

## **Abstract**

Through the combination of this academic paper and a video by the same name, I have attempted to problematize Sinterklaas' "helper," Zwarte Piet (literally "Black Peter"). Piet, a dimwitted character almost always played by white people with their faces painted black, represents an offensive caricature of a black slave, and, when placed next to the saintly and wise Sinterklaas figure, expresses a binary relationship that reinforces the ideas of white supremacy. Through interviews representing a broad spectrum of Dutch society, I have attempted to trace the historical background and current conceptions of Zwarte Piet to build an argument calling for the removal of a character no longer admissible in The Netherlands' multi-ethnic society.

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## Introduction

*“Listen, you might want to pack a few of your things together before going to bed. The former bishop of Turkey will be coming tonight along with six to eight black men. They might put some candy in your shoes, they might stuff you into a sack and take you to Spain, or they might just pretend to kick you. We don’t know for sure, but we want you to be prepared.”*

-What a Dutch parent might say to his children on Sinterklaas Eve, according to David Sedaris

Every November, Sinterklaas arrives in the Netherlands with hundreds of helpers wearing bright clothes and large, red smiles. These characters, known as *Zwarte Pieten* (or Black Peters), have stirred controversies in a country internationally known for its reputation of tolerance. Generally played by white people with their faces painted black, Pieten personify various aspects of a stereotypical African slave. Through the course of this project, I will problematize this character and offer a stage for critics whose voices have been marginalized in the discourse surrounding *Zwarte Piet* and racism in the Netherlands.

The project consists of this paper and an accompanying video. The paper will primarily focus on the historical context of *Zwarte Piet* while the video will explore the representations, conceptions, and critiques of this character, although overlap is apparent in both forms. I will show that *Zwarte Piet* has its roots in a devil figure from the Middle Ages and that, influenced by the extensive Dutch colonial system, he was reborn in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as an African slave. Furthermore, I will explore the dichotomies embodied by Sinterklaas and his black slaves and the effects this has on Dutch society. I will then look at the dissent surrounding *Zwarte Piet*, the methods through which it has been marginalized, and the possibilities for change.



## Related Projects and Studies

We must see *Zwarte Piet* in a wider context of Dutch racism and its colonial history if we are to make any sense of the implications of such a character. There are a few significant works on the subject, although, as Allison Blakely states, not as many as one would expect or desire (xix). In fact, studies of Holland's colonial past are largely neglected in English-written books and reports. However, Allison Blakely's *Blacks in the Dutch World* offers an impressive tackling of the issue, focusing on the presence of black people in The Netherlands as well as its slave trade and colonies. Jan Nederveen Pieterse offers a brilliant account of the images of blacks in Western culture and the significance of these images in his study, *White on Black*. Both books examine racism, colonialism, and their effects upon racial imagery and European society and I draw upon their research extensively in the historical context section of this paper. Additionally, they each offer brief accounts of *Zwarte Piet*.

Philomena Essed has written prolifically on racism in The Netherlands. In one study, *Understanding Everyday Racism*, Essed argues that the discourse of Dutch tolerance actually functions to hide and maintain racism and inequality (4), an important argument to consider while examining *Zwarte Piet*. In fact, Jan van Tongeren, a Dutch cultural historian, explained to me during our interview that the Dutch are a tolerant people and it is therefore okay to continue with characters such as *Zwarte Piet*.

A few significant works have been written specifically about the issue of *Zwarte Piet* and they deserve acknowledgement here. Lulu Helder, author of "Black servant/White Saint: a tradition caught in dualism" offers an account of the binaries apparent throughout this holiday and this article inspired my own study of the *Sinterklaas* dichotomies. Helder also edited, with Scotty Gravenberch, *Sinterklaasje*,

*kom maar binnen zonder knecht*, a study of Zwarte Piet and a plea for the removal of this character from the Sinterklaas tradition. A few people I interviewed spoke highly of this book and explained that it helped influence their current opinions. I do not see an overlap with this project, however, because while *Sinterklaasje* is written specifically for a Dutch audience, I see my work as internationally based. In fact, my goal with this project is to spread awareness of the issue to an international audience.

