White faces and black masks: The Dutch *Sinterklaas* tradition – A colonial hangover or a children’s tradition meant for everyone?

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Abstract

Open-minded attitudes and an international environment are two terms that describe Amsterdam and the Netherlands well. Yet, in contradiction, the Sinterklaas tradition and, especially, the ritual of dressing up as Zwarte Piet takes annually place in the Dutch society. The aggressively debated subject whether Zwarte Piet is racist has divided opinions; some view Zwarte Piet as offensive, while others think of him as completely harmless. Although, the increasingly challenging opinions and protesting by Afro-Dutch individuals has resulted in that celebrating and Zwarte Piet isn’t anything self-evident anymore.

The ongoing Zwarte Piet debate is an inspiration source for this thesis as it aims to explore how the polarized opinions about how the character can be understood and what happens when the two opposite opinions collide? The empirical data is gathered through a semi-structured interview, a group interview and participant observation. The theoretical framework used to analyze the data is Victor Turner’s concept: multivocality and critical race and whiteness theory. By analyzing how individuals both experience and celebrate the ritual of Zwarte Piet, it becomes possible to further explore how or why the tradition can be considered racist or harmless. What happens when the two opinions collide and what effect does it have on the Dutch society?

Ultimately, this project will contribute to a larger discussion about how modern-day racism in the Netherlands as well as in Europe is understood. It will also work as a reference point for the ongoing societal debate regarding questions whether the tradition of Zwarte Piet should continue or not.

Keywords: Sinterklaas, Zwarte Piet, the Netherlands, symbolism, tradition, identity, whiteness, white supremacy, stereotypes, racism
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1. Background

The Netherlands is known for being a nation with tolerance and anti-racism as two of its core values. “While the Dutch history proves it; their open policies demonstrate it” (Tavares, 2004). In 2007, the former Dutch Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende claimed that: “the Netherlands is in its origins a country of tolerance and respect. People therefore deserve respect for their beliefs, faith and identity” (Smeekes 2011: 170). Yet, there is a societal gap between the self-image produced by the Dutch society and what minorities living in the Netherlands experience. The Dutch Sinterklaas-tradition provides some examples of this gap.

Sinterklaas, Saint Nicholas in English, is an imaginary 4th-century Catholic bishop from Myra\(^1\). Each year children are told that Sinterklaas travels from Spain to the Netherlands on a steamboat. In November, Sinterklaas arrives to the Netherlands, where he is publicly welcomed and celebrated in almost every city across the country. A welcoming committee where the mayor meets him, which is broadcasted on national TV and is a spectacle watched by thousands of children and adults.

In the tradition, Sinterklaas is accompanied by a servant - something that can traced back to the middle ages\(^2\). However, in the Dutch version of the Saint Nicholas tradition, Sinterklaas is accompanied by a character named Zwarte Piet, Black Pete in English; a dark, curly haired companion with reddened lips, wearing golden-hoop earrings and dressed in a colorful early modern servant costume. While the origin of the character is debated, a well-known theory is that he first appeared in a children’s rhyming book\(^3\).

Although Surinamese sailors were, in 1934, during the first ceremonial celebration of Zwarte Piet asked to act as the character – the character is usually today played by white individuals who paint their faces black (Lakmaker 2009). As the Sinterklaas tradition is widely thought of as a children’s tradition it is not uncommon that children are painted black as well. Nonetheless,

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1 Myra is a town in present-day Turkey.
2 Saint Nicholas servant has since the middle-age, under different names and appearances, been personified as a tamed devil. This domesticated devil was often depicted in shackles to convey that Nicholas had captured, enslaved and civilized him symbolizing his victory over the evil power. The picture of Nicholas with a servant symbolizing evil forces is still reproduced today in several European nations. For example, Saint Nicholas is in Austria accompanied by a demonic, horned and red-tongued Krampus, while in Germany he is being served by a sooty and mean farmhand named Ruprecht; yet in France and Luxembourg, his attendant is an evil butcher (Raboteau 2014: 144,145).
3 A well-known theory is that Zwarte Piet first became popular in a nineteenth-century children’s rhyming book published by a schoolteacher named Jan Schenkmans. Published in 1850, the children’s book shows Sinterklaas, for the first time, accompanied by a black servant (Schols 2019: 25).
the question remains: why black? The most frequently used explanation is that Zwarte Piet’s duty is to climb through chimneys in order to deliver presents to children resulting in his blackened face (Lamers 2009: 443).

On 5\textsuperscript{th} of December, the Sinterklaas eve is celebrated. According to the legend, Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet visit every family in the Netherlands giving children sweets and gifts. During this period shops all around the Netherlands are decorated with Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet promotional material and institutions such as: schools, companies, hospitals to Dutch embassies abroad all celebrate the tradition. However, in the process of mass celebration which is an important intangible Dutch heritage – the contested picture of Sinterklaas is repeatedly reproduced. The tradition has become an important building block in the Dutch identity. John Helsloot argues that: “Zwarte Piet has grown into a key or master symbol of Dutch society, ‘a way of talking about’ the Netherlands”. The result is that any attack on Zwarte Piet is viewed as blow to Dutchness (Helsloot 2012: 13). In other words, the general view, in the Netherlands, is that Zwarte Piet is not a character that spreads racial prejudice. In 2014, Mark Rutte, the prime minister of the Netherlands formulated the argument that: “Black Pete is black, and I cannot change this because his name is Black Pete. This is an old children’s tradition. It is Sinterklaas and Black Pete and not Green Pete or Brown Pete, so I cannot change that”. 4 In 2017, most of the Dutch did not connect Zwarte Piet to racism as 68\% of respondents to a national survey indicated that they did not consider Zwarte Piet an offending character and therefore did not want him to undergo any changes whatsoever (EenVandaag 2017). Yet, evidence that the character Zwarte Piet reinforces racial stereotypes exists. Helder writes: “Once the transformation is completed, a change in voice and behavior usually follows. He or she [i.e. actors who play Zwarte Piet] will speak improper Dutch with a low voice and a Surinamese accent” (Helder 2005: 3). In the past five years the character has been both heavily and emotionally debated; it is thought of as an increasingly disturbing and racist celebration; with people of Afro-Dutch descent feeling the most discriminated\textsuperscript{5} (Raboteau 2013: 1).

