

Race and the Pitfalls of Emotional Democracy: Primary Schools and the Critique of Black Pete in the Netherlands

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Abstract: A centrepiece of the Dutch festival of Sinterklaas, the blackface character Black Pete, has met with growing contestation in the past decade over its caricatural representation of people of African descent. Attacks on this national “happy object” elicited a host of majority responses that converged in professing non-racism. As the celebration is primarily thought of as a children’s festival, schools across the Netherlands had to decide whether to maintain, alter or suppress the Black Pete character. This article considers the spatial politics of race that informed school decisions about the festival. We show geographical variation in the distribution between change and non-change. However, we find that both strategies were justified in the name of respect for “black feelings”, even as majority calls for mutual tolerance between proponents and opponents of Black Pete normatively portrayed multicultural society as conflict free and ultimately strove to disarm anti-racist critique by framing it as anti-democratic.

Zwarte Piet—een centraal figuur in het jaarlijkse Sinterklaasfeest—is vanwege zijn karikaturale representatie van afro-Nederlanders in het afgelopen decennium in toenemende mate onder druk komen te staan. Omdat de Sinterklaastraditie vooral gezien wordt als kinderfeest, zien veel basisscholen zich gedwongen een beslissing te nemen over de omstreden figuur. In dit artikel bespreken we hoe de ruimtelijke verbeelding van raciale spreiding een rol speelde in de strategieën van scholen om hiermee om te gaan tijdens de viering. Scholen maakten een verscheidenheid aan keuzes. Zowel scholen die niks veranderden aan het feest als scholen die dit wel deden, rechtvaardigden echter hun keuze met een beroep op “zwarte gevoelens”. Dit laatste ging gepaard met de roep om wederzijdse tolerantie tussen voor- en tegenstanders van Zwarte Piet. Hiermee riep een witte meerderheid het ideaalbeeld op van de conflictvrije multiculturele samenleving, met als gevolg dat antiracistische kritiek als antidemocratisch kon worden geframed.

Keywords: racism, whiteness, geographical imagination, the Netherlands, politics of happiness

Introduction

In 2010, the Dutch Centre for Folklore published a book titled *Dit zijn wij* (“This is us”) (Strouken 2010), listing the hundred most important traditions in the Netherlands. The most popular was the annual gift-giving festival of

“Sinterklaas”, or St Nicholas’ day. Celebrations of the festival start on the second or third Saturday of November when the fictional character of Sinterklaas arrives in the Netherlands on a steamship from Spain, together with his “Black Petes”. Up until the 5th of December when the festival culminates in the celebration of Sinterklaas’ birthday, the main characters of the tradition—Sinterklaas and the Black Petes—are everywhere to be seen. They appear in songs, books, films, television series and as live characters on all kinds of occasions. The figure of Sinterklaas allegedly evolved out of representations of the Catholic patron St Nicholas. The earliest St Nicholas effigies in the Netherlands date back to the 15th century (Boer-Dirks 1992). The character of Black Pete only became part of the festival around 1850, however, at a time when the event had become profane.

One cannot properly understand the figure’s inclusion in the holiday nor the evolution of its personal and moral features without engaging with its colonial context (Boer-Dirks 1992; Brienens 2014; Helsloot 2008; Schenkman 2004). Current representations of Black Pete share many similarities with blackface characters from American and British 19th and 20th century minstrel shows. Its appearance (the black face, big red lips and afro wig) and role (submissive, dumb, bad, always frolicsome and with low proficiency in Dutch) made Black Pete the object of critique for at least the past 50 years over its caricatural representation of people of African descent (Helsloot 2005). In addition, the multiplicity and generic appearance of Black Petes present black bodies as replaceable, whereas the white patron St Nicholas is appreciated as a unique character (Van der Pijl and Goulordava 2014).

Over the years, Black Pete’s persona changed from dumb and frightening to joyful and athletic. Despite these changes, the character’s role and appearance still echo colonial representations of black people. Although Black Pete has been repeatedly criticized in the past decades, the critique only gained massive media attention in recent years.¹ The increased resonance of anti-racist discourse resulted in part from the coming-of-age of a new generation of upwardly mobile Dutch Afro descendants. Another key factor has been the expanding presence in major Dutch cities of international professionals, students and “creative” workers lured by neoliberal urban development and branding (Peck 2012), who have proven to be more consistently plugged on international standards of diversity and have contributed to popularising global definitions of offensiveness. The blackface figure also drew heightened condemnation in the international press and even received a rebuke from the United Nations.² This brought about a heated public debate in the Netherlands in which protests against Black Pete have been frequently dismissed as assaults on Dutch culture and identity (Balkenhol et al. 2016).

Attacks on such a treasured national symbol elicited a wide variety of nationalistic responses, ranging from outright defences of the blackface character as an inflexible part of the tradition, to attempts at maintaining it by denying it has anything to do with race. Interestingly, these strategies converged in disidentifying with racist bias, a performance strategy François Bonnet dubbed “non-racism” (Bonnet 2014). More sympathetic responses called for creating Petes of different colours, or suppressing the character from the celebration altogether. Yet, even these proposals for change were themselves frequently informed by “non-racism”:

avoiding a critique of white racism, most of them were justified by merely invoking the need to respect “black sensitivities” within a multi-ethnic and multicultural society.

As the festival is primarily thought of as a children’s festival, schools across the Netherlands have been key battlegrounds in the fight over Black Pete. This article examines how schools have reacted to the critique of the festival’s controversial character. Based upon a variety of data sources including a nationwide school survey and semi-structured interviews with school personnel and parents complemented by ethnographic observation during the Sinterklaas period, we investigate which schools decided to alter the ceremony, what reasons they invoked for (not) doing so, and in which way changes were carried out. In particular, we probe the spatial imaginary of race that led the trope of “black sensitivities” to become a focal point even as most schools nationwide have little direct interaction with non-white communities.