I must also acknowledge a relevant video on the subject, *Zwarte Piet: An impression on a Dutch tradition*. Directed by Iyahmin Hotep and working in collaboration with the Global Afrikan Congress, this video calls for a banishment of Zwarte Piet and explores the links with colonialism and devil mythology. However, the video is plagued by serious technical errors, making the voice-over almost incoherent at times. I have taken a much different approach for my project and do not see this video's excessively melodramatic and serious approach as an appropriate means to communicate the issue to an international audience. Therefore, I hope to fill part of the gap left open by this video and help build international awareness on the phenomenon of Zwarte Piet.

# Theoretical Framework

## The Dichotomy of Race in the Netherlands

The physical act of dressing up as Zwarte Piet is not, by itself, significant. It is the combination of these physical actions with conceptual, hierarchical, and historical contexts that make the issue worth exploring. This study requires an examination of race, racism, colonialism, and nationality in the Netherlands and in order to do so, we must frame a construct in which to analyze the event and the issues that circumscribe it.

Jacques Derrida will provide the first tool I will use in the analysis of this project. He argues that language is constructed in binary oppositions and that these binaries create an unequal and interdependent relationship between each pair (Grosz 93). He writes, “within such a conceptual structure, one of the terms, the dominant one, defines the terrain of the other, placing it in a position of subordination or secondariness” (93). Each word is dependent on its pair, with the one being defined by lacking the qualities of the other.

How does this conceptual structure relate to the Dutch dichotomy of white/black? Interestingly, in the Netherlands—unlike the United States where African descent is generally the prerequisite for “blackness”—one is considered black if they are “not white” (Heider, 1998). Thus, white is established as the dominant and black as the subordinate, lacking “whiteness.” As Patrick Wolfe explains in his essay on postcolonial studies, “Difference is not neutral; to vary is to be defective, in proportion to the degree of variation alleged to obtain” (52). Thus, as can be seen in the hierarchal structure developed in the Dutch colonies, where mixed children gained more rights than “pure-blacks” and occasionally received a traditional Dutch

education, the degree to which a person varied from the white norm impacted his or her position in society.

Linguistically, racial difference and its implications are apparent. The Dutch generally refer to “people of color” as *Allochtonen*, which, translated literally from its Greek roots, means “from another world” (Heider, 1998). The oppositional term in this binary, the white, Dutch citizen, is known as the *Autochtone* (Heider, 1998). As Lulu Heider states in his analysis of *Zwarte Piet*, “the identities of non-whites versus ‘Dutch’ people are defined in terms of difference, dichotomies: the Allochtoon becomes everything the white Dutch person, the Autochtoon, is not.” Thus, the Allochtoon fills the subordinate position in Dutch discourse.

### **Abjecting Dissent**

Incorporating identity politics into the discourse, Judith Butler argues that when subjects, for example, white, Dutch citizens, define themselves as subjects, they simultaneously create an abject, in this case, “black” people (Butler 3). Furthermore, she argues that, “the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject” (3). Thus, the concept of white is developed through “not being black”—through excluding “blackness.” Here, we witness an example where the ordinate white is defined through the subordinate black, a reversal that fails to change the unequal power relations associated between the two groups.

The concept of the abject has practical consequences in Dutch society. As Helder (1998) writes, in 1995, when second and third generation immigrants organized a protest and publicly criticized the *Zwarte Piet* tradition, they were dismissed by people who claimed that the protestors had no right to criticize a Dutch tradition seeing as they were not, in fact, “Dutch.” Thus, as an abject, as not

Dutch (despite the fact that most of the protestors were born in the Netherlands), “black” people were denied an equal say in the discourse surrounding *Zwarte Piet*.

Furthermore, the creation of the abject is often invisible to the dominant group. As Pieterse explains, discussing racism in Europe, “from the point of view of the comfortable strata of the society, and those who aspire to join them, no problem exists; there is a problem only from the point of view of those on the margins” (12). Indeed, racial stereotypes often appear quite normal to the dominant group and any dissent is seen as strange or abnormal, furthering the gap between subject and abject (Essed, 30).

This abjection, while forming a sense of “group cohesion,” simultaneously asserts and justifies the supremacy of the dominant group, in this case, the white Dutch (Essed, 30; Pieterse, 231). Additionally, in the words of Pieterse: “Probably the single most important feature of representations of otherness is the role they play in establishing and maintaining social inequality” (234). The *Allochtonen* in the Netherlands are still not equal in terms of employment, housing, and education (F. Derooy, Personal Interview, 2004). Thus, the character of *Zwarte Piet* only reinforces the idea of the abject and helps maintain the current system of inequality.