\textsuperscript{4} “Black Pete is black, and I cannot change that because his name is black Pete. It is an old Dutch children’s tradition, Saint Nicolas and Black Pete. It is not about a green or brown Pete and I cannot change that. I can only say that my friends in the Netherlands Antilles are very happy with the Saint Nicolas celebration, because they don’t have to paint their faces. When I play Black Pete, I am for days trying to get the grime off my face” – Mark Rutte 23-03-14, reaction to a question of a Dutch-American journalist at National Security Summit.

\textsuperscript{5} In Amsterdam, Dutch-born or “racially” mixed individuals of black South American, Afro-Caribbean or African descent show a sense of a shared African heritage, as well as an increased desire for public recognition of their Africanness (de Witte 2014: 260).
1.1 Questions and aims

As an individual of African descent as well as someone originating from Finland; a country where publicly dressing up as Zwarte Piet would be viewed as both backwards and socially unacceptable – I, personally, struggle to understand and tolerate the ritual of dressing up as Zwarte Piet. When living in Amsterdam, in 2016-2018, the annual emergence and celebration of Zwarte Piet, who in my opinion resembles blackface, in the Dutch society left me wondering how the tradition can be viewed as acceptable.

Simultaneously I witnessed how most Dutch people supported the ritual of Zwarte Piet and didn’t want the character to undergo changes. The oppositional opinions about whether Zwarte Piet is socially acceptable or not, have been debated for years, without any side taking precedence. This sparked my further interest in understanding better the coexistence of such polarized opinions about Zwarte Piet in society. How can the polarized opinions be understood? What happens when the two opinions collide? Does the tradition have the role to exclude some individuals, while includes others into the main Dutch culture? In order to address these questions, I will use empirical data collected through interviews and participant observation, in order to examine how Dutch-individuals experience the tradition within the broader context of Dutch society and its attitudes toward the issues of racism, migration, and discrimination.

The theoretical frameworks that will be used in analyzing the ritual of Zwarte Piet are: Victor Turner’s concept: multivocal symbols and critical race and whiteness theory. My specific questions that guide my research are:

- How can the differentiating opinions about Zwarte Piet be understood?
- What happens when the two opinions collide?
- Does the Sinterklaas tradition have a role to exclude some, while including others into the main Dutch culture?

1.2 Earlier research

Various previous research surrounding the issues of Zwarte Piet has been done. For example, published on January 2012, John Helsloot’s article: Zwarte Piet and Cultural Aphasia in the Netherlands, builds on the American historian Ann Laura Stoler’s concept: aphasia, which she used for describing the cultural inability to recognize things in the world and assign proper names to them. Another more recent example is Heleen Schols doctoral thesis: Keeping things gezellig: negotiating Dutchness and racism in the struggle over ‘Black Pete’. Published in November 2019, Schols doctoral thesis examines how people’s participation in the Zwarte Piet
debate can be viewed as affirmations, claims or propositions about who can have a say about Zwarte Piet in the Dutch society.

1.3 Relevance
The on-going Zwarte Piet debate is a relevant and trending topic in the Netherlands. In recent years, the tradition has got international attention as the debate has escalated from a conversational level to a physical level. The tradition has led to an increase in terrorist attacks in the Netherlands. For example, in 2018, white supremacists raised Nazi salutes at the Sinterklaas parade in Hoorn and waived neo-Nazi flags at the one in Zaandijk. The same year, an estimated 250 white extremists chanted racist slogans while throwing eggs, bananas and beer cans at people peacefully protesting the parade (Little 2018). In November 2019, a man, in the Hague, threatened opponents of the tradition with a suicide bombing attack (Pieters 2019). On the same month, anti-Zwarte Piet activists fell victim to a violent attempted arson attack in the Hague (Newmark 2019).

1.4 Disposition
This paper is structured into five parts. The first part provides the reader with essential background information about the Sinterklaas tradition as well as the character Zwarte Piet. In the second part, the theoretical frameworks: symbolic multivocality and the critical race and whiteness theory are presented. In the third part, the empirical methods which consist of participant observation, a semi-structured interview and focused group interview are presented. In the fourth part, the polarizing opinions about the character Zwarte Piet are analyzed through the theoretical frameworks in order to gain a better understanding of why people support or are against the tradition and whether the tradition normalizes racial prejudice. In the fifth and last part, the key-points of the analysis will be summed up in order to look at the issues surrounding Zwarte Piet from a macro perspective. Ultimately, the paper will result in a further insight about how individuals in the Netherlands understand the mechanisms of modern-day racism.
2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical frameworks used to analyze the empirical material are Victor Turner’s concept: multivocal symbols and the critical race and whiteness theory. Other important terms used in this paper are, ethnicity\(^6\), race\(^7\), stereotyping\(^8\) and colorblindness\(^9\). The concept multivocal symbol is applied on the character Zwarte Piet in order to highlight how the tradition is understood differently by different individuals within the Dutch society. The critical race and whiteness theory is used for understanding the opposing opinions regarding the tradition, as well as in analyzing what position whiteness has in the tradition.

2.1 Multivocal Symbols

Victor Turner (1920-1983) was a British cultural anthropologist who, in his book: Symbols of the forest, discussed the concept: multivocal symbol. Turner conducted his fieldwork in Zambia, among the Ndembu-people. He studied what and how the milk tree was as a symbol understood concluding that the Ndembu-people ascribed different symbolical meanings the milk tree; making it a symbol with multiple meanings (Turner 1967: 29). However, Turner did not only refer to the milk tree as a multivocal symbol, but the milk tree was, according to him, a dominant symbol as well. Dominant symbols are characterized by two properties. Firstly, many different phenomena are given a common expression and secondly, a dominant symbol contains a fusion of different meanings; resulting in that people can find commonalities through a dominant symbol (1967: 30). Turner suggests that because people are different, symbols must be able to mean different things to different people in order to create solidarity (2000: 241). However, because symbols can have multiple meanings, they can also be used in multiple ways. Multivocal symbols can be used to dominate other meanings and by so blocking different

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\(^6\) The term ethnicity can be defined as “an ideology of cultural difference between people” (Payne, Öhlander 2017: 293,294)

\(^7\) Race refers to idea that the human species is divided into groups based on physical and behavioral differences. Race, has since the 1700-century been used to divide groups of people in “scientific” way (2017: 57,58)

\(^8\) Stereotypes are created through categorizations, when simplified descriptions of well-known attributes of groups of people becomes a representation of a whole group, a stereotype is formed (Mattson 2015: 45).