The next section of the article reviews scholarship on reactions to racism accusations within racially stratified societies. Then, we describe the ambivalent presence of race in Dutch debates on nationhood, difference and inequality, and the “politics of happiness” that preside to its suppression. After introducing the study’s research methods, we consider spatial variation in school responses and their justifications. We conclude by relating the centrality of “black sensitivities” to multicultural ideology’s propensity to mask the structures of white domination and disarm anti-racist critique ironically by framing the latter as anti-multicultural and anti-democratic.

“Non-Racism”, Happy Objects, and Multiculturalism

How do racially privileged groups perform “non-racism” within societies that are racially stratified and yet ostensibly stigmatize racist bias? Although a vast scholarship has helped bring to light racism, racial inequality and racial discrimination as objective mechanisms, only recently have researchers begun to investigate how individuals and organizations deal with—deflect or pre-empt—accusations of racism in discourse and practice (Ahmed 2008, 2012; Bonnet 2014; Bonnet and Caillault 2015). François Bonnet (2014:3) proposed the concept of “non-racism” to account for individual and collective performances oriented towards maintaining the status of a situation, person, policy or tradition as “not-being-racist”. The performance of “non-racism” benefits from being analysed as a separate realm presenting distinct dynamics mostly pertaining to the presentation of self. However, as “non-racism” plays a central role in the production and reproduction of “white innocence” (Wekker 2016:2), this article aims to reconnect it with the sociology of racial domination by studying how different institutional ways of responding to anti-racist critiques relate to objective racial inequality and the political economy of whiteness (see Ahmed 2012).

The Black Pete controversy allows us to illustrate how “non-racism” functions in the Netherlands. In the dominant Dutch self-image, “racism” ought not to be Dutch (Essed and Hoving 2014; Van Reekum 2014; Wekker 2016). The Sinterklaas festival is precisely about celebrating Dutchness. Therefore, the festival cannot be racist. In

Sara Ahmed's (2010) terms, it is a national "happy object". Happiness is thought to be achieved by coming into contact with such predefined objects. Happiness is something we are obliged to wish for. Happiness is our responsibility. We should know where to find it. The Sinterklaas festival potentially turns everybody into happy objects for one another. Thus, when ethno-racial minorities complain over racism embedded in a national holiday instead of celebrating it like "everyone else", their unhappy feelings spoil the happiness of others. They themselves become the cause of unhappiness and, hence, the object of scrutiny (Ahmed 2010:583). *They* are those not able to let go of *their* atavistic attachments to experiences of racism thought to belong to the past (Ahmed 2012:143), instead of achieving happiness by joining the party. Their feelings are stuck in colonialism. They are the real racists.

Maintaining happiness does not preclude considering diverse opinions, however, nor does it necessarily lead to the refusal of change in the happy object in the face of criticism. The requirement of "happy change" is tied to the neutralizing power of multicultural ideology (Hage 1998, 2002). In the Netherlands and other European countries, "multiculturalism" is commonly denounced by commentators and a wide range of conservative politicians as embodying supposedly failed liberal policies of integration (Duyvendak and Scholten 2012). Yet, conservative paranoia obscures the central role of multicultural ideals in the politics of happiness that come with the reproduction of racial domination. First, mainstream multiculturalism tends to validate white neutrality by continuing to locate "diversity" in the ethno-racial other. This rhetoric leaves existing power relations mostly untouched and turns ethnic minorities into "helpless objects" (Hage 1998:48). Second, normative celebrations of ethnic and cultural diversity can serve to symbolically erase racial domination and deflect anti-racist 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". Third, the performance of "non-racism" and openness to "diversity" often function as symbolic operators sorting "tolerant" from intolerant whiteness, simultaneously activating and masking infra-racial hierarchies tied to social class, cultural capital, post-colonial and centre-periphery dynamics (Bonnett 1992; Igarashi and Saito 2014; Jazeel 2011; Reay et al. 2007; Weenink 2008).

The Absent Presence of Race in the Netherlands

The initiative of placing the Sinterklaas holiday on the National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage in January 2015 came from a lobby group founded in response to a court case that ruled Black Pete conveys a negative stereotype of blacks.³ As the Inventory's stated purpose is to protect cultural heritage from getting lost, the lobby group justified the placement as a way to officially safeguard the thought-to-be-embattled festival. In the Netherlands, the norm of not spoiling the happiness of others is encapsulated in the phrase "*gewoon gezellig*" (Breedveld 2014). Perhaps the most cherished reflexive Dutch national linguistic symbol, the adjective *gezellig* is a descriptor of a pleasant atmosphere,

while “*gewoon*” means normal or regular.⁴ *Gewoon gezellig* is not only a way to describe a setting, but also defines something everyone should be doing. *Gezellig* is what a good citizen must *be* and *feel*. Doing or being *gewoon gezellig* generally involves blending and joining in, as opposed to being an antisocial killjoy (Ahmed 2010; Breedveld 2014).

The struggle over Black Pete is a struggle over happy white Dutchness and its ability to project and transfer racism to an unDutch space inhabited by unhappy minorities (Chauvin et al. 2017). Moreover, it touches upon the trope of national innocence, which is fundamental to Dutch self-conception and generally governs the disavowal of racism in the Netherlands (Essed and Hoving 2014; Wekker 2016). Gloria Wekker (2014:166) describes the Dutch version of white innocence as “the strong Dutch attachment to a self-image that stresses being a tolerant, small and just ethical nation and that foregrounds being a victim rather than a perpetrator of (inter)national violence”. Primary school history textbooks barely mention colonialism, as national and colonial histories are seen as separate from one another (Weiner 2014). Dominant national discourse presents the Netherlands, even as it commemorates slavery (Balkenhol 2016), as an innocent nation that is post-racial and characterized by an aversion to violence stemming from the centuries-old Dutch trader mentality of tolerance and openness to diversity (Bijl 2012; Essed and Hoving 2014; Van Reekum 2014). As a result, Black Pete could only be incorporated as part of a national holiday by being detached from its racial history.

