete will accompany Sinterklaas to family visits by horse, wearing the same garments as the white bishop. At the end of the episode, he and Sinterklaas ride on each other's horses into the night—Sinterklaas on a black horse and Grandpa Pete on Sinterklaas's customary white steed. Symmetry and interchangeability are meant to show how little race matters. Still, the contrast between the black and the white horses is presented as natural and unchangeable, grounded in the animals' true pigmentary selves. Even as it celebrates multicultural harmony in an effort to proclaim the insignificance of race, the equestrian allegory thus simultaneously conveys an understanding of the characters' differences in skin color to be unmistakably racial. By analogy, the blackness of Grandpa Pete and the whiteness of Sinterklaas also ostensibly refer to each other as racial opposites. In the words of the show's lead writer in an interview commenting on Grandpa Pete's sudden ascendancy, "Isn't it beautiful? He's just like Bishop Tutu. Pete is now equal to Sinterklaas" (Takken 2014). Chromatic interchangeability has limits, however. Tellingly—and in contrast to the many attempts to refute the racial nature of Black Pete's blackness—the show has not tried to deracialize Sinterklaas's inherent whiteness by casting him as a black man. The latest storyline suggests that every black servant who works hard can become *like* Sinterklaas—but not Sinterklaas himself, who remains racially white. This trope echoes dominant Dutch and Western European perspectives on immigrant integration: who works hard in the Netherlands gets the reward of achieving near similar status as those who belong by birth, but never becomes quite as Dutch as the natives (Hübinette and Lundström 2014; Schinkel 2010). In Grandpa Pete's case, soot sticks: although not being able to climb down the chimney anymore, he nevertheless permanently retains his black color.

Diversity: From Happiness to Genocide

Many of the color-related stories depicted in the program function as thinly veiled metaphors for Dutch multicultural society. In the Netherlands as in many other European countries, "multiculturalism" has become the favored whipping boy of conservative commentators and politicians for embodying the supposedly failed liberal policies of integration (Duyvendak and Scholten 2012). Yet, conservative paranoia obscures the role of multicultural imagery in the reproduction of racial domination and the politics of happiness that supports it (Ahmed 2010; Hage 1998). Indeed, normative celebrations of ethnic and cultural diversity can serve to symbolically erase racial domination and deflect antiracist critique by creating a

false equivalence between the “feelings” of groups holding vastly unequal positions in the racial order and by demanding “mutual respect” between artificially neutralized “opinions.” Paul Römer, the director of the public broadcaster NTR, which produces the *Sinterklaasjournaal*, thus justified the introduction of “soot Petes” as a reasonable, democratic compromise validated by the rising number of viewers in 2014: “I think the program succeeded in finding a solution acceptable to a big group without an extreme opinion on Black Pete. That’s also visible in viewer ratings: we had a million viewers a day. That’s about 20 to 25 percent more than previous years. And they kept watching, so, apparently, they weren’t bothered by the chosen direction” (Kuiper 2014).

Media producers claimed to have found a middle ground between the (misplaced) racial sensitivities of a minority and the majority’s attachment to tradition. Multiculturalist compromise was thus deployed to undercut criticisms of racial bias, replacing the latter with a liberal call to respect emotional diversity. Unsurprisingly, the focus on respecting “black feelings”—while presenting them as mistaken—was mirrored by calls for mutual tolerance between the proponents and opponents of Black Pete. By portraying multicultural society as free of conflict, these calls resulted in framing persistent antiracist critique as disrespectful of “white feelings” and thus ultimately as antiliberal and antimulticultural (Coenders and Chauvin 2017). The director of the public broadcaster NTR discussed the show’s coming season in the spring of 2016 following that line of argument:

Suppose that this season we would introduce only White Petes in the program: that doesn’t reflect how society thinks about this issue. Last year, the disappointment about the *Sinterklaasjournaal* [for still including Black Petes] was mainly in the Randstad [the urban region including Amsterdam and Rotterdam]. But elsewhere, there is still a lot of support for Black Pete. We want to reflect what’s going on, we don’t want to take a leading role. . . . I understand that people want us to show the way, but we’re not a moral compass. . . . Society has to decide whether Black Pete is racist. Not us. . . . In the *Sinterklaasjournaal*, we don’t take a political position. It’s a joyful program about a magical, sweet children’s festival. (Van Dongen 2016)