\(^9\) Colorblindness is based upon the idea that appearance shouldn’t or doesn’t matter (2012: 43). The critical race and whiteness theory suggest that a color-blind approach can contribute in oppression rather than social justice. The conscious choice of not wanting to see color means that one perceives color as something negative. Colorblindness then becomes a tool for invalidating individual’s racism-related experiences, as well as method of ignoring the existence of the white privilege in western societies. Claiming to be colorblind can, in other, be used for denying, promoting and justifying racism (Apfelbaum, Norton, Sommers 2012: 206,207).
explanations, creating contradictions or discrepancies in meaning; leading to conflicting and contrasting ideas about the same symbol (Turner 1967).

2.2 Critical race and whiteness theory
The critical race and whiteness approach originate from the United States. Drawing inspiration from critical legal studies, the approach was first created by legal scholars. While the academic discipline started in the United States and focuses most of its research on that society, it has later been applied on other societies as well (Schols 2019: 113). What the approach highlights are the normative systems that govern the relationship between “races” – a dynamism where whiteness is both produced and reproduced as the privileged superior position (Hübinette 2012: 44). As the name of the approach hints, two essential concepts within the critical race and whiteness theory are race and whiteness. Whiteness as well as race is within the approach considered to be a socially constructed phenomenon, which main purpose is to maintain inequality through the creation of social, economic and legal differences between the white and non-white population. The critical whiteness theory or study, as it is also known as, further challenges power relations hidden in institutional norms and certainties (Ahmed 2011: 206).

This paper will further discuss four terms commonly discussed within the critical race and whiteness theory: the whiteness-norm10, white privilege11, white supremacy12 and structural racism13. However, here it is worth noting that the term whiteness is often mis-associated with skin-color. Even though, skin-color and appearance are, to some extent, discussed within the critical race and whiteness theory, the focus lies on questions of how racialized power structures are formed by whiteness (Ingridsdotter 2017: 34). Ylva Habel further suggests that whiteness is a racialized power structure which derived out of a colonial context that is still prevalent today (Habel 2012).

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10 The whiteness-norm is the idea that whiteness is, in western societies, the norm and therefore something individuals should strive for. Whiteness being the norm also implies that a hierarchical system based on whiteness exists and that the higher degree of whiteness an individual possesses, the higher human dignity that individual has (Hübinette, Pripp 2017: 308).
11 White privilege can be described as the societal benefits of white people over non-white people (Kendall 2002: 1).
12 White supremacy is the belief that the white race is intellectually and culturally superior to other races.
13 Structural racism can be defined as a system in which public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and other norms work in reinforcing ways to maintain racial group inequity. It is based in dimensions of history and culture that have allowed whiteness to become a privileged position, while disadvantages have been associated with color. However, structural racism is not something that a few people or institutions choose to practice. Instead it is embedded into social, economic and political systems in which we all exist (Lawrence 2004).
3. Method and material
The methods used in this research are: a semi-structured interview, a focused group interview and participant observation. All the methods complement each other, as gathering empirical material from three different sources was necessary in order to get a wholesome understanding of how the polarized opinions regarding Zwarte Piet can be understood.

3.1 Participant observation
On the November 17th, 2019 I observed the annual Sinterklaas parade at Dam-Square in the heart of Amsterdam. What mostly interested me during my observation was how the overall atmosphere of the parade was created; how the tradition was celebrated, what kind of people part-ttook in the parade, how both Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet were portrayed and what the relationship between the two characters was like. Despite using a notebook and a camera as observational tools, I tried my best of being like a “fly on the wall”, meaning that I quietly observed the field, without any further interaction with the observed subjects.

My choice of conducting a participant observation lies in the fact that the method allows the researches observe how things really are; to analyze how actors in their in their natural habitat act. Another perk with the method is that it grants the researcher with high degree of anonymity (Lalander 2015: 99). In my case, it enabled me to observe a large amount of people without linking anything to any specific individual. Although, the method isn’t flawless. Firstly, a disadvantage of the method is that by solely conducting participant observations, the researcher does not get a wholesome picture. Only observing something does not necessarily reveal the reasons behind the observed attitudes, behavior and preferences. Secondly, observing someone without their consent can raise ethical issues. Does observing individuals without their consent in the purpose of research invade their rights to privacy? -These are among the questions that I was constantly thinking about while conducting my observation.

3.2 Semi-structured interview
The second data collection method used in this project is a semi-structured interview. I interviewed a Dutch-Surinamese woman named Ruchama. Ruchama, who is in her thirties is born and raised in Amsterdam and works as a financial administrator.

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14 All, but the cover picture used in this research are taken by me.
During the interview I only had few predetermined questions, which were about how she experiences the *Sinterklaas* tradition; how she views *Zwarte Piet* and whether she thinks the tradition is offensive. As the method semi-structured interview hints, the interview mostly consisted of open-ended questions, which resulted in an open, but guided discussion. The purpose of conducting an open-ended approach was for my informant to get more space for self-reflection, which then simultaneously resulted in that me, as a researcher, got a chance for further in-depth questioning, analyzing and observing what my informants thinks, believes and knows about the tradition (2015: 34).

### 3.3 Focus group interview

The third data collection method used in this study is a focused group interview. The explorative method: focused group interview is based upon the idea of letting the participants’ voices and experiences take the lead. Within this method, the goal is for individuals with shared experiences and knowledge to have an open discussion of their experiences and opinions related to a selected subject (Dahlin-Ivanoff 2015: 73).

