Black Pete, “Smug Ignorance,” and the Value of the Black Body in Postcolonial Netherlands*

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Abstract

This article discusses the controversies over the blackface figure Black Pete (Zwarte Piet)—central to the popular Dutch Saint Nicholas holiday tradition—and the public uproar surrounding the Saint Nicholas feast in 2013. It combines history, social theory, and patchwork ethnography, and draws on theoretical approaches discussing race, capitalism, and the commodification of cultural difference to establish an understanding of the controversial character. In doing so, it argues that Black Pete is an invented tradition that marks a “white Dutch habitus” in which the historical context of colonialism and the legacy of slavery is repeatedly ignored or denied.

Keywords

colonial history – consumption – Netherlands – postcolonialism – racism

* We would like to thank Markus Balkenhol for his insightful comments on an earlier draft of this article, and we are grateful to the two anonymous reviewers who pointed out where revisions were needed.

Please note that the Black Pete “tradition” continues to preoccupy both its advocates and opponents in Dutch society. We have finished our analysis of the various debates, and protests for and against the “tradition” in late May 2014.

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The Dutch Saint Nicholas (Sinterklaas) celebration, a folkloric festivity commemorating Saint Nicholas, is a popular annual holiday event celebrated from mid-November to December 5. In mid-November, broadcast live on national television, Saint Nicholas triumphantly arrives in a selected city of the Netherlands, accompanied by numerous men and women dressed in costume as Black Pete (Zwarte Piet). They are eagerly greeted by thousands of Dutch people, children and adults alike, who have waited impatiently several weeks for their arrival. After the official welcoming event, most Dutch cities and towns hold their own arrival parade (intocht). In this tradition, many Black Petes follow Saint Nicholas, assisting the saintly character on his travels throughout the Netherlands until early December. Together they meet with many Dutch families presenting gifts to only the children who have been good. During this time, homes, businesses and streets of the Netherlands are festooned with Saint Nicholas and Black Pete decorations, and sweets and other typical Saint Nicholas products and gifts are sold in stores throughout the country.

Historically (270–343), Saint Nicholas was the bishop of Myra (a town in present-day Turkey). He is also known as “Nikolaos the Wonderworker” due to several miracles attributed to his intercession. Saint Nicholas had a reputation for secret gift giving and was declared a saint by the Catholic Church, becoming the patron saint of many groups, including that of children (Blakely 1993:40). As such, Saint Nicholas became a model for the Dutch Sinterklaas and is still revered today as an admirable gift-giver. Nowadays in the Netherlands, usually a white Dutch person plays Saint Nicholas and white Dutch people in blackface makeup play Black Pete. Saint Nicholas’ Eve (December 5), known as “Sinterklaasavond” or “pakjesavond,” is the chief time for giving presents.

The Dutch multicultural capital, Amsterdam, where Saint Nicholas is patron saint of the city, also holds its annual parade to welcome Saint Nicholas. Currently more than six hundred Black Petes, male and female, convoy the saint on his arrival to this city—a huge event.1 The quintessential Dutch row homes serve as the backdrop in the city center, while hundreds of thousands onlookers cheer in excitement as a steamboat proceeds along the water with Saint Nicholas and dozens of Black Petes. The Saint, an elderly, solemn man with long, white hair and a long, white, full beard, stands ceremoniously at the head of the boat. He is dressed in a rich red robe, wearing a bishop’s miter and holding a decorated, ceremonial shepherd’s staff with a curled top. The blackface

1 The website http://www.sintinamsterdam.nl (Saint in Amsterdam) proudly reports the more than 600 Black Petes that will be present (last visited May 3, 2014).
Petes wave and dance for the crowds usually wearing Afro wigs and gold earrings, and they often have their lips painted bright red. They are dressed up like seventeenth-century pages in a costume of a feathered cap, lace collar, velour jacket, colorful knickers and tights. After the boat docks, the mayor of Amsterdam greets Saint Nicholas, later allowing him to address the public. Following the mayor’s welcoming, the Black Petes dance, play music, hand out sweets, walk on stilts, rollerblade, and perform acrobatic tricks between the crowds that line a main street of Amsterdam for the parade. Meanwhile, Saint Nicholas proceeds on his white, faithful horse, “Amerigo,” waving to the crowds. In this fashion, together with several Black Petes he is then ready to cross the Netherlands.