# Methodology

## Assumptions and Identity

*“While eight flying reindeer are a hard pill to swallow, our Christmas story remains relatively dull. Santa lives with his wife in a remote polar village and spends one night a year traveling around the world. If you’re bad, he leaves you coal. If you’re good and live in America, he’ll give you just about anything you want.”*

-David Sedaris

While my apparent obsession with quoting David Sedaris may seem strange to some readers, I believe it provides proper insights into my perspectives and assumptions in approaching this project. Like Sedaris, I am a white, privileged male from America and this has a profound effect on my research. Coming from a widely American-centric culture, I immediately found the Zwarte Piet tradition strange, fascinating, and unimaginably offensive. The brochures, advertisements, and various paraphernalia displaying Zwarte Piet brought to mind images of minstrel shows and stereotypical representations of the Negro in 1950s American popular culture. I was fascinated by how a country known for its tolerance could continue such a tradition and how this festival did not seem to have any significant effect on the Netherlands’ reputation in the international community.

Another reason for quoting Sedaris is that his ingenious essay, “Six to Eight Black Men,” introduced me to the Sinterklaas celebration. Thus, my first experience with the holiday was one of satire. Despite any effort on my part, these events and preconceptions all affected the methods in which I approached this project.

My identity is also significant when examining my relationship to the subjects of this study. I believe that my white ethnicity helped gain access and trust among

white Dutch citizens, especially those who strongly defended the tradition of Zwarte Piet. I believe that such subjects would have been more suspicious of my questions concerning Zwarte Piet if I had black skin.

Conversely, some people of color appeared suspicious of my motivations. For example, while asking people in Bijlmer if they would mind answering a few questions on camera, one man gruffly responded: “I don’t know you” and walked away. Iwan Leeuwin, from the Global Afrikan Congress, requested a meeting before agreeing to an interview and, although I eventually gained his trust, he always appeared hesitant to talk with me. Leeuwin explained that he needed to be careful because white people in Europe and the United States like to keep track of what black organizations are doing.

I am also under the impression that my viewpoints were apparent—from the focus of my questions, the way they were structured, and my attitude during reading them—to every planned interviewee. (See “The Order to the Chaos” on page 12 for an explanation of the different categories of interviews.) Thus, critics of the Zwarte Piet tradition such as Ernestine Comvalius and Felix Derooy appeared to respect and trust my motivations while supporters such as Jan van Tongeren became defensive early in the interview. My views also affected the methods in which I analyzed both this paper and the accompanying video. I do not try to hide this fact and hope that my views are transparent throughout this project.

Among many of the subjects, I encountered (justified) irritation that I did not speak Dutch. A few interviewees explained that they would have a hard time explaining their views in English and wished to conduct the interview in Dutch. My limited knowledge of the language and lack of a translator prevented me from accommodating to this request.

Finally, while I often felt uneasy about my role as an American judging a tradition from another culture, I was encouraged by comments from various

interviewees. Comvalius told me at the end of our interview: “It’s a good thing that somebody from another country comes here and raises this subject because I think nothing will be changed unless there is some outside pressure.”

### **Explanation of Project**

The video component of this project provides the bulk of my research. It offers an analysis of the theories surrounding Zwarte Piet’s origins, the conceptual differences between Sinterklaas and his helpers, their effects upon Dutch society, and the possibilities for change. This paper serves as a companion piece, offering a more detailed historical background, placing the video in the wider context of related studies, explaining the theoretical constructs used in the video’s analysis, and discussing the manner in which I approached this project.

I decided that a video was a more appropriate means to communicate a critical analysis of Zwarte Piet for the following reasons. Firstly, the topic is highly visual and I felt that I could not provide an adequate critique of this tradition without including these visual elements. Through juxtaposing interviews with footage of parades, television specials, commercial brochures, and Sinterklaas merchandise, I was able to express my critiques in a way I could not have done on paper.

Secondly, as a film major at Ithaca College, I am naturally drawn to expressing myself through video. I also have a bias towards synthesizing information through documentaries, which I personally find to be a more democratic and accessible medium than academic papers.