For this paper, I interviewed three individuals: Thomas, Arthur and Jonathan. All three informants have much in common. Firstly, they are all white Dutch men between their late thirties and mid-forties. Secondly, they all work within the academia: Thomas is a high school geography teacher, Arthur is a historian, while Jonathan is a teacher in law. Like my conducted semi-structured interview, this interview was open-ended as well, based on only a few predetermined questions that worked as guidelines for the discussion. The choice of conducting a focused group interview was based upon the idea that the method enables the researcher to observe and part-take in a “real” and natural interaction. In my case, the method enabled me to not only listen to what my informants were saying about *Zwarte Piet*, but to “read between the lines” by observing how they discussed the matter and what kind of questions the asked each other. When my informants were discussing, I was quietly listening and voice recording my informants talking and comparing their thoughts, feelings, perceptions and opinions with each other.
4. “Saying Zwarte Piet is wrong is like saying that you should feel guilty for having good childhood-memories”

In the Netherlands, the general opinion is that Zwarte Piet symbolizes Dutch culture. However, by applying Victor Turners concept: multivocality on the character Zwarte Piet, it becomes evident that the character symbolizes different things to different individuals within the Dutch society.

The multivocality of Zwarte Piet as a symbol is further supported by my empirical material. All my informants agreed upon the fact that Zwarte Piet is generally thought of as an important character that symbolizes the Dutch identity. Celebrating the Sinterklaas tradition with Zwarte Piet included is, according to Thomas, the only solely Dutch holiday tradition in the Netherlands. Making it one of the few things, apart from the Dutch language, the Dutch football team and the “open-minded attitude” that sets the Dutch culture apart from other European cultures. The idea that Zwarte Piet represents the Dutch identity further results in that individuals who support the character view that being against Zwarte Piet equals being against the Dutch identity. In other words, the existing fear of losing Zwarte Piet could be explained through the idea of losing an important building block of the Dutch identity; an identity that many, according to Thomas, feel is being threatened by both globalization and immigration. Alternatively, Sacha Hilhorst and Joke Hermes suggest that the fear of losing Zwarte Piet can be understood through the “domino theory”. The theory refers to the idea that if Zwarte Piet undergoes modifications then all sort of other things will be taken away or changed as well (Hilhors, Hermes 2016).

If proceeding from the idea that the Sinterklaas tradition represents the Dutch identity, the tradition could be understood as a reproduction of an assumed picture of what the Dutch identity is rather than solely a children’s holiday.

However, Zwarte Piet also symbolizes childhood memories. All my informants associated Zwarte Piet with fond childhood memories. Claiming that the character is bad or morally wrong is, therefore, according to my informant Arthur, equal to saying that: “all your good childhood-memories are bad, you should now feel guilty for having good childhood-memories of Zwarte Piet”. Here, the idea that: “it was acceptable to celebrate and support Zwarte Piet as a child, it should be okay now as well” exists; resulting in that the character is associated with innocence.
4.1 When whiteness equals comfort

Because Zwarte Piet symbolizes the Dutch identity and childhood memories – it could be argued that the presumed Dutch identity that Zwarte Piet annually reproduces produces feelings of comfort to individuals who supports the character. Sara Ahmed argues that: “to be comfortable is to be so at ease with one’s environment that it is hard to distinguish where one’s body end’s and the world begins” (Ahmed 2007: 158). During the annual Sinterklaas celebration at Dam-Square similar expressions of comfort were visible. By dressing up as Zwarte Piet, both Dutch and foreign children as well as adults from different walks of life part-took in the tradition. The festive atmosphere condensed with laughter and smiles suggested that, through part-taking in the ritual of Zwarte Piet, individuals felt and expressed feelings of unity and solidarity, which resulted in expressed feelings comfort.

With that said, the number of Afro-Dutch individuals or other colored minorities watching or playing Zwarte Piet was extremely low compared to those of white\textsuperscript{15}. In comparison to the white crowd, the few black or colored individuals watching the celebration had less-enthusiastic facial expressions or were just slowly biking past\textsuperscript{16}. Ruchama supports this observation by claiming that: “mostly white people go to the city to celebrate Sinterklaas” - a suggestion that further supports the argument that the annual Sinterklaas celebration is a white space. Ahmed suggests that bodies stand out when they are out of place; something that re-confirms the whiteness of space (2007: 159). From this point of view, the idea of the tradition being a white space explains why black or brown bodies automatically stood out when part-taking in the tradition, ultimately resulting in them looking a less-enthusiastic than their white counterparts.

\textsuperscript{15} During my three-hour observation at Dam-Square I only saw three black or colored individuals.

\textsuperscript{16} When observing the tradition, it became evident that black or colored individuals had less-enthusiastic facial expressions than their white counterparts. Also, no black or colored individuals dressed up as Zwarte Piet or were at the front rows watching the tradition, as they all stood far in the back.
In the white space, whiteness further works as a vehicle allowing white bodies to comfortably move within the space of the tradition, and to inhabit that “world” as if it were home, which also results in that those bodies take up more space (2007: 159). In other words, white bodies were more comfortable as they inhabited spaces that extended their own shape. In this regard, the celebration is more comfortable if an individual possesses a certain degree of whiteness.

4.2 “You become very aware of the fact that you’re not completely Dutch”

The multivocality of the character Zwarte Piet can also be seen in the fact that while the character symbolizes identity and childhood memories to some, the character symbolizes racism and discrimination to others. If proceeding from the idea that the character developed during a colonial context as a slave-character – it could be argued that Zwarte Piet’s appearance, behavior and asymmetrical relationship to Sinterklaas all reproduce colonial ideas of “we and them”; the savage and the civilized.