M’charek et al. (2014:462) analyse the ideological implications of the “absent presence” of race in Europe. In this regime of thought, race is solely recognized as an “object of a problematic past of colonialism, scientific racism and Nazi genocide”, while the European continent remains “largely untouched by the devastating ideology it exported all over the world” (El-Tayeb 2011:xv; Wekker 2016:4). In the aftermath of WWII, racism came to be construed mostly through the horrors of the Holocaust—understood as a distinctly continental tragedy—displacing colonialism as the master signifier of European race relations (Goldberg 2006; Hesse 2007, 2011; Lentin 2005, 2008). As anti-Black Pete activists reconnect the Netherlands’ contested present to its unsettling past by bringing attention to the contemporary ramifications of Dutch colonial history, they face violent resistance that traffics in racial absent presence. Indeed, the controversy over the Sinterklaas festival is full of statements claiming to be blind to race while simultaneously acknowledging it as a reality (Essed and Trienekens 2008). In 2013, for example, Rob Wijnberg (2013)—a liberal commentator and editor-in-chief of the online magazine *De Correspondent*—responded to criticisms targeting Black Pete by arguing that he and most of his fellow Dutch citizens were now “consciously blind” to race thanks to “a process of enlightenment that took centuries” and that, therefore, claiming Black Pete to be racist was a “rather harsh allegation”. As the phrase “*consciously blind*” illustrates, the debate over Black Pete reveals the fragility of Dutch non-racism. By forcing the defenders of the character to closely condition its non-racist nature on the blanket denial of race, the controversy brings them dangerously on the verge of self-indictment.

The following sections of the article examine how the controversy unfolded in the Dutch education system and reviews the array of school “non-racist” strategies elicited by the rise in anti-Black Pete critique.

Methods

In order to get an understanding of whether, how often, where, by whom and into what Black Pete was changed, and what considerations played a role in the decisions, we used a mix of qualitative and quantitative data. We combined a nationwide school survey consisting of closed and open-ended questions with semi-structured interviews at two schools located in Amsterdam.

In December 2014 and January 2015, we held a series of nine semi-structured interviews with school heads, teachers and parents from two schools located in Amsterdam. As Amsterdam is the city in which the debate seemed to resonate most, we thought it would be a good place to inquire how the latter impacts different schools. School A is a Christian school that has not had Black Petes in recent memory. It is located in Amsterdam Southeast in a district with the highest proportion of Caribbean-Dutch minorities in Amsterdam (OIS 2015). The pupils mainly have Surinamese-Dutch backgrounds; other ethnic groups are Antillean-Dutch, Ghanaian-Dutch and Nigerian-Dutch; except for one teacher, the staff is entirely black.⁵ School B is a non-religious public school located in Amsterdam West that, when the study took place, was in the process of altering Black Pete in response to the national-level controversy. The pupil population is ethnically mixed, while the teaching staff is mainly white, as is the case for most primary schools in the Netherlands (Grootscholte and Jettinghof 2010).

Interviewees were between 30 and 65 years old. Seven of them were women, two of them were men. Five of them were black and four of them white. All of the interviews lasted between half an hour and an hour and a half. Questions discussed included how the school celebrated Sinterklaas, the presence, absence, or alteration of Black Pete, and what process led to it. We coded the interviews based on potential factors playing a role in the decisions. We also investigated how parents and children responded to either the alterations to, or the absence of Black Pete. Finally, we did four days of observation at school A in the period leading up to the Sinterklaas festival so as to investigate whether and how the absence of Black Pete was marking the celebration.

Given that interview respondents had frequently mentioned black feelings as a justification for their decisions, we subsequently conducted a nationwide survey to see whether the presence of Antilleans and Surinamese would explain variation in alteration rates. After obtaining a list of all 6537 primary schools in the Netherlands from the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science,⁶ we assembled email addresses for all of these schools resulting in a database of 6456 addresses. We distributed the survey three times in February and March 2015. A total of 983 schools responded, amounting to 15% of all primary schools in the Netherlands. As with other quantitative studies based on voluntary responses, potential bias limits the representativeness of our findings. Considering this, we made unequal regional response rates part of the analysis—in particular, trying to

interpret regional variation in non-responses. We observed that higher response rates included both regions with avid supporters of change and regions with avid opponents, thus providing insights into a wide spectrum of positions.

The survey consisted of multiple-choice questions about whether Sinterklaas was being celebrated, what kinds of Sinterklaas-related activities the school participated in and whether it had changed in the past five years. Open-ended questions were posed regarding what had changed, as well as which considerations played a role in either change or non-change. We used data from both the closed- and open-ended questions together with remarks volunteered by respondents in the comment box at the end of the survey. We coded all questions and comments based on whether Black Pete was altered, the kind of alteration made and the considerations and reasons given for the alteration. The variables we considered included region, level of urbanization and the presence of Caribbean-Dutch minorities. As we were not able to obtain statistics regarding the ethnic composition per school or per postal zone, we used data from the Central Bureau of Statistics on ethnic composition per municipality (CBS 2014). Although these individual data sources may be limited in scope, our mobilization of a variety of corroborating evidence allowed us to build an argument that speaks to generalised patterns regarding the Sinterklaas celebrations.