Finally, I believe people both inside and outside the academic world will find this topic interesting and important and hope that the project can transcend the artificial wall that separates academics from the rest of the population. If this project

helps in any way to spread awareness and build international pressure against Zwarte Piet, I will view it as a success.

### **The Order to the Chaos**

Through the course of this project, I conducted 20 interviews from a broad spectrum of Dutch society. For purposes of analysis, I split these interviews into two categories: planned interviews and street interviews.

#### *Planned Interviews (12)*

Planned interviews, as the name suggests, were set up in advance and involved subjects I had a specific interest in speaking with. They were generally longer and more in-depth than the street interviews. I interviewed people from a variety of fields, including a cultural historian, visual artist, district councilman, folklore historian, and three Zwarte Piet actors. Following is a list of the names and positions of the planned interviewees, as well as the time and location of the interviews and the reasons I contacted the subjects.

- Dr. Herny G. Dors: Bijlmer district council member, councilor, and social scientist; 11/17/04 from 12:10-13; Dor's office in the Bijlmer District Council building; A host of a fellow SIT student had worked with Dors and suggested that I contact him due to his involvement in organizing against the tradition of Zwarte Piet.
- Felix Derooy: Visual artist, contributor to the novel *White On Black*; 11/19/04 from 11-12:30; Derooy's living room at his apartment in Amsterdam; My advisor, Andre Reeder, suggested I speak with Derooy because of his extensive artistic work on race relations.
- Arno Langeler: History professor at the University of Amsterdam; 11/19/04 from 15-15:30; Empty classroom in the university building, BC Hoefthuis,

- Amsterdam; I came across Langeler's book, *Zwarte Piet*, at the LBR library in Rotterdam and subsequently contacted him.
- Jan van Tongeren: Cultural historian; 11/21/04 from 13:14-14; office at the Amstelkring Museum, Amsterdam; Online, I read that Tongeren was giving a lecture about Sinterklaas at the Amstelkring Museum and interviewed him after his lecture.
  - Drs. Ernestine Comvalius; Director of the Krater Theater; 11/23/04 from 12-13; Comvalius' office at the Krater Theater in the Bijlmer district of Amsterdam; I contacted Comvalius at the suggestion of my advisor, Andre Reeder, because we thought it would be interesting to get the opinion of a black mother living in Amsterdam.
  - Brian Mar: Director of programming, Imagine IC; 11/23/04 from 14:15-15; Imagine IC building in Bijlmer; I had visited Imagine IC, a visual arts gallery focused on immigration and culture issues, prior to embarking upon this project and thought it would be a good resource to contact. The completed video may be displayed at Imagine IC.
  - John Helsloot: Folklore historian at the Meertens Instituut; 11/25/04 from 13-14; Helsloot's office at the Meertens Insituut, Amsterdam; Tongeren suggested I contact the Meertens Instituut because of their expertise in, among other fields, folklore history.
  - Danielle: Cultural anthropology student at the University of Amsterdam; 11/25/04 from 15:15-16:30; Walen Café, Amsterdam; I met Danielle at the Sinterklaas parade in Amsterdam and decided it would be interesting to speak with someone who grew up believing in *Zwarte Piet*. I was also impressed with her willingness to acknowledge the criticisms of this character.
  - Sintaktie Scouting Group: Lonneke Schzuedez, Milos Benistant, Steptlan Lokken; 11/27/04 from 9-10:30; I wanted to interview actors as they "became"

Zwarte Pieten for both aesthetic and psychological reasons, to explore the implications of playing this character. After contacting various organizations, Sintaktie, a club that “rents” out Sinterklaas and Zwarte Pieten actors to raise money for various activities, was receptive to my requests.

- Iwan Leeuwijn; Chairman of the Global Afrikan Congress, Holland and representative of the Diemen city council; 11/28/04 from 15:15-16; office in the Diemen City Hall; During my research, I came across a petition by the Global Afrikan Congress asking for a ban on the Zwarte Piet tradition and subsequently contacted the organization.