This holiday tradition, displaying a seemingly white master/black servant relationship, brings about discussions on race and the legacy of slavery in the Netherlands, and urges reflection on a couple of important questions: What are the possible links between Black Pete and the Dutch legacy of slavery? What does his existence in a postcolonial, supposedly multicultural society indicate about present-day Dutch racism? How does the consumption of Black Pete products relate to historical and contemporary commodification of the black body? And, finally, how are these questions connected and related to one another? This article explores these questions for a more thorough understanding of the blackface character—central to one of the most popular Dutch festivities—its stereotypical representations, contested racial components, and the (lack of) value assigned to blackness and black bodies in the Netherlands.

Yet, to grasp the both widely embraced and contested Black Pete character, it is first important to scrutinize recent controversies over the playful, festival character and the public uproar surrounding the Saint Nicholas’ celebration in 2013. The protests against, and as a reaction to the Black Pete tradition around that year’s festivities, turned into grim, even violent manifestations of identity politics and recognition. For the first time several public figures, politicians, celebrities, and influential scholars were taking a stance against the traditional celebration. On the wave of these events, international attention for the Dutch holiday tradition increased remarkably and, consequently, some minor though symbolically significant changes have been made. Hence, these developments may mark a turning point in the ongoing debate, slowly transforming persistent

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2 The organization of the Saint Nicholas feast in Amsterdam, for example, decided in liaison with the mayor of the city and several appellants to ban Black Pete’s golden earrings in the 2013 festivities.
interpretations and practices. At the same time, however, current statements of both controversial and mainstream politicians, and public outrage also show the reiteration of a “willful” or “smug ignorance” (Smith 2014; Essed & Hoving 2014b) regarding race issues in the popular celebration, as well as a massive defense against discussing it and fierce refusal to find compromise. In these cases, the claim continues to be that “Black Pete is merely a fun character, completely unrelated to messy politics, and he is part of an innocent tradition, aimed at children whose innocent pleasure would be free from racism or any form of politics by definition” (Essed & Hoving 2014b:21–22; see Brienen 2014; Smith 2014). This article concentrates on these recent developments, whereupon it discusses the deeper historical context and related controversies over representations of Black Pete. In doing so, it aims to analyze established, interlocking systems of domination and hegemonic notions, and illuminates the ways the black body is literally brought into play as a sentimental, commodified resource and/or locus of entertainment.

“Black Pete is Black and I Cannot Change that ...”

In a press conference preceding the international Nuclear Security Summit in March 2014, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte astounded friend and foe when confronted with a critical question by Dutch-American journalist Kevin Roberson about the racist character of Black Pete. Rutte replied: “Black Pete is black and I cannot change that ... because the name is Black Pete.” After Roberson pointed out that the Netherlands Institute of Human Rights had classified (on October 22, 2013) Black Pete as a racist part of the annual Saint Nicholas feast, as the character confirms negative black stereotypes, Rutte persisted by stating:

I simply do not agree. This is an old children’s tradition (Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet). It is not “Green Pete” or “Brown Pete,” it is “Black Pete,” so I cannot change that. This is an old tradition, and I can only say that my friends in the Dutch Antilles, well they are very happy when they have Sinterklaas because they don’t have to paint their faces, and when I’m playing Black Pete, for days I’m trying to get off ... the stuff [greasepaint] on my face.3

Rutte’s remarks caused an avalanche of shocked, upset tweets and comments on Facebook and other social media. Artist and activist Quinsy Gario, known as one of the initiators of Zwarte Piet Is Racisme (Black Pete Is Racism)⁴ and several Black Pete protests, responded on Facebook: “Thank you very much, Mark Rutte. The racism behind Black Pete could not have been translated better.”⁵ Amsterdam alderman André van Es, who was involved in the organization of the 2013 commemoration of the one hundred-fiftieth anniversary of the abolition of slavery in Suriname and the Dutch Caribbean, voiced similar criticism: “Seen Rutte? If this isn’t a solid argument to say farewell to Black Pete, then I don’t know anymore. Prime Minister of all Dutch people?”⁶ On behalf of Overlegorgaan Caribische Nederlanders (ocan, Consultative Council for Dutch Caribbean People in the Netherlands), chairman Glenn Helberg, stated:

The Prime Minister of the Netherlands displays ignorance as to the origin of Black Pete in the Kingdom. It is our conviction that he shows no intention of assuming responsibility for the shared slavery past in the Kingdom and the manner in which blacks are being treated … Rutte may be able to remove this make up, but he cannot discard his colonial mind-set.⁷

A variety of people termed Rutte’s statements as arrogant, lacking subtlety and embarrassingly ignorant, particularly for a Prime Minister who studied history. Moreover, the Prime Minister’s performance was highly peculiar against the background of the latest developments that took root in a tense past of protest and criticism, on the one hand, and denial and hostile countercritique, on the other hand, both nationally and internationally.

Over the last few decades various attempts have been made to move away from blackfaced performances and negative stereotypes by introducing, for example, red-, yellow-, blue- and green-faced Petes or multicolored “rainbow Petes.” However, time and again, these initiatives were simply choked off by

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common assertions, such as Black Pete is an “innocent, old tradition” and part of “our culture.” Refusing to admit any kind of racial component, these statements were and still are, as Rutte showed, delivered as “unassailable facts meant to end any discussion” (Smith 2014:222). Recently, advocates of Black Pete defend the tradition more and more by making a direct link between the popular tradition, a national sense of pride and Dutch identity (and the fear of losing them), the latter being fuelled by reactionary, controversial politicians like the former minister of Vreemdelingenzaken en Integratie (Immigration and Integration) Rita Verdonk. In her 2008 manifesto that marked the installation of her new political party, Trots op Nederland (Proud of the Netherlands), Verdonk invoked a widely sensed threat to the beloved tradition suggesting an attack on Dutch native culture and “our traditions.”

Such insinuations are increasingly part of populist discourses of conservative politicians like Rita Verdonk or Geert Wilders, the leader of the Partij voor de Vrijheid (Party for Freedom), who in the 2013 turmoil (see below) tweeted that he would rather eliminate the UN than Black Pete. Yet, more mainstream politicians, like Mark Rutte, are also inclined to adopt similar, sometimes racist discourses, rather than to counter them (Essed & Hoving 2014b:11ff.; Smith 2014:231–235). Under these conditions, criticism of and protests against the tradition grew tense, in particular against Saint Nicholas’ helper, Black Pete. The playful, though confrontational art exhibition, *Read the Masks: Tradition is not Given*, held at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven in 2008, fired the starting signal for a deluge of rude, often hateful and even violent responses. The international artists, Annette Krauss and Petra Bauer, received death threats for taking the next, more public step in their critical exhibit. Ultimately, the succeeding phases of their three-part artistic project never materialized (see Smith 2014:229ff.). The grassroot outrage was not an isolated incident; subsequent acts and protests received similar negative, sometimes extreme reactions. On November 12, 2011, four people, including Quinsy Gario, wearing t-shirts with the text “Zwarte Piet is racisme” (“Black Pete is racism”) were forcibly arrested


9 The exhibition was part of a broader artistic project devoted to the project *Be(com)ing Dutch* at the Van Abbemuseum. Besides the exhibition, a second act would consist of a planned, filmed, mock-protest march. The final project, then, would be a film including preceding work and stages, the public reaction to this as well as the artists’ further explorations of the Saint Nicholas tradition. See http://www.becomingdutch.com/introduction/ and http://vimeo.com/53495267 (last visited May 3, 2014).
for protesting against the arrival parade in the city of Dordrecht. The next day, five more protesters suffered the same fate during the Amsterdam parade. Describing these events, Joy Smith, English professor at Hunter College in New York City, (2014:231) argues that:

The activists may have brought more attention to this issue, but given the negative reaction to the protesters by the general public, critical reflection on the meaning of the black-face performance has not improved since the Van Abbe Museum debacle of 2008.