In a similar vein, the show’s chief writer had declared two years earlier, “We want to send the message to take it lightly. The tradition offers many options. We don’t want to oblige anyone [celebrating at home] to order a black Sinterklaas or a soot Pete. Believing is a choice, anyone can make their own Sinterklaas festival out of it” (Takken 2014). Bringing emotional democracy to its full logical consequences, the show’s producers even argued that the in-show Pete population should mirror

the structure of Dutch opinion. Boschhuizen explained in the same interview, “I have read that 80 percent of the population is pro-Pete. So I thought: let’s do two [chimney Petes] out of ten” (ibid.).

Revealingly, the rhetoric of multicultural celebration and normative compromise at times has given way to more apocalyptic fears of racial displacement and cultural genocide. These fears typically conflate various incarnations of otherness in a single looming threat to national cultural survival. Muslim residents of Turkish and Moroccan descent, often considered the ultimate outsiders and mostly excluded from this entire debate, are lumped together with the Afro-Dutch minority, whose claim to national belonging is usually not contested to the same degree. “Why did all those people who are against Black Pete decide to live in this country?” read a tweet in 2013. “Get lost and take all the mosques with you.” In 2016, when the Jumbo supermarket chain announced that some of its products would no longer display Sinterklaas or Black Pete in person but only through their less contentious paraphernalia (e.g., their clothing), far-right politicians expressed their ire by contrasting the symbolic and commercial killing of Dutch national symbols with the supermarket chain’s scandalous honoring of the Muslim sacrifice feast Eid al-Adha by rewarding customers with baklava (Turkish pastries). Geert Wilders, the leader of the Party for Freedom (PVV) opined, “Jumbo Islamicizes: yes to the feast of sacrifice and no to Sinterklaas, they have turned completely insane! Leave Sinterklaas and Black Pete alone” (Van Dam and Witteman 2016). Jan Roos, a public figure and then leader of a smaller far-right party, voiced the same fear: “You increasingly see that these types of companies are out to erase Dutch culture, while they at the same time do not refrain from sponsoring Islamic culture. With Hema [another Dutch retailer], this was also the case. Black Pete had to go, but during Sugar Feast [Eid al-Fitr, celebrating the break of the Ramadan fast], the whole store had to be turned upside down” (Van Dam and Witteman 2016).

Although the PVV is usually much more obsessed with “Islam” in general and the Dutch-Moroccan minority in particular, its members have frequently defended Black Pete against attackers using the same rhetorics initially deployed to protect the Dutch nation against presumed Muslim invaders. The party’s supporters on social media mobilized a notion of cultural trade-off, offering concessions on the Sinterklaas festival in exchange for an agreement to limit Muslim expansion. “We gave them Black Pete, now no more mosques,” proclaimed a tweet in 2015.

In defending the blackness of Black Pete against intolerant eradicators, many on the far right unwittingly ended up adopting the rhetoric of antiracism and black pride. Martin Bosma, a PVV member of parliament holding sympathetic views of

the South African apartheid regime, became personally invested in Pete's racial otherness. An attack on Black Pete, he argued, is an attack on the Netherlands: "There is a war going on against Black Pete: Mr. Asscher, Mr. van der Laan, Mrs. Bussemaker, Mr. Plasterk [all prominent Labor party politicians], the whole Labor party is out there to exterminate Black Pete" (2014). The PVV went as far as submitting a conservationist draft bill to preserve Black Pete's features and identity. It included the following technical instructions: "A Black Pete has an evenly Black or dark brown face, red painted lips, black curly hair and golden earrings, is dressed in a velvet suit with knickerbockers and always wears a headpiece with a colored feather."⁴