During the annual parade at Dam-Square, the concept race was embedded into the core of the Sinterklaas tradition. Fredrik Barth argues that ethnicity, race in this case, works as marker highlighting the differences between individuals and is actively maintained through social processes (Barth 1969: 9,10). Applying Barth’s idea on the Sinterklaas tradition highlights how the main differences between Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet are created through assumptions of the “black and white race” and maintained through annually celebrating the tradition. Through the race-based division between the two characters a categorization a “we and them” is formed, where black or colored individuals automatically fall into the category “them”. “You become very aware of the fact that you’re not completely Dutch”, as Ruchama expresses herself, supports this argument as the celebration of Zwarte Piet makes her feel excluded from the Dutch majority culture. According to Ruchama, she physically resembles Zwarte Piet more than Sinterklaas - something that results in her automatically identifying with the subordinate “other”. Ruchama’s opinion is not a detached opinion either. Helsloot argues that black people, who feel discriminated, commonly express that they identify with Zwarte Piet, as they see Zwarte Piet as a reflection their own status in the Dutch society (Helsloot 2010: 10).
4.3 The appearance of Zwarte Piet

At the annual Sinterklaas parade, Sinterklaas was portrayed as a white-elderly man wearing a long white robe and a red-mantle. By his appearance it could be argued that he represented what western societies generally associate with “the pure and the good". Zwarte Piet, on the other hand, was portrayed as the opposite. He was represented through color, hair and clothes. The character was exotified by having a blackened face and exaggerated facial features, such as large red lips. He also had a less “sterile” appearance than Sinterklaas, as he was wearing a colorful suit along with curly black wig and golden-hoop earrings. However, the most striking feature between the two characters were the contrasting colors: black and white. Leonardo and Rood along with most Western color theorists refer the color white to light and the color black to absence. In this case, it is important to reflect over the meaning behind the dualistic idea that white and black are absolute opposites as it highlights an assumed divide between the two colors (Dyer 1997: 48).

In the tradition, Zwarte Piet embodied features of a presumed picture of blackness. Ahmed suggests that, in western societies, an exotification and fetishization of blackness exists. She argues that fantasies to “pass as black” are fulfilled through adopting elements assumed belonging to “black culture” – assumptions that further make the adopted elements representations of what being black means (2011: 60). Similar assumptions of what blackness is were visible at the Sinterklaas parade. However, the blackness that Zwarte Piet represented was divided into individual body parts and characteristics. For example, Zwarte Piet was appearance-wise represented through color, clothing and hair. This raises an issue, as solely portraying Zwarte Piet through a few characteristics or body parts resulted in the characters loss

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17 In contrast to black, the color white is, in various western societies, seen as color that represents morally and spiritually pureness (1997: 58).
of personal identity - causing a depoliticization of the black body that Zwarte Piet represented\textsuperscript{18}. Simultaneously, through this act, the experiences of the black body are decontextualized and eradicated – ultimately resulting in that blackness becomes nothing more but store-bought color, clothes and hair (van der Pijl, Goulordava 2014: 286)

The fact that thousands of individuals dressed up as Zwarte Piet during the parade indicates that the character has become a commodity. Cited in Pijl and Gourlordava 2014, Sharp suggests that: "commodification insists upon objectification in some form, transforming persons and their bodies from a human category into objects of economic desire." (2000: 293). When it comes to commodification of culture. Bell Hooks argues that “within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture,” (Hooks 1992: 23). Therefore, it could be argued that the picture Zwarte Piet produces of the black body is used, through commodification and exotification of blackness, to “spice up” the mainstream white culture. Here, the difference between the mainstream white culture and Zwarte Piet also becomes a commodity; resulting in what Hooks refers to “commodification of difference” (1992: 29).

Ultimately, the commodification results in two factors. A) in a depoliticization of the black body, which becomes visible by the fact that any reference to race, racism and association to the legacy of slavery is denied and considered irrelevant. B) in the denial of the black body’s sociality, as it is regarded as belonging to the category “other” and therefore not considered as important as the white body\textsuperscript{19} (2014: 286).

\textsuperscript{18} The black body was removed from the realm of politics.

\textsuperscript{19} By not associating black bodies with the “we” categorization, black bodies are socially deprived; resulting in a social exclusion and a reduction in the interaction between black bodies and the rest of the Dutch society.
4.4 The behavior of Zwarte Piet

The “otherness” of Zwarte Piet was also reflected in his behavior. At the annual Sinterklaas parade, Sinterklaas had a calm authoritarian-role, while Zwarte Piet was displaying a clown-like behavior; goofing around, dancing and singing – something which further emphasized the asymmetrical master contra servant relationship between the two characters.

Here, it could be argued that the asymmetrical relationship between the two characters construct a social hierarchal categorization as well as symbolic boarders, based on assumptions of race, between what is considered normal and abnormal.

In the clash between the two identities a process where the white Dutch identity is formed emerges. By defining the difference to the “other”, the picture of what the white Dutch identity is and isn’t is formed (Butler 1993: 3). Such identity forming processes are, however, not uncommon. Richard Dyer suggest that white people often construct a self-image without race or ethnicity. While ascribing other ethnic groups collective identities, they do not ascribe to themselves a collective identification (1997: 4). Philomena Essed (1995) supports this claim as he suggests that white westerners, unlike colored individuals within the Netherlands, are not considered to be ethnic minorities. In other words, the white Dutch citizen is created though excluding non-whites; by not belonging or identifying as a non-white minority group, individuals reinforce the superior ordinary white-position.