Smith could not foresee the oncoming developments. In October 2013 the debate exploded, polarizing both cultural and political life, and dragging in opinion leaders, politicians, celebrities and other prominent public figures such as Eberhard van der Laan, the mayor of Amsterdam, and influential scholars like Abram de Swaan. Above all, this time the controversy received growing international attention. Complaints from individuals and civil society organizations reached the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights. On November 21, 2013, UN human rights experts advised the Dutch government to facilitate the growing national debate on whether or not the portrayal of Black Pete perpetuates both a negative stereotype and derogatory image of Africans and people of African descent. Like the artists of the Van Abbemuseum exhibition, the UN human rights experts received death threats and, after publishing their findings, the advice was ignored by the Dutch government. Nonetheless, it did result in a national debate, in which diverging opinions were fiercely ventilated in newspapers and magazines, TV talk shows,

11 See Abram de Swaan’s article “Erken Het: Hier Wonen Ook Donkere Mensen” (“Admit It: Black People Live Here Too”) in NRC Handelsblad, October 22, 2013. Artist and activist Quinsy Gario, who was arrested in the 2011 Dordrecht parade, ignited hot debate when he appeared in the popular television talk show Pauw & Witteman on October 7, 2013, to make his case again. See https://pauwenwitteman.vara.nl/media/301522 (last visited May 3, 2014).
12 See http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=14013& LangID=E for both the statement by the UN experts and the Dutch government’s reply (last visited May 3, 2014). The government’s denial was partly motivated by statements made by UN expert Verene Sheperd. In an interview she voiced her personal opinion stating that Black Pete is racist and a throwback to slavery. Sheperd signed the final report that the UN submitted to the Dutch government, but later it was found that she was not authorized to sign it.
and discussions on social media. It triggered passionate feelings, as well as aggressive actions and reactions; numerous white Dutch people reacted furiously to accusations that the tradition is racist. Many repeated the “it is our culture” statement or the long-standing claim that Black Pete appears black because of the soot from the chimneys he climbs to deliver presents. A petition page on Facebook backing Black Pete, named “Pietitie,” gathered over two million likes within just a few days. The country’s largest newspaper, De Telegraaf, portrayed anti-Black Pete protesters as troublemakers, while popular celebrities (both black and white), like sports newscaster Humberto Tan, singer Anouk, and model Doutzen Kroes, opposing the Black Pete custom, received insults and death threats. A pro-Black Pete protest at the Malieveld in The Hague turned grim and aggressive when a dark-skinned woman, who was addressing a totally different political issue, was besieged by an angry mob and needed rescuing by the police.13 In the midst of these events, Prime Minister, Mark Rutte, simply commented, “Black Pete is black,” the same trivializing remark he would repeat during the international press conference prior to the Nuclear Security Summit in 2014.

Considering all the above, the Prime Minister’s political performance may raise some questions, particularly at a moment in which the Dutch government is directly faced with increasing pressure to act, and even take the lead, in the polarizing debate. After the advice of the UN experts, Paul de Leeuw, renowned Dutch television comedian, singer, and actor, put some more pressure on political leaders and the Dutch parliament. Impressed and inspired by the Oscar-winning movie, 12 Years a Slave, he stirred up the debate at the end of March 2014. “It is most important,” said De Leeuw, in the widely liked television talk show, De Wereld Draait Door, “that children are able to celebrate the Saint Nicholas feast without any racist component.” According to De Leeuw, it is necessary that politicians, including Mark Rutte, express an explicit opinion on the matter in favor of change, as citizens do not succeed to work it out together. To achieve this, he handed over 151 copies of 12 Years A Slave to the parliament, together with a letter that voiced his appeal.14

How can we understand Rutte’s response and, more generally, the unwillingness of a Dutch majority to reflect on Black Pete and his offending char-