### *Street Interviews (8)*

Street interviews were conducted with “random” participants in Amsterdam and Alkmaar, were not set up in advance, and were generally considerably shorter than the planned interviews. The purpose of the street interviews was to get the opinions of people who might not be well read on the subject of Zwarte Piet but have grown up and experienced the tradition. For the interviews, I generally set up my camera in one location and asked anyone who walked by if they would be willing to answer a few questions on camera. I conducted the street interviews in three locations through the course of four days, as explained below:

- Alkmaar: 11/13/04 from 13:50-14:30; I conducted three interviews after the Alkmaar parade welcoming Sinterklaas to The Netherlands. Two of the subjects were white college students. The last was a shop-owner whose daughters were dressed up as Zwarte Pieten.
- Amsterdam Central: 11/14/04 from 13:30-13:50; During the Amsterdam parade, I interviewed one Surinamese spectator who was at the parade with his children.

- Bijlmer shopping district: 11/17/04 from 13-13:45 and 11/23/04 from 13-13:30; I interviewed three parents of various ethnicities on 11/17/04 and one adult white male on 11/23/04.

For all interviews, I adopted a semi-structured format, entering with a prepared list of questions (see Appendix for planned questions) and bouncing off of their answers with new questions and topics. It is important to acknowledge that I went into this project attempting to determine the various ways in which Dutch citizens perceive *Zwarte Piet*; however, as I began compiling the video, I realized that my material leant itself more naturally to a critical analysis of the character than my original mission of examining Dutch perceptions. In fact, as I look back at my approach, the people I interviewed, and the questions I asked, I become more convinced that, albeit subconsciously, I had been working towards a critical analysis the entire time.

Using these interviews as well as footage from the parades in Amsterdam and Alkmaar, television programs, and shots of merchandise, I compiled the video into seven chapters, each examining a theme and advancing my thesis. A list and brief description of the chapters follows:

1. Meet *Zwarte Piet*: A general introduction explaining the basics of the Sinterklaas celebration and the legends of the Saint and his black slaves.
2. The Great White Saint: A brief analysis of the Dutch perceptions of Sinterklaas and a tongue-in-cheek montage portraying him as a holy man.
3. The Black Slave: A brief analysis of the Dutch perceptions of *Zwarte Piet*, juxtaposing various descriptions of this character with parade and television footage exposing the problems of such perceptions.

4. **Black is Black:** An examination into the arguments surrounding the racial identity of Zwarte Piet. This section follows a point-counterpoint format through which I argue that Piet is in fact a caricature of a black man.
5. **Black as the Devil:** A look at the origins of Zwarte Piet, exploring connections between the traditions of the Middle Ages in which people painted their faces black to represent the devil and the act of dressing up as Zwarte Piet today. I incorporate shots of Sintaktie members painting their faces to emphasize this connection.
6. **Civilization:** An exploration of Piet's shift from devil to dimwitted slave. Also begins to examine the effects of Piet on Dutch society from testimonies of various interviewees.
7. **Bye, Bye Zwarte Piet:** The culminating chapter in which I explore the models critics have used to attempt to change the Sinterklaas tradition, the obstacles to such change, and the options for the future, ending with a call for change.

Through the course of the video, I utilize the ideas discussed in the theoretical framework section of this paper. The juxtaposition of the second and third chapters, which examines the Dutch perceptions of Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet respectively, portrays the binaries apparent in this celebration. While people refer to Sinterklaas as wise, all knowing, and holy, they describe his helpers as funny, unintelligent, and hard working. Through accompanying music and video footage, I emphasize the unequal dichotomy created between Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet.

I then connect Zwarte Piet with stereotypical images of black people and examine the effects of this connection, thus depicting the creation and reinforcement of the abject in Dutch society. Finally, in the last chapter, I examine the consequences of this abjection. Dr Dors explains it perfectly:

They see any tackling of a tradition as a tackling not belonging to our traditions, not belonging to our country, people from outside. That makes it so difficult to get rid of Zwarte Piet. White people in this country see any discussion from blacks about Zwarte Piet as discussions started by people not knowing 'our traditions.' In that way we can learn something from Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet and how we handle that phenomenon. It could be a good mirror for most of the people in this country (Personal Interview, 2004).