4.5 Summary

The fact that Zwarte Piet symbolizes different things for different individuals within the Dutch society indicates that the character is a multivocal symbol. In the Netherlands, the opinions are polarized: individuals supporting the Sinterklaas tradition suggest that Zwarte Piet creates solidarity, while individuals opposing him suggest that he creates division. With that said, the
general opinion is that the character symbolizes a presumed Dutch identity and childhood memories. What Zwarte Piet symbolizes for individuals supporting the character has further resulted in a fear of losing the character. Thomas suggests that individuals, who support the tradition, feel that losing the character equals losing an important aspect of the Dutch identity; an identity which is thought to be under threat by immigration and globalization. From this perspective, Zwarte Piet can be understood as a phenomenon that ultimately produces feelings of comfort in individuals who identify with the presumed Dutch identity that the character symbolizes. However, the absence of Afro-Dutch individuals during the 2019 Sinterklaas parade at Dam-Square indicates that the tradition is a white space; a space where non-white bodies automatically stand-out. Within this white space, whiteness works as a vehicle allowing individuals possessing a certain degree of whiteness to effortlessly to feel at home. Resulting in that to be able to “fully” enjoy the ritual of Zwarte Piet becomes a question of privilege, rather than opinion. The absence of Afro-Dutch individual’s part-taking in the tradition could also be explained through the fact that an increasing number of individuals view Zwarte Piet as a symbol of discrimination, oppression and racism. During the annual parade, Zwarte Piet’s appearance, behavior and asymmetrical relationship to Sinterklaas all produced and reproduces categorizations of “we and them”. While observing the tradition, it became evident that assumptions of race (black and white) were embedded into the core of the parade, as the main difference between Zwarte Piet and Sinterklaas were formed through the contrasting features of the characters. While Sinterklaas displayed a calm authoritarian behavior and was portrayed in white – a color often associated with something “pure and good”. Zwarte Piet was exotified through bright colors, a blackened face and exaggerated facial features along with a submissive clown-like behavior. Not only did the appearance and the behavior of the two characters highlight an asymmetrical, master – servant, relationship, but the portrayed difference between them, ultimately, created symbolic boarders between “we and them”, where the picture of what the Dutch identity is and is not is formed.
Ahmed argues that in society, bodies are shaped by histories of colonialism, which makes the world “white”. This inherited world gives whites bodies an inheritance of reachability; meaning that whiteness is an orientation that puts certain things within reach (2007: 153). In other words, whiteness comes with a privilege that grants individuals inhabiting whiteness with an “invisible and weightless bag” with practical tools that gives them access to every conceivable sphere in society (2012: 55).

In the tradition, the inherited reachability or white privilege is visible in two aspects: firstly, white individuals can part-take in the Sinterklaas tradition without automatically, at some level, identifying with the subordinate position. From this perspective, the question of how black or colored individuals can whole-heartedly enjoy the national tradition without being offended by Zwarte Piet boils down to an individual’s white privilege.

Secondly, white people have a right to be various without losing their privileges. White individuals painting themselves black displays white people’s right to be various; a self-given right to incorporate themselves into features of other people (1997: 49). Unlike when colored individuals paint themselves black, white individuals lose no prestige in painting themselves black. Their whiteness remains even though they acquire darker skin, while black or colored individuals stay the same as they do not have the same inherited privileges. With that said, an alternative view on the annual Sinterklaas tradition can be perceived through viewing the tradition as an event that is not an extension of the “real world”, but rather, as Mikhail Bakhtin suggests: a space where the world is upside down. Bakhtin suggests that the carnival, in this case the Sinterklaas tradition, is an event where rules, restrictions and regulations of everyday life are suspended. In other words, the carnivalesque provides individuals to freely move over boarders constructed by societal norms and societal values. From this perspective, Zwarte Piet can be experienced and understood as a phenomenon outside of normality (Bakhtin 1984: 10).
However, ideas that Zwarte Piet is linked to individual’s white privileges are to a great extent dismissed by the general Dutch population. Because many western societies treat whiteness as the norm, as something neutral, the benefits that comes with whiteness are taken as a given. The benefits of whiteness are simply associated and understood accordingly to ideas of how the society is supposed to work. In various western societies, the status of whites represents how the social, political and legal systems are meant to function, which then validates that functioning, while the status of minority groups represents the imperfections in those systems. From this perspective, white normativity defines the perspective from which acceptability is judged (Morris 2016: 955).

The normalization of white privilege also makes the concept invisible. Dyer claims that white privilege is invisible as most white people do not recognize their own privilege. The inability of not seeing whiteness is based on the idea that whiteness is nothing; that the white identity and culture has no content (1997: 9). Ahmed supports this argument by suggesting that whiteness is only invisible to people possessing it (2011: 208). The idea of not having any content further results in that positions of power and privilege cannot be seen or understood by white individuals. By the term: transparency phenomenon, Barbara Flagg claims that there is a tendency of whites to not reflect over whiteness, norms, behaviors, experiences or perspectives that are white-specific” (Flagg 1993: 957). In this context, it could be argued that the Dutch white people’s tendency of not reflecting over the position their whiteness grants them in society, results in that the white privilege linked to the character Zwarte Piet remains invisible. Eventually, leading to that individuals with privilege unconsciously construct and reconstruct their privileged position by not seeing it. In this way, the white privilege becomes a norm that is embedded into individual’s habitus; embedded into the way individuals think, act and perceive reality.

5.1 Normalizing and internalizing racial prejudice
A key-feature when talking about modern-day racism is denial. Ahmed argues that “a form of racism is to say that racism does not exist” (Ahmed 2009: 47). A similar denying approach is visible in the two main arguments made by individuals supporting the Sinterklaas tradition. The two main arguments for why Zwarte Piet is and should be acceptable is, according to Thomas, that he has fallen down a chimney, resulting in a blackened face20 and that the tradition is for children and therefore innocent. In other words, it could be argued that an acclaimed innocence

20 The chimney argument dismisses the idea that Zwarte Piet is a black person.
lies at the core of both arguments – an innocence which is further used to validate and normalize the character. However, in order to understand how Zwarte Piet is normalized, one must take into consideration the context where the character exist: The Netherlands. Essed and Hoving suggest that: “Dominant discourses miss historical explanations and dismiss the connection between present ethnic humiliations and the brutality of colonization, slavery and antisemitism” (2014b: 11).

With that said, during my observation of the parade, Zwarte Piet displayed numerous expressions of classic western stereotypes of black people. For example, Zwarte Piet embodied traits of stupidity and immaturity - a behavior that when put next to the authoritarian figure Sinterklaas creates a justification for Zwarte Piet to be disciplined or civilized. Zwarte Piet also reproduced positive stereotypes. It could be argued that Zwarte Piet’s submissive behavior along with his constant need for being entertaining further reproduced positive stereotypical ideas of that blackness equals being good at dancing, singing and entertaining – an idea that implies that physicality, and not in intellect, is the natural preserve of a black person.

Commonly, positive stereotypes are thought of as not having any negative effects. This thought was evident in the tradition, as Zwarte Piet’s stereotypical behavior was made into a comedic spectacle laughed at and imitated by hundreds of children and adults’ part-taking in the tradition. Although, the intentions might not have been racism-based - colonial ideas of the African individual being too savage to ever become fully civilized were reproduced -ultimately leading to a dismissal of the seriousness of Zwarte Piet’s connection to the history of colonialism.