acteristics? The defensive and increasingly hostile attitudes may be hard to grasp, especially in view of the cherished Dutch self-image that “stresses being a tolerant, small and just ethical nation” (Wekker 2014:174; see Jordan 2014:206), proudly bringing out its freedom of expression, consensus-based model of decision-making (the “polder model”) and recognition of pluralistic Dutch cultural values (see Smith 2014:230–231). It appears, however, that despite its good reputation, “Dutch tolerance,” might better be interpreted as “passive tolerance,” which comes close to “passive intolerance” (Hondius 2014), “indifference” (Ghorashi 2014), and ultimately evasion and denial. Accordingly, there is a strong tendency to ignore and/or reject race issues and racism. The editors of the recently published volume Dutch Racism (Essed & Hoving 2014a) take (institutionalized) ignorance, together with innocence, avoidance, and denial as key features in their understanding of (everyday) racism in the Netherlands. The controversy over the figure of Black Pete shows how claims of innocence and strategies of ignorance and denial work: Black Pete is nothing more than a fun-loving, well-meaning children’s friend whose blackface appearance results from chimney soot. Racist connotations or references to slavery are, subsequently, easily waved aside (i.e., ignored). In this way, innocence and ignorance are forms of evasion and even denial, which easily fits in with the Dutch inclination to reject colonial history as relevant for understanding racism or, as Philomena Essed and Isabel Hoving (2014b:11) put it: “Dominant discourses miss historical explanations and dismiss the connection between present ethnic humiliations and the brutality of colonization, slavery, and antisemitism.” Actually, they argue, there is in the Netherlands no shared discourse to address racism, while lately “there is a sense of self-satisfaction and smugness about ignoring the issue—racism is seen as an outdated topic that has no relevance to the twenty-first century” (Essed & Hoving 2014b:11). Also Smith (2014:233) who aims to explain why criticism and protests regarding Black Pete fail to provoke Dutch reflection and why they have little effect on how the holiday tradition is practiced, comes to the same conclusion: “Avoidance of open discussions about race is the norm.” Or, as Dutch historian Dienke Hondius (2014:274) notes, “We don’t do race.”

Almost all authors of Dutch Racism agree on this overriding feature of “smug ignorance,” that is “(aggressively) rejecting the possibility to know” (Essed & Hoving 2014b:24). It remains to be seen, however, if the “nation’s main strategy” (Essed & Hoving 2014b:10) of ignorance, avoidance, and denial will suffice after the latest events in the Black Pete controversy. Despite massive resistance, there are signs that the representation and role of Black Pete will be adjusted; a few days after his much-discussed performance, Rutte gave his apologies for his “unfortunate remark” as he called it, and he personally apologized to the Prime
Minister of Curacao, Ivar Asjes. Meanwhile, various stakeholders from both sides of the debate, including critics like Quincy Garion and the pro-Black Pete Sint Nicolaas Genootschap (Saint Nicholas Alliance), were consulted to discuss the future of Black Pete. The consultations, led by the Nederlands Centrum voor Volkscultuur en Immaterieel Erfgoed (VIE, the Dutch Center for Popular Culture and Intangible Heritage), secretly started in October 2013 and aimed to produce a list of shared principles and draw some conclusions before summer 2014. However, the director of the VIE, Ineke Strouken, is cautious: “this might be the beginning of a solution.” Strouken expects that an adequate resolution will take years because advocates and opponents are hard to reconcile.15

The abiding refusal to find an acceptable compromise can be understood by the critical analysis of the various contributing articles in Dutch Racism: conscious evasion of “race talk” (Hondius 2014), ignoring or silencing of critique (especially regarding Dutch colonial history and the legacy of slavery), and hostile, offensive responses to critical voices leave little room for debate, let alone pro-actively promoted change. In the following sections we want to take these insights a step further, first by examining the historical context of Dutch slavery and colonialism. We will show how slavery and colonialism are inextricably linked to hegemonic systems of exchange and commodification as well as the circulation of images and discourses of black bodies (see Brienen 2014; Jordan 2014; Smith 2014). The latter, subsequently, seeks to elucidate both the dynamics between Saint Nicholas and his servant Black Pete, and the way Black Pete continues to be “consumed” in present-day Dutch society. However, we explicitly do not aim to “prove” that Black Pete is grounded in this history. Rather we want to demonstrate that it, nevertheless, provides an unavoidable background for the understanding of the controversy over Black Pete, and the reasons why present-day emotions are running so high. Conceptually, we will argue that the invented Black Pete tradition marks, in Pierre Bourdieu’s (1990) terms, “a white Dutch habitus” in which this historical context is so conveniently ignored or forgotten. In any case, this notion brings us back, then, to the recent developments described above, as they expose cracks in this “habitus,” making it increasingly difficult to ignore black people’s perspectives.16