White Innocence and the Materiality of Metaphors

Faced with mounting accusations that Black Pete is a racist caricature inherited from colonial times, the Dutch children's television program *Sinterklaasjournaal* found itself saddled with the responsibility of demonstrating the Sinterklaas tradition's "non-racism." Toward this end, the show developed narrative tropes that purported to provide a deracialized account of the chromatic hierarchy and employment structure of the Sinterklaas mythology. In many ways, this meant lying to children to preserve an adult fairytale about Dutch national innocence. The show's writers, careful to carry out the narrative cover-up of race in ways that circumvented acknowledging any past or present racist guilt, seemingly expected that Black Pete's blackness could be explained away through imperceptible change. In deploying its own brand of soot-based chromatic constructionism to deny race and racism, however, the *Sinterklaasjournaal* told many more stories about race, eventually reracializing Black Pete as white while equating racial blackness with dirt and physical inauthenticity. The new narrative tropes were initially developed as metaphors for race's absence. Their unraveling eventually became an allegory of racial absent presence.

The fight over Black Pete has not only been a fight against racism but a struggle over the definition of racism itself. In the narrative politics of the controversy, the preservation of national innocence depends on the racial innocence of Black Pete, in turn grounded in the intrinsic innocence of Dutch children (Mesman, Janssen, and van Rosmalen 2016; Wekker 2016: 201). However, this claim to innocence has foundered on the remnants of empire—relics from the colonial past as well as

4. Bill proposal by congressmen Bosma and Wilders to protect the cultural tradition of the Sinterklaas festival (a.k.a. the "Black Pete Law"), Proposed November 13, 2014. <https://www.tweedekame.nl/kamerstukken/detail?id=2014D41588>

the contemporary presence of ethnoracial others that keep tying Black Pete's to this unsettling history. Critics were depicted as kill-joys responsible for the problems they point to (Ahmed 2010). Protesters were ridiculed as seeing race everywhere—owing to their misguided sensitivities confusingly associated with their imagined racial moorings, cultural otherness, and inability to get over the unfortunate but long-settled tragedies of the colonial past. Tolerance for the hallucinations of a minority that sees race where it clearly is not, was justified in the name of liberal respect for multicultural diversity and emotional democracy. This resulted in peculiar compromises in the form of attempts to have the *Sinterklaasjournaal* strike a narrative balance between (hurt) black feelings and (unhurt) white feelings. Ironically, defenders of Black Pete could present opponents as xenophobes intolerant to human difference, while framing themselves as antiracists of sorts by freely adopting rhetorics of black racial preservation. The looming sacrifice of one of the nation's most emotionally invested symbols—Black Pete—came to symbolize the eventual prospect of white Dutch cultural genocide.

This essay also told a story about stories. As the scholarly variant of how common sense perceives meaning making, propositional logic alone cannot fully account for the form and content of narrative strategies in times of contestation. The dialectics of narrative change in the *Sinterklaasjournaal* demonstrate that the meaning of stories resides not only in stories but also in the complex interplay of narrative and extranarrative forces within real-life spaces of contention. In particular, whether and how stories are perceived to be (in)consistent is contingent on the symbolic work done by alternative counterstories. Rising field-level contentiousness forces hegemonic narratives toward higher levels of discursive codification and sophistication, which in turn exposes them to greater logical scrutiny (Bourdieu 1990). However, metaphoric tropes introduced to fix an ailing storyline turn out to have lives and materialities of their own. Invoking the narrative symptom involves costs, constraints, and consequences. Metaphors may be deployed as ideology only in ways that are metaphorically plausible, while generating new narrative constraints and logical challenges: chimney soot and magic stones raise as many questions about race and color as they seemingly solve, reracializing as much as they deracialize. Yet these new challenges to Dutch innocence and racial absent presence may not be solved by merely removing the new fixes and returning to some original narrative purity. Turning to narrative orthodoxy means narrative *doxa* is forever lost or retrospectively tainted with embarrassing contradictions or unacceptable politics. The flip side of engaging in the infernal spiral of lying is that one can never return to the initial lie.

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