## Historical Background

*“The six to eight black men were characterized as personal slaves until the mid-1950s, when the political climate changed and it was decided that instead of being slaves they were just good friends. I think history has proved that something usually comes between slavery and friendship, a period of time marked not by cookies and quiet hours beside the fire but by bloodshed and mutual hostility.”*

-David Sedaris

### The Great White Saint

Saint Nicholas has inspired a colorful palette of traditions and holidays in dominantly Christian cultures worldwide. Interestingly, many argue that this mythical figure has his roots in pagan folklore. Tony van Renteghem, author of *When Santa was a Shaman*, writes that during the Winter Solstice festivals in ancient Europe, a shaman would reward the good and punish the bad (Dawn, 2004). Additionally, one can draw many similarities between Wodan, the ancient Germanic god, and current-day manifestations of Saint Nicholas. Wodan flew on a horse and was accompanied by two black ravens who informed him of the behavior of the humans below, just as the Zwarte Pieten are said to inform Sinterklaas of the behavior of Dutch children today (Brown and Tavares, 4). Through these comparisons, it appears that the mythical character of Saint Nicholas is at least partially a Christian adoption of various pagan rituals.

In fact, Charles W. Jones casts doubt on the existence of a historic Saint Nicholas. He points to a quote from “the church’s authorities, the Bollandists,” who state: “In fact, we know nothing about the actions of that renowned miracle-worker”

(7). While documentation exists of various other saints of the fourth and fifth century, nothing is written about Saint Nicholas during this period (7).

However, regardless of the existence of a real Saint Nicholas, the myth of this character bears importance to current day conceptualizations of *Zwarte Piet*. The Saint is said to have been born in Myra in current day Turkey during the fourth century (7). He is a renowned miracle-worker who protected sailors and others threatened by catastrophe (Blakely, 40). In one famous story, he is said to have calmed the waters during a violent storm, thus saving the lives of a group of sailors (Jones, 7). His sea-faring miracles explain the figure's popularity among the water-conscious people of the Netherlands (Blakely, 40).

Interestingly, as Dutch visual artist Felix de Roy states, Turkey comprises of people of many skin colors and therefore, there is no way of knowing the ethnicity of Saint Nicholas, if he did in fact exist. It is unlikely, however, that he would have been as white as he is portrayed today.

### **Black as the Devil**

It is quite probable that the tradition of *Zwarte Piet* has its roots in pagan folklore as well. In pagan rituals, black was the color of winter and death (Blakely, 43). Beginning in the twelfth century, with the increased influence of Christianity and the growing popularity of the legend of Saint Nicholas, the black figure was transformed into the devil and relegated to a subordinate role next to Saint Nicholas—a symbol of the triumph of good over evil (Blakely, 43; Helder, 1998).

In fact, the conception linking blackness with the devil was well established by the early Middle Ages (Pieterse, 164). As early as AD 360, Athanasius wrote the *Life of Saint Anthony* in which the devil takes the form of a black boy (164). Similar accounts can be found in Gregory's *Dialogues* (Blakely, 47).

Furthermore, Dutch linguistics often mixed the meanings of black people and the devil. *Moor* and *Neger*, words adopted from the Spanish empire, were the most popular terms used to refer to a black person (33). Interestingly, although *Mooren* originally referred to Arabic people, it quickly became a common term for all people of African descent. By the seventeenth century, the term *Moor-lands* referred to Ethiopia (33). However, an alternative definition for *Moor* also existed in some dictionaries of that time, that of “a devil, or an ill spirit” (33). Similarly, in ancient Dutch folklore, *Nikker* referred to the devil or various demons and was later used to refer to black people as well (36).

In addition to representing the devil, *Zwarte Piet* adopted the role of the bogeyman, frightening children into behaving properly (Pieterse, 164). There are many similar figures in Dutch and Germanic folklore including *Pietje Roet* (Little Sooty Peter) and *Zwarte Hannes* (Black Hans) who punished children for such misdeeds as playing in the woods or sitting on the side of a ditch (Blakely, 63). Another “relative” of *Zwarte Piet*, *De Zwarte Man* (the Black Man), inspired the following poem:

And yo! There he is, black as  
 A Negro, disguised from head to toe;  
 He has much of the look of a chimney sweep  
 The children are struck dumb with fear...  
 The Black Man will come again,  
 As often as you do bad things (62).