Even though the celebration of Zwarte Piet can be viewed as racist, Arthurs suggests that people celebrating the character do not generally have racist intentions. Here, the Dutch dominant discourse of how racism and the effects of colonialism is understood is in full display, as individuals supporting the tradition take on a colorblind approach. By associating Zwarte Piet with innocence and dismissing the characters connection to the Dutch colonial history individuals ignore and dismiss Zwarte Piet’s connection to discrimination and racism. Within the idea of being colorblind lies a way of thinking that everyone is equal and that talking about race and differences only opens gaps between people (2012: 70). Despite that, something worth noting is that having a good intention does not automatically equal not being able to

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21 Positive stereotypes are favourable beliefs held about a social group.
22 That blackness equals being good at singing, dancing and entertaining is a positive stereotype often associated with blackface and American minstrel shows.
unconsciously reproduce racism. Habel suggests that by choosing a normative colorblind approach, individuals who otherwise are aware and against racial stereotypes, dismiss the term race, as they view it as a term that further contributes to racism (ibid: 70). Similar ideas are prevalent in the Netherlands, as racism has been labeled as an outdated topic that has no relevance to the twenty-first century (Essed & Hoving 2014: 11).

Although, colorblindness is not the only mechanism enabling racism to thrive. John Solomos and Les Back offer an alternative viewpoint. According to them, discrimination based on ethnicity or race can be coded as culture. From this perspective, qualities of different social groups can be naturalized and fixed through hidden cultural narratives (Solomos, Back 1994: 151). In the case of the Sinterklaas tradition, Solomos and Back’s claim becomes relevant as Zwarte Piet is generally associated with Dutch culture and values.

In the Zwarte Piet debate, the effect of the colorblind approach is visible in how the ideas of Zwarte Piet’s innocence are strengthened, while the ideas of him normalizing racial prejudice are weakened. By the dismissal of Zwarte Piet’s link to discrimination, Afro-Dutch individuals are placed into a position where they are not allowed to suffer. Because suffering is not recognized, calm complaints about the ritual of dressing up as Zwarte Piet, are viewed as whining, aggressive or dangerous. Because traits of whining or a display of aggressiveness are widely thought of as moral flaws, all complaints voiced by colored individuals are labelled as morally flawed as well. In such a manner, so-called “defenders of the Dutch values” are given a justification for silencing people of color. Rather than invoking people’s ethnicity, they can argue that they are defending the Dutch culture from immoral opponents (2015: 228).

With that said, not everyone in the Netherlands seek to defend the Dutch culture through supporting Zwarte Piet. Therefore, the question remains: why do thousands of people across the Netherlands annually part-take in the ritual of Zwarte Piet? All my informants claimed that, as children, people in their schools, at home and in the public dressed up as Zwarte Piet. However, if proceeding from the idea that the character re-enforces racial prejudice, it could be argued that Zwarte Piet is a form of structural racism. The nationwide acceptance of the character validates this argument, as the acceptance of the character exposes how the Dutch people supporting the tradition view and understand what modern-day racism and white supremacy is.

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23 For example, minorities can be included or excluded into or from the majority culture by the stories that a people or an ethnic group within a nation tell about their past, present and future.
Further, the normalization of racial prejudice through The *Sinterklaas* tradition comes in full circle, when the hierarchal ranking based on assumptions of race is legitimized and internalized through the annual celebration of the tradition.

However, a key-feature in understanding why thousand’s individuals celebrate the tradition, lies in the fact that the internalization of white supremacy and racial prejudice happens at early age. The consequence of the tradition being a children’s celebration is ultimately that children are early on introduced to the ideas of white supremacy. In this way, the racial prejudice is unconsciously assimilated into the thought world of children and, later, labelled as “good childhood memories”; resulting in that the fond memories of *Zwarte Piet* are hard to let go of.

In this context, *Zwarte Piet* could be compared to a tip of an iceberg; as the tradition clearly symbolizes a more deep-rooted racism related issue in the Dutch society - essentially working as a reminder of the underlying societal power relations between black and white people in today’s Netherlands (Kozjin 2014: 39).

### 5.2 A compromise in sight?

As a result of the on-going *Sinterklaas* debate, the character *Zwarte Piet* is changing. In Amsterdam, Chimney Piet has replaced *Zwarte Piet*. Appearance-wise, instead of having a fully blackened face, Chimney Piet only has a few strokes of black on his face. Despite that, the characters behavior and relationship to *Sinterklaas* still remains the same. Ruchamas claim that: “Chimney Piet is just another try to silence the protesters in order to be able to continue the tradition” suggests that the modification done to *Zwarte Piet* works as a way of further justifying the tradition. From this standpoint, it could be argued that, like dismissing *Zwarte Piet*’s link to colonization, Chimney Piet works as a mechanism to further invalidate accusations of racism rather than eventually ending the story of *Zwarte Piet*. However, Arthur suggested that even though Chimney Piet (with the whole face blackened) is the norm in smaller Dutch towns, he is getting
increasingly banned in Amsterdam. Nonetheless, at the annual Sinterklaas parade mostly young individuals had their face slightly blackened, while older individuals still were in full Zwarte Piet attire - something which further highlights two things: the slowness of the progression of completely changing or getting rid of the character Zwarte Piet as well as an unwillingness to let go of Zwarte Piet.

5.3 Summary
Sara Ahmed suggests that in western societies, bodies are shaped by histories of colonialism, which makes the world “white”. This inherited world gives whites bodies an inheritance of reachability; meaning that whiteness becomes an orientation that puts certain things within reach (2007: 153). In the Sinterklaas tradition, the reachability or privilege that Ahmed refers to is visible in two aspects: firstly, white individuals can part-take in the tradition without automatically identifying with the subordinate position. Secondly, white individuals painting themselves black displays white people’s right to be various; a self-given right to incorporate themselves into features of other people (1997: 49). However, Bakhtin term: carnivalesque suggests an alternative way of viewing the issue. From this point of view, it could be argued that the ritual of dressing up as Zwarte Piet works as a liberating mechanism as individuals get to act outside of norms, rules and restriction, working as a way of getting out of “normality”; to turn the world upside down.