Imagined Geographies of Race

The question of geography has been particularly contentious in the development of the national controversy over Black Pete, as critics have often been accused of being privileged urbanites and cosmopolitans disconnected from the real Netherlands. Here is how Ajé Boschhuizen, the main writer for the kid's TV program "*Sinterklaasjournaal*", warned his impatient, unrealistic opponents who wanted Black Pete abolished:

We have to realize that we live in the Reserve: Amsterdam, Haarlem, higher-educated, artistic circles. But outside of those circles, there's a whole other Holland. We have to take that into account (NRC, 6 December 2014).

In this section, we give an overview of the regional variety in response rates and Black Pete alterations. We consider the role of urbanization levels and the local share of Caribbean-Dutch minorities in whether schools decided to alter Black Pete.

We used "COROP areas" devised by the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS). These areas consist of multiple municipalities and fall within the boundaries of existing provinces. Functional relations between a core and its catchment areas form the basis for each of the regions. As the number of schools per municipality is often too low to make valuable comparisons, we deemed these regions most accurate in inquiring into interregional variability. Response rates per region are shown in Figure 1, whereas Figure 2 depicts the proportion of schools that altered Black Pete.

With the exception of Rotterdam, response rates in the Randstad⁸ were higher than in most other regions. Indeed, some survey respondents from schools outside the Randstad specifically described it as an issue belonging to that urban region. In response to the question of whether they considered changing Black Pete, a

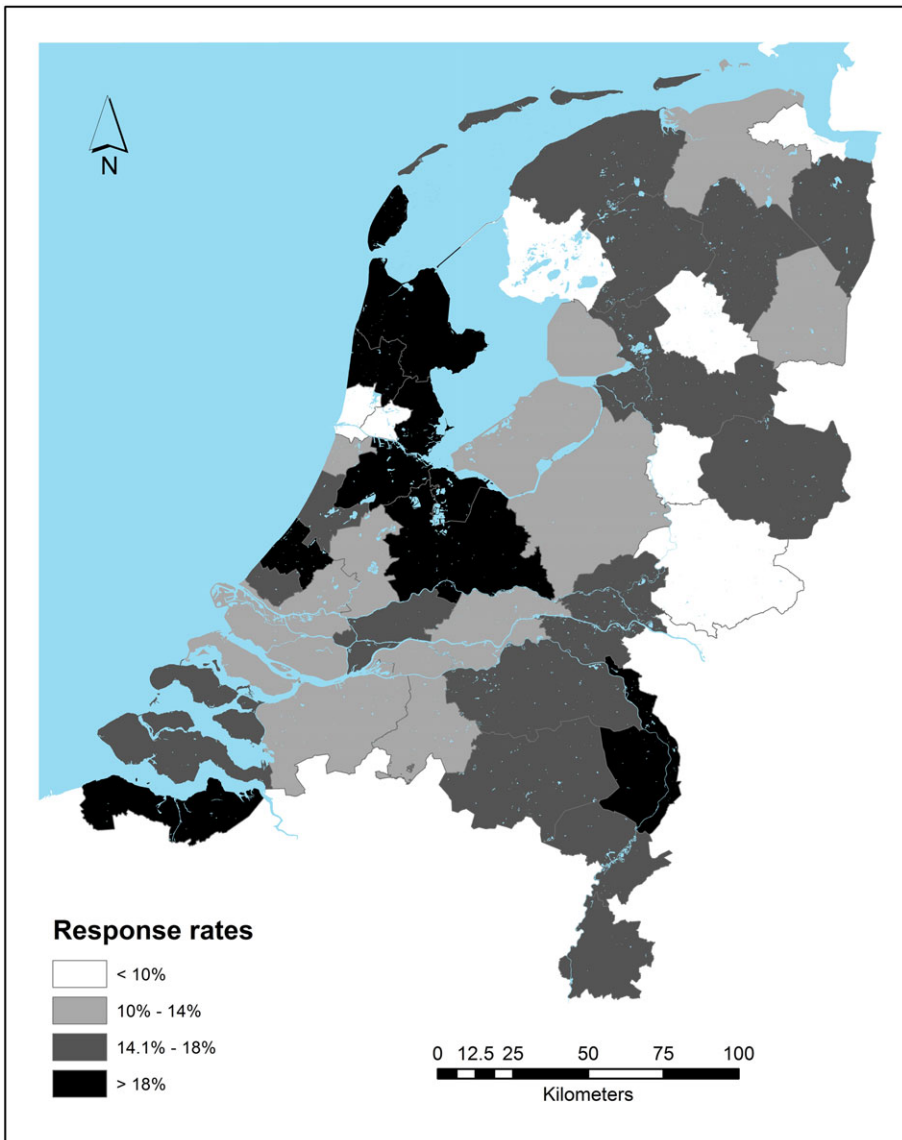


Figure 1: Response rates per COROP region⁷ [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

respondent from a school in Overijssel (Eastern district in the Netherlands) stated defensively:

Yes, the discussion, which was mainly staged in the Randstad, forced us to maintain the tradition in its current form, because of the absence of racism or discrimination in any form whatsoever. It is ridiculous how it is possible that a limited number of people can turn a children's holiday into an issue for adults and disregard children's interests.