Thus, the Dutch associated black with evil and used myths of frightening black figures as a disciplinary tool. These creatures, including Sinterklaas’ companion, slowly lost popularity during the Protestant Reformation (Helder, 1998). *Piet* did not reappear until 1850, when Jan Schenkman wrote the popular novel,

*Sinterklaas en Zijn Knecht* and, according to folklore historian John Helsloot, invented the contemporary character of Zwarte Piet (Personal Interview, 2004).

A likely influence for *Sinterklaas en Zijn Knecht* is the book *Der Stuwweltpeter*, written by Heinrich Hoffman in 1844. In this book, mischievous boys mock a Moor for his dark complexion and are punished by “big Nicholas” who throws them in an inkwell, “from which they emerge blacker than the Moor” (Pieterse, 164). It was not until 1891, however, that children’s books named Sinterklaas’ companion by the name we know today (Brown and Tavares, 2004). Thus, literature reinvented Sinterklaas’ helper in the nineteenth century and, as I will show, transformed this character from a devil to an African slave.

### **The Black Presence**

Before I examine the current manifestations of Zwarte Piet, it is important to discuss the historical presence of black people in The Netherlands and its effect on the images of Zwarte Piet. Although limited and often ignored in literature on Dutch history, there *was* a presence of black servants in The Netherlands and this affected the manner in which Dutch citizens perceived people of color. In 1596, a group of 130 slaves were brought to Zeeland, marking the first sizeable group of black people inside The Netherlands (Blakely, 226). Furthermore, according to Allison Blakely, who researched extensively on the issue, “the practice of maintaining black servants in the region around Groningen...was well established by the late eighteenth century” (228). Originally working as house servants, coachmen, and “lowly” laborers, black people immediately received a subordinate position in Dutch society (225).

Blacks additionally assumed the role of spectacle in the 19th century. In 1883, the Colonial Exhibition displayed a group of 28 Surinamese in their “native” habitats (Pieterse, 96). Other exhibitions, in which black people were displayed like animals

at a zoo, created a show element in which blacks were enjoyed as a form of entertainment. Pieterse explains the implications of such practices: “Exoticism is a luxury of the victors and one of victory’s psychological comforts. The Other is not merely to be exploited but also to be enjoyed, enjoyment being a finer form of exploitation” (95). Today, Zwarte Piet retains the characteristics of both the entertainer and the subordinate laborer.

However, the most noteworthy interaction between the Dutch and blacks in pre-World War II Holland occurred through the systems of slavery and colonialism. As early as the seventeenth century, the Dutch entered the African slave trade and quickly became the most significant power in the trade (54). In addition to providing slaves to the Americas, the Dutch also supplied Africans for their colonies, which included the East Indies, West Africa, Brazil, Surinam, and the Dutch Antilles (Blakely, 18-30). The slaves inside the Dutch empire were treated harshly and abjected from Dutch society. As Blakely explains: “slaves were allowed to perform only certain types of labor and were required to wear different clothes and play different music than their masters” (27). Zwarte Piet still displays many of these characteristics, wearing colorful clothes and working specific roles as the helper of Sinterklaas.

With the colonial system intact, European culture displayed blacks as childish, naïve, and unintelligent (Pieterse, 89). This shift had a strategic importance, as Pieterse explains: “The colonial superiority complex was a political and psychological necessity to enable a tiny minority of foreigners to control the local majority” (89). This trend is also apparent in Dutch history. Eigen Haard, a spectator of the 1883 Colonial Exhibition of Surinamese Creoles, wrote: “The appearance of these groups of Creoles had something kind and childlike, that is naturally appealing; real children of tropical nature...” (89). It is not without significance, then, that many children play the role of Zwarte Piet today even though the role of Sinterklaas is

reserved only for adults. Additionally, Piets are often described as mischievous and childish, personifying a stereotype developed during the Dutch colonial period.

### **Contemporary Zwarte Piet**

It is commonly theorized that Spanish sailors brought the legend of Saint Nicholas to The Netherlands and this accounts for Sinterklaas' "residence" in Spain ("The Sinterklaas story," 2002). This country, the theory continues, is contingently connected to North Africa and, as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, had a sizeable population of Moorish slaves (Pieterse, 123). Thus, many scholars attribute contemporary Zwarte Piet's origins to the Moorish slave.