On the other hand, the fact that Zwarte Piet displays numerous western stereotypes of black people must be considered to understand the opposing opinions. However, the idea that Zwarte Piet embodies racial stereotypes are largely dismissed by the Dutch population. By associating the character with ideas of innocence, both the white privilege and the racial stereotypes linked to the tradition are denied. However, my empirical material further suggests that the dismissal is done unconsciously. Dyer suggests that most white people do not recognize their own white privilege, resulting in that individuals unconsciously both construct and reconstruct their privileged position by not seeing it.

Nonetheless, a key-feature in the discussion about modern day racism is: denial. Regarding individual’s personal intention, both the colorblind approach regarding Zwarte Piet’s link to discrimination as well as his presumed innocence works as ways of validating and normalizing racial stereotypes that the character represents. Because the tradition is mainly thought of as a children’s tradition - children are early on introduced to the idea of white supremacy. In this context, children internalize two things: a) ideas of what modern day racism is and b) that
whiteness equals “we”, while non-white individuals equal “them”. With that said, a new modified Sinterklaas servant as emerged: Chimney Piet. Despite the character having a less blackened face, the character still displays a similar behavior as well as the same stereotypes as his older brother Zwarte Piet. Here, it could further be argued that a colorblind approach yet again works as a mechanism of silencing accusations of racism allowing the normalization of racial prejudice to continue.

6. Conclusion
The complexity of Zwarte Piet stems from the characters multivocal symbolic properties within the Dutch society. While the character creates feelings of solidarity within groups that support him, the character simultaneously creates feelings of exclusion within groups who oppose him. The idea that the Dutch identity is threatened by both immigration and globalization further helps us understand the supporting opinions of the character. My empirical material suggests, that the perceived importance of Zwarte Piet boils down the fact that the character works as an annual reminder of what the Dutch identity is and is not; ultimately working as a tradition that gives individuals supporting the tradition increased feelings of comfort. Paradoxically, my empirical material also suggests that the annual 2019 Sinterklaas parade in Amsterdam was a white space. In this regard, the perceived Dutch identity that the tradition reproduces is linked to whiteness. In other words, the constructed picture of Dutchness that the tradition reproduces equals whiteness - something which further explains: a) the absence of black or colored individuals during the annual parade and b) why an increasing number of Afro-Dutch individuals feel discriminated.

By analyzing Zwarte Piet’s appearance, behavior and relationship to Sinterklaas - the opposing opinions of the character can further be understood. What the empirical material suggests is that the characters appearance, behavior and asymmetrical relationship to Sinterklaas all reproduce Eurocentric ideas of European superiority and African inferiority; a categorization that automatically categorizes non-white individuals into the category “other”. Proceeding from this idea, it becomes evident that the Dutch Sinterklaas tradition works as a mechanism for: a) maintaining a symbolic hierarchy based upon white supremacy and racial categorization and b) constructing a picture of what the Dutch identity is by defining a picture of the “other”; a picture of what it is not.

When the two polarized opinions about character collide, a miscommunication happens. Individuals supporting the tradition justify the character by hiding behind a colorblind screen. In this way, Zwarte Piet’s connection to both race and racism is disconnected, which further
results in that the accusations of the character being discriminating are dismissed and the tradition continued. Another effect of the colorblind approach is that both part-taking and supporting the character is viewed as actions of innocence. As a result, calm complaints by colored individuals are coded as whiny or aggressive; ultimately leading to that colored individuals are not allowed to suffer and only accepted based on accepting the tradition.

The perceived innocence attached to Zwarte Piet does not, however, match how the ritual of dressing up as the character is received by individuals with opposing opinions. My empirical material suggests that the mismatch in intention, reception and differentiating understandings of what the character symbolizes, all result in that even though the two polarized opinions talk about the same phenomenon, they do not speak the “same language”. In other words, individuals with polarized opinions regarding Zwarte Piet do not understand each other; resulting both in frustration and in a difficulty in coming up with a solution regarding what to do with Zwarte Piet.

What Zwarte Piet ultimately highlights are the general Dutch populations ideas about what modern day racism and white supremacy is. Because most of the Dutch still support the ritual of Zwarte Piet, it could be argued that the tradition makes the nation-wide lack of understanding of how modern-day racism operates visible. With that said, am equally aware that some Afro-Dutch individuals celebrate the tradition as well. Therefore, a proposal for a further study in the subject is to examine the experiences and opinions of Afro-Dutch individuals supporting the character Zwarte Piet.

As already stated, individuals who take on colorblind approach, with the intention of tackling racism, play a big role in understanding how the legacy of Zwarte Piet is defended and continued. Despite that, my empirical material suggests that no matter an individual’s personal intention, colorblindness makes racism flourish as it disables discussion further closing opportunities to deal with the racism related issues. Because the tradition is widely regarded as a children’s tradition, children are early, through a colorblind way of thinking, introduced to the ideas of white supremacy. In this way, the colonial way of categorizing and the reproduction of racial prejudice that the Sinterklaas traditions reproduces is internalized, as it is unconsciously assimilated into the thought worlds of children.

Pointing out the fact that Zwarte Piet both produces and reproduces racism can feel uncomfortable, as it challenges individuals internalized colonial thinking forcing them to re-evaluate the position that whiteness has in the “open-minded” Dutch society. Even though, the Dutch colonial period is long gone - a colonial hangover in the form of Zwarte Piet still blossoms today.
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**Electronical newspaper articles**


**Websites**


**Interviews**

Semi-structured interview

1. Ruchama Heijmans
   
   Gender: Female
   
   Work: Financial administrator
   
   Interview conducted on: 19.11.2019
   
   Location: Hannekes Boom, Amsterdam
   
   The length of the interview: 45 minutes
   
   The interview was conducted by the author
Focused group interview

1. Thomas
2. Arthur
3. Jonathan

Gender: All male


Interview conducted on: 16.11.2019

Location: Café De Oranjerie, Amsterdam

The length of the interview: 80 minutes

The interview was conducted by the author

Participant observation

17.11.2019, 12-15 o'clock, Amsterdam, Dam-Square