This respondent thus imagined that the "limited number of people" turning Black Pete into a political issue lived mainly in the Randstad. He thus presented racism

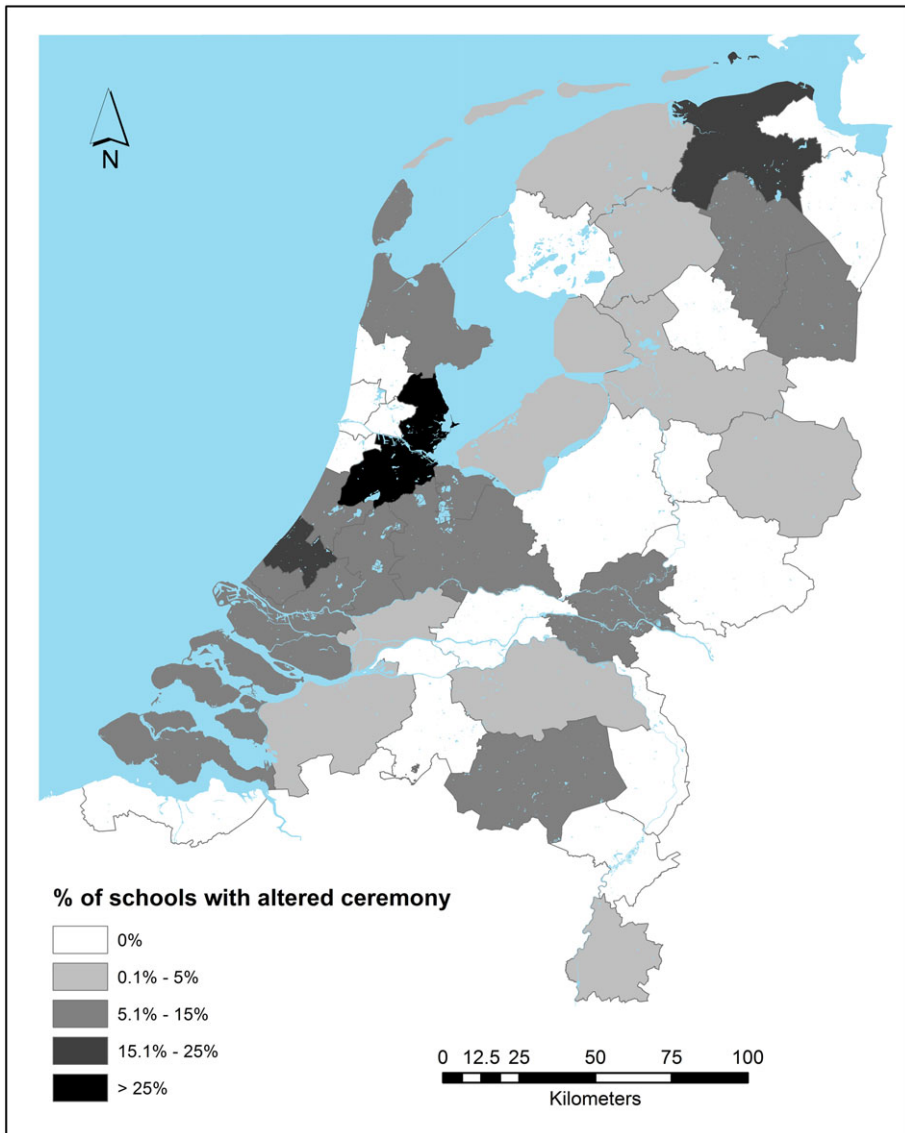


Figure 2: Alteration rates per COROP region [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

and discrimination (and complaints about them) as irrelevant to the less urbanized environment of his school. Many of the groups protesting Black Pete⁹ indeed do locate their activities in Amsterdam as well as in other Randstad cities. A recent court case filed against the municipality of Amsterdam to force it to withdraw the license it granted for the public entrance of Sinterklaas received wide media coverage nationwide.¹⁰

Those mostly imagined to be affected by the stereotype of Black Pete are Caribbean-Dutch minorities, thus one may expect schools located in areas where these minorities are present to be more sensitive to the issue. The centrality of a

few large Dutch cities in transnational networks may also result in increased sensitivity to international critique and positive attitudes towards living in an (ethnically) diverse society in those cities. Moreover, appreciation for cultural otherness and a sense of openness to the world are status-related skills valued in different ways contingent on class and cultural backgrounds, themselves unevenly distributed in space (Bonnett 1992; Cousin and Chauvin 2014; Igarashi and Saito 2014; Jazeel 2011; Reay et al. 2007; Weenink 2008).

In our survey, we found that school alteration rates are indeed correlated with the co-presence of Caribbean minorities ($r = 0.286$; $\text{sig} < 0.01$). We also examined the relationship between levels of urbanization and school decisions and found a positive significant correlation ($r = 0.371$; $\text{sig} < 0.01$).¹¹ Interestingly, variation in alteration rates no longer correlates with the co-presence of Caribbean-Dutch minorities once controlled for levels of urbanization ($r = -0.041$, non-significant). These results are in line with Bonnett's (1992) earlier findings that white progressive engagement with racial issues does not depend on the physical presence of racial minorities. Indeed, some predominantly white environments may still make it a middle-class virtue to be more attuned to the sensitivities of racial and cultural others (Reay et al. 2007). A recent national-level poll carried out for a television program confirms these tendencies (TNS Nipo 2016). To the question "are you open to experimenting with a different appearance for Black Pete or with different helpers for Sinterklaas?", 42% of respondents with higher education provided a positive reply, as opposed to 17% of respondents with high-school education and 9% of respondents without a high-school diploma. The pattern was replicated regarding regional variation as well. In the three big Randstad cities combined (Amsterdam, Rotterdam and the Hague), openness to changing Black Pete was 34%, in contrast to 17–24% in the rest of the Netherlands.

Although school decisions in our survey did not depend on the physical presence of Caribbean-Dutch populations in the surroundings, race was by no means absent from the geographical imaginaries informing choices over Black Pete. A respondent from a school in a town near Utrecht replied the following to the question of whether there were considerations involved in not changing anything about the celebration: "The authenticity of the Sinterklaas festival. The Black Pete issue does not really play a role in our surroundings, as we are an almost entirely white school". In other words, the school did not see the need to change Black Pete because it assumed that the controversy was racially irrelevant to its membership and surroundings.