While Arabic influences are apparent in the character's clothing and many 19<sup>th</sup> century representations, contemporary Zwarte Piet appears to more closely characterize a black person. Ernestine Comvalius comments that Zwarte Piet is a representation of a stereotypical black slave, with giant red lips and curly black hair (Personal Interview, 2004). Indeed, a popular children's book from the 1950s tells the story of Sinterklaas as he travels to Africa, recruiting "niggers" to become Zwarte Pieten (F. Derooy, Personal Interview, 2004). Thus, Piet's connection to the black race is apparent.

Originally, Sinterklaas only brought one Zwarte Piet with him. However, in 1945, several Pieten appeared during the Sinterklaas celebration (Crijnen, 2002). John Helsloot theorizes that this morphing of Zwarte Piet occurred to make the grand entrance of Sinterklaas more dramatic (Personal Interview, 2004). It is interesting to note, however, that such a development robs these characters of any sense of individuality. As Pieterse discusses, similar attitudes existed during colonial history. Citing studies of colonial ethnography, he writes: "The figures portrayed were not individualized; individuality is an attribute of civilization and a western privilege" (93). Thus, just as black slaves were robbed of individuality during the colonial era,

Zwarte Pieten adopted the role of the masses, a group of laborers with similar appearances, clothes, tasks, attitudes, and, names.

Interestingly, when Zwarte Piet reappeared in the 1850s, he retained many of the characteristics of the bogeyman. Piet would beat mischievous children with a stick and, if the wrongdoer was especially naughty, take him or her back to Spain in his sack (H. Dors, Personal Interview, 2004). Although aspects of this legacy live on today, the 1960s saw yet another morphing of Zwarte Piet, this time from bogeyman to jester (E. Comvalius, Personal Interview, 2004). Historically, Europeans have used humor as a means of domination, showing blacks as inferior and unable to adapt to western culture and technology (Pieterse, 98).

In summary, historical events have shaped and transformed the character of Zwarte Piet. In the words of Blakely, “The inimitable, enduring figure of Zwarte Piet may be the best representation of all of the composite image of blacks which has come down through the centuries” (275).



## Conclusion

Through the course of this study, I have concluded that the contemporary character of Zwarte Piet is based, in part, upon the bogeyman figure of the Middle Ages. Then, with the advent of slavery and colonialism, the figure reemerged as a stereotypical image of a black slave. Today, Sinterklaas and his helpers epitomize the unequal dichotomies of white and black, wise and dumb, saintly and mischievous. These differences have real-world implications on Dutch society, implanting and reinforcing in the minds of children the ideas of white supremacy.

Additional research could examine the possible connections between the minstrel acts in the United States and the contemporary conceptualization of Zwarte Piet. I hypothesize that US minstrel films helped develop Piet's character during his transformation from bogeyman to clown. In fact, Felix Derooy stated in our interview that minstrel shows traveled beyond the United States, moving first to France and Britain and eventually to The Netherlands. He thinks the connections to Zwarte Piet, with his large painted lips and dimwitted demeanor, is extremely clear, although, due to time constraints, I was unable to find evidence to support the theory.

If this link were made, it would offer yet more support that Zwarte Piet, a character based upon a devil figure in the Middle Ages and reborn as an offensive caricature of the black slave, is an outdated tradition that deserves to be laid to rest in the cluttered dustbins of history.



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## Appendix – Interview Guide

*Depending on time, circumstances, and relevance to the interviewee, I asked subjects any of the following questions:*

- Who is Zwarte Piet?
- Why is this character black?
- What is the history of this character? Did colonialism affect the character of Zwarte Piet? If so, how?
- What is your first memory of this character?
- What does Zwarte Piet mean to you?
- How did you get your job playing the role of Zwart Piet? What does it mean to you to take on this role?
- If you could only pick a few words to describe Sinterklaas / Zwarte Piet, what would they be?
- Does Zwarte Piet have a race? Why or why not? If yes, what is his race?
- What do you say to people who protest against Zwarte Piet, claiming it is a racist tradition? What are the implications of these protests?
- How would you feel if Zwarte Piet was banned?
- How do other people in the Netherlands perceive this character? How does ethnicity affect these perceptions?
- How did you tell your child(ren) about Zwarte Piet? How did he/she react?
- Why is this tradition defended so strongly?
- Children grow up believing in Zwarte Piet. What effects does this have?
- What are the effects of Zwarte Piet on Dutch society?