In the following section, we examine more in depth the considerations brought forward to justify change or, on the contrary, the refusal to alter the Sinterklaas tradition. We will then show the contrasting ways in which imagining the proximity of black people feeling hurt can matter. In both schools in which we conducted qualitative interviews, respondents regardless of race perceived it mainly as an issue relevant to blacks rather than whites. Not the actual presence of ethno-racial minorities, but the felt proximity of black emotions and the need to engage with them thus seem to have informed school decisions over the Sinterklaas festival.

Varieties of (Not) Changing Black Pete

Van Dijk (1998) describes three ways in which Black Pete has been upheld against criticism in the Netherlands. In some instances, its association with race has simply been denied. One of the strategies to do this explains Black Pete's blackness as stemming from chimney soot.¹² In other instances, Sinterklaas has been defended as an unchangeable Dutch tradition. Finally, the celebration has been framed as a children's festival.¹³ The innocence of children, their joy and presumed inability to discriminate unequivocally proves that the festival cannot be racist. The centrality of children in the debate makes schools critical sites of investigation for the mapping of various arguments put forward by proponents and opponents of Black Pete. Indeed, "to symbolically attack children is not only perceived as an inhuman act, it also attacks the operative principle that 'the child, like us, is good and innocent'" (Wekker 2016:201).

Honouring Dutch Tradition

Given the public and media salience of the controversy nationwide, we assumed that all schools had to engage in some form of collective discussion, even in cases in which they decided not to alter Black Pete. Surprisingly, almost half of no-change schools (350 out of 798) responded that no discussion had taken place. Among schools that did alter Black Pete, the existence of a public debate was most often mentioned as a consideration (38.9%), while other considerations such as pressure from parents (13.3%) or following the *Sinterklaasjournaal* (15.6%)¹⁴ also evidently relate to the national-level public controversy over Black Pete. That so many schools that changed the ceremony mentioned the existence of a discussion leading up to their decision might suggest that schools that did not make alterations also faced discussions but decided to actively ignore or minimize them, down to their answer to our survey.

A proportion of 56.8% of no-change schools provided explicit reasons for not altering anything. Among them, the most frequent reason given was the desire to stick to tradition (36.1%). Many respondents from these schools emphasized that Sinterklaas was a Dutch tradition that should be guarded and protected as intangible heritage. A respondent from a school in The Hague stated:

This school maintains the opinion that celebrating the Sinterklaas holiday is a Dutch tradition and that it should stay that way. Therefore, no modifications to the colour of Black Pete.

The appearance of Black Pete is thus seen as an inseparable part of the tradition. Changing the former would endanger the perpetuation of the latter. Moreover, the tradition is defined as being Dutch and its Dutchness is made dependent upon leaving Black Pete unchanged.

Brown Skin, Black Masks

Among the establishments we visited, school A did not have any Black Petes, nor was there a Sinterklaas character present during the celebration. School B replaced

one of the three visiting Black Petes during the last celebration with a Pete not fully covered in blackface but with ostensible marks of chimney soot. In addition, school officials had removed what they felt were offensive decorations, used altered lyrics in some of the songs and changed the name of Black Pete to just Pete or Pete with another adjective (e.g. fast Pete).

Using a “chimney Pete” appeared as a convincing alternative to the extent that it fitted the deracialized cosmogony according to which Black Petes get their skin colour from climbing down chimneys. Attributes connected with the stereotypical colonial depiction of blacks such as the afro wigs and the big red painted lips were removed. Yet, when one of the teachers at school B showed the pictures of the Black Petes and the chimney Pete on her computer screen, she had to zoom in to be able to distinguish the chimney Pete from the traditional Black Petes. Other schools changed their Black Petes in response to the controversy by having them painted brown instead of black, implying that the ceremony can be made less offensive by making Black Pete *more* racially realistic rather than less (as in the chimney soot response). At both of the schools we visited, decorations and educational material that featured brown Petes were thought of as more benign than the black ones with big red lips and earrings.

The brown Pete alternative ostensibly conflicts with the chimney story, manufacturing a new paradox that narratively encapsulates the trope of racial absent presence. The chimney Pete is supposed to be less reminiscent of black people than the Black Pete, retroactively detaching it from its racial history. By contrast, the brown Pete is aimed to be less offensive because it is thought of as less stereotypical than the black one and as providing a more realistic depiction of people of African descent. Unintentionally, the latter story confirms that Black Pete had indeed always been a depiction of blacks and contradicts the deracializing effort of the chimney story. Thus, different strategies to mitigate Black Pete’s racial associations undermine each other, revealing the presence of race in the very attempt at erasing it (Chauvin et al. 2017).

***Doing It For the Children?*¹⁵**

“Debate this in talk shows and newspapers but leave the kids alone”, implored Ajé Boschhuizen, the Sinterklaasjournaal writer in the Dutch newspaper NRC (6 December). Yet, children have been mobilized by both sides who, for opposite reasons, have respectively cast them as the primary victims of either Black Pete or the controversy surrounding it. Even schools that decided to make changes to Sinterklaas’ controversial companion/slave insisted that alterations had to remain unnoticeable to children themselves, thus protecting them from the unhappy politics behind the change.

As officials at school B found that changing all three Black Petes at once would be too radical, they opted for one chimney Pete and two Black Petes. According to respondents from school B, none of the children made comments about the new chimney Pete. The alteration was seen as having passed successfully precisely because the children had not seemed to notice it. If they had, it might have caused confusion which—according to one of the heads—would have

jeopardized the essence of the festival: “Because actually we didn’t want to change anything if it would upset a children’s holiday”. For other schools, protecting the children was the main reason *not* to change anything at all. Many of these schools judged the debate to be an adult issue in which the interests of children—who were typically described as innocent and incapable of discriminating others—were neglected.

Of the schools giving a reason for not altering Black Pete, 19.8% mentioned the children or the festival being a children’s holiday as a reason for not changing. In some of these responses, non-white children were explicitly mentioned in defence of the tradition (20 out of 71). This was done in two different ways. First, schools not changing Black Pete and keeping it traditional explicitly justified it as a way of getting recently migrated children accustomed to genuine Dutch culture. Second, children with a minority background were used as a way of defending the tradition as harmless, because they allegedly enjoyed the celebration just as much as the other children. A respondent from a school in Utrecht gave such a response:

We experienced that it is actually Black Pete that makes the celebration fun. We do not want to take that away from the children. Moreover, the children do not relate it to slavery etc. I asked the pupils from other countries/cultures and they unanimously agreed that Black Pete was fun.

While children were more often mentioned by schools as a reason not to change, 17.3% of those schools also mentioned considering the parents. The decision not to alter anything to Black Pete was frequently made after seeking advice from the parents’ council or another advisory board in which parents were represented. Other schools reported that they did not see the need to change, because parents did not complain over it. Finally, a few schools reported being pressured by parents *not* to change.

From schools that did alter Black Pete, 13.3% mentioned taking parents into consideration before doing so. In these cases, complaining parents were often identified as a main reason for change. Parents also played an important role at the two schools we visited. Both the head and the deputy head at school A emphasized that (overwhelmingly Surinamese) parents had addressed the issue of Black Pete from the very beginning of the school’s existence, and asked for the figure not to appear during the celebration. The deputy head explained:

From the start, we had a parent group who, from their background and their roots [Surinamese], really aimed at preserving the self-esteem and self-respect of the children. When they were younger, they often experienced being treated rudely in this period [leading up to 5 December] and all kinds of slurs were directed at them. So they proposed: “we would like it if Sinterklaas wouldn’t appear here”.

At school B, a father addressed the issue in 2013 and again in 2014. When interviewed, he also emphasized the importance of his racial identity. He explained that growing up as a black child in a small white village, he was often confronted with Black Pete during the Sinterklaas period. Every year, again and again, his peers teased him by calling him Black Pete.

Notably, while invoking “black feelings” can work to stir up change as in the case of school B, it may also come with a cost. Indeed, black individuals may also be brought on to prove that the problem does not exist, if some of them can be shown to share the feelings of the happy majority. This was the case with schools that used approval by ethnic minority children and/or their parents as a justification for not changing anything. In addition, when blacks were thought of as not being present in a school or in the surrounding community, respondents felt no reason to change or even to deal with the issue at all.

From the vantage point of the anti-Black Pete critique, admitting that the controversy is mainly a matter of black feelings also amounts to again conceding that blacks are the problem. While Black Pete has the potential of reconnecting the Dutch colonial past to the country’s national historical narrative, the focus on black feelings insures that it remains solely related to blacks and *their* history rather than Dutch history. When kids are involved, such lopsided focus took the form of a fear that Black kids would confuse their fathers with Black Pete. Black kids, of course, never confuse their fathers with the racist caricature, as a teacher in school A confirmed. White kids do, however.

Keeping It “Gezellig”

Some schools decided to change Black Pete. However, children had to be kept unaware of these alterations. One way of achieving this was by making changes too small to notice. If the children would notice, the fun would be spoiled, especially if it brought any hint of the struggle that occasioned those changes. The “innocence” of the children was used as an argument for changing without acknowledging change so as to avoid an uncomfortable conversation about race in the Netherlands. Thus, while the politics of happiness do not necessarily prohibit change, self-denying change does ensure that the transformation remains “*gewoon gezellig*”. Black Pete may simply be “disappeared”.

The silent removal of the cause of the problem thus depoliticizes both the critique and its outcome. It reduces the original controversy to a benign technical misunderstanding that does not challenge multicultural happiness. As a result, those who continue to address racism after Black Pete has been (partly) altered—or Petes of other colours have been *added*—face accusations of being obtrusive and ungrateful towards a multicultural society that, by changing, was able to maintain and confirm its self-image as open and charitable to all minorities (Ghorashi 2014).

Another way of making changes imperceptible was by keeping them in line with Sinterklaas celebrations elsewhere in the nation. Maintaining the festival’s innocence requires avoiding that the celebration self-deconstruct through excessive heterogeneity, and thus demands an amount of coordination. As a result, national-level institutions such as the TV program *Sinterklaasjournaal* and other national trendsetting media have been assigned a prominent role in local debates (Chauvin et al. 2017). At school B, a black father warned the staff that not changing the Sinterklaas festival would pose the threat of “lagging behind the developments”. In response, the head declared she wanted the Sinterklaas and Black Petes entering

the school to resemble as closely as possible the “official versions” shown in the *Sinterklaasjournaal* and at Sinterklaas’ official entrance parade in Amsterdam. As she tried and failed to find out in advance how the *Sinterklaasjournaal* would deal with the issue, she commented:

It is of course quite important. It is one of the sources that children watch, we would have liked to know [what changes they would make], but fine. I now read in the newspapers what their considerations were [not to let people know in advance]. Well okay then, it ended well. Because, actually, we didn’t want to change anything if it would be opposing a children’s holiday. We didn’t want to do that, so actually we wanted to make adjustments in line with Amsterdam, the children of Amsterdam and the *Sinterklaasjournaal*. So basically we skipped the whole discussion about whether we should change or not.

Interestingly, while the head of the school sought to be considerate of the feelings of those protesting Black Pete by carrying out changes, the burden of not being aligned with other national and citywide appearances of the figure was simply too heavy. Delegating change to external or central decision-making bodies thus functioned as another way of depoliticizing change itself.

Critique and the Emotions Trap

A centrepiece of the Dutch festival of Sinterklaas, the blackface character Black Pete has met with growing contestation in the past decade over its caricatural representation of people of African descent. Attacks on this national “happy object” elicited a host of majority responses that converged in their defensive assertion of the tradition’s “non-racism”. This article considered the geographical imagination of race that has informed recent decisions over whether to maintain, modify or suppress the Black Pete character in Dutch primary schools. Although many schools refused to change anything, in some schools Black Pete was altered to accommodate criticism. Beyond spatial variation in the distribution between change and non-change, most decisions were justified in the name of respect for “black feelings”, whether the latter were experienced as present or absent.

Many schools not changing the ceremony, especially in rural areas, claimed they were not hurting anyone because they had no black students. Schools that did change the ceremony, especially in urban areas, also expressed their concern for the “sensitivities” of people of African descent, even when no pupils were black. Indeed, our geographical survey showed that levels of urbanization were a better predictor than the presence of ethno-racial minorities for the frequency with which Black Pete was altered. Rather than actual encounters with racial others, propensity for change appeared to be connected with an imagination of oneself as belonging to a multicultural and multiracial environment along with cosmopolitan responsiveness to international critique and a concern for keeping up with the dynamics of a “progressing” society.

Drawing upon Sara Ahmed’s (2008, 2010) analysis of the centrality of compulsory happiness in the dynamics of nationalism and white supremacy, we suggested that the happiness of happy objects does not preclude change. In the

case of the Black Pete controversy, however, the imagination of Dutch society as freed of racial conflict only allowed change at the condition that it be depoliticized and not recognized as such—thus turning it into “happy change”. Moreover, we showed that the concern for accommodating “black feelings” could equally translate into conservation. On the one hand, the trope of black feelings meant including witnesses of African descent in the imagined community in reference to which schools justified their choice. On the other, invoking the presence of an imagined racial other as an argument for change left the possibility of arguing of its absence to reject any modification. It shifted the focus away from a critique of Dutch whiteness and racism towards neutralized representations of multiculturalism and liberal injunctions to respect diverse sensibilities and opinions even when one disagrees with them.

Thus, although professions of colour-blindness often constitute the default performance of non-racism in reaction to anti-racist critique (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Bonnet 2014), the promotion of defensive multiculturalism in the Dutch response to the Black Pete controversy suggests that non-racism can also be performed through the claim of merely accommodating the irrational feelings of racial others. In the name of emotional democracy, the focus on black feelings was mirrored by calls for mutual tolerance between proponents and opponents of Black Pete that normatively portrayed multicultural society as conflict free, with the ironical but not surprising result of framing persistent anti-racist critique as disrespectful of “white feelings” and thus ultimately as anti-multicultural.

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Endnotes

¹ This was partly triggered by an online video posted in the fall of 2011 showing the violent arrest of poet and dramatist Quinsy Gario at the national arrival of Sinterklaas on 12 November 2011. Together with artist and poet Kno’Ledge Cesare (Jerry Afriyie), they silently attended the entrance wearing t-shirts with the text “Zwarte Piet is racism” (Black Pete is racism). For the police, this was enough reason to arrest both of them. Other reasons for increased media attention were a lawsuit against the municipality of Amsterdam aimed at preventing the entrance of Sinterklaas and his Black Petes within city limits.

² In January 2013, the UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent asked the Dutch government to respond to concerns brought by people of African descent with regards to the racial stereotyping of Black Pete.

³ See http://www.volkscultuur.nl/archief_27.html#link212 (last accessed 8 August 2015) and <http://sintenPetesgilde.nl/ontstaan/> (last accessed 8 August 2015).

⁴ Many Dutch people think “*gezellig*” is untranslatable and represents a feeling uniquely Dutch.

⁵ As statistics of ethnic composition per school were not available to us, this is based on our interview data and own observations.

⁶ List acquired from https://www.duo.nl/open_onderwijsdata/ (it is not available anymore as it has been replaced with the 2015 version).

⁷ Shapefile obtained from www.imergis.nl

⁸ The Randstad is the most urbanized area in the Western part of the Netherlands, comprising the four largest cities (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Den Haag and Utrecht.).

⁹ Or at least those that are quite visible in the media and through their activities. Examples of such groups are: Zwarte Piet Niet, Zwarte Piet is Racisme campagne, New Urban Collective and Stichting Nederland wordt beter.

¹⁰ A court case won in the first instance by the complainants. After the mayor, among others, appealed, the decision was however annulled by the State Council (highest court in Dutch administrative law) on 12 November 2014 (see www.raadvanstate.nl—case number 201406757/1/A3).

¹¹ Levels of urbanization were measured by the density of addresses per municipality in 2014 (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek).

¹² According to this dominant narrative, Black Pete has to climb down chimneys to bring children presents.

¹³ Note that the holiday is also celebrated in high schools, companies, student organizations, among adult friends, etc. Within these celebrations, Black Pete and Sinterklaas feature less prominently, although they are not entirely absent as they typically feature on decorations, in songs, and as candies, for instance.

¹⁴ These percentages are not additive, since multiple answers were possible.

¹⁵ This title refers to the documentary “We’re doing it for the children” made by the Cultural Media Collective-Creation for Liberation in 1982. The documentary, which aired on British television, explores reactions of Dutch people to the statement that Black Pete is a racist caricature: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AujLZhuiPMU> (last accessed 24 February 2017).

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