16 We want to thank the anonymous reviewer #1 for suggesting this intelligible formulation.
Interlude: On Approach, Representation, and the Black Body

Before continuing with the history of Dutch colonialism and the legacy of slavery, this section highlights some of the theoretical and methodological approaches that are central in our unraveling of the Black Pete phenomenon. Besides Bourdieu’s conceptualization of a white Dutch habitus and, importantly, the self-preservation of it, we draw on bell hooks’ (1992) notion of white supremacy to illuminate the complexity of “interlocking systems of domination which define our reality” (hooks in Jordan 2014:209). Instead of implying an all-embracing, systematic domination, the analysis focuses on connections between “sites of diverse knowledge,” without losing sight of the individual stories and experiences of people making those connections. Following Anna Tsing’s (2005) method of “patchwork ethnography,” the article uses “ethnographic fragments” to show that there is not necessarily a master narrative. Yet, each element is not independent: patchwork ethnography and fragmented examples allow for sometimes incomparable and contradicting knowledge, stressing “zones of awkward engagement where words [and experiences] mean something different across a divide” (Tsing 2005:xi).

The engagements and examples mentioned in this article, unfolded through observations, (group) interviews, personal interactions, and informal conversations with both black and white Dutch people. The first investigations into the Saint Nicholas tradition started in the fall of 2012, a couple of weeks before the national arrival in the city of Roermond. The findings are analyzed in combination with an examination of online resources, academic literature, and public debates concerning the legacy of Dutch slavery and the Black Pete tradition. By using notions of a “white habitus” and white supremacy in this analysis, we demonstrate that the Black Pete tradition is neither an isolated nor a fixed phenomenon, but rather embedded in broader systems of domination, and part of a larger body of stereotypical representations. It is therefore relevant to understand how and why Black Pete, “once a liminal figure of fertility and winter angst” (Smith 2014:228), became portrayed as a black body, including prominent phenotypical features like a solid black skin color, thick bright red lips, and curly or wooly dark hair. In using the term “black body,” however, we have to acknowledge that there is obviously no monolithic, singular black body, but that various bodies and body images—regarding e.g., gender, sexuality, class,

17 Gloria Jean Watkins. Her pen name, “bell hooks,” is intentionally not capitalized.
18 Karina Goulordava has primary responsibility for the interviews and conversations in this article.
race, ethnicity, age, health—are implicated differently in hierarchies of meaning and regimes of power. Hence, the body and experiences of embodiment are always complex and multifaceted, layered, and nuanced at different levels of human subjective experience, social interaction, institutional arrangements, and historical and cultural processes (Waskul & Vannini 2006:2). Heeding interactionist theory and taking into account existing discursive orders in society, we therefore approach the body as a “vehicle” bearing the representational traces of history, culture, and power (see Waskul & Vannini 2006:11), which in this case particularly refers to racist representations and meanings of the black body as both inferior and entertaining, sometimes even as evil or polluting. The term, however, is not meant to simply objectify the black Dutch body, but to explore its racialization, politicization, and commodification within the tradition of Black Pete and the subsequent relation to value. Such a focus on the black body adds to an understanding of the controversial character, not only as a contested symbol of Dutch racism, but also, to put it in Mimi Sheller’s (2003) terms, “a commodified source of pleasure and consumption.”

Colonialism, the Legacy of Dutch Slavery, and the Invention of a Tradition

When inquiring into the origins of Black Pete, a wide array of possible information sources exist. To gain access to the public discussion in a larger forum, the website Stuff Dutch People Like is insightful.19 This site keeps a blog summarizing aspects of Dutch traditions listing Black Pete as a prominent item. The short, five-paragraph summary states that the origin of Black Pete is unclear. Dozens of pages of reader comments, many of which argue the character’s origin, follow the short summary. Comments are left by Dutch citizens and foreigners as well as Dutch ex-pats living abroad.20 The possible origins presented were similar to those noted from off-line conversations and sources, including references to a devil figure tamed by Saint Nicholas, a warrior of the Germanic god Wodan (or his Norse variant Odin), a Moorish sailor, or an enslaved boy saved by Saint Nicholas.

20 Although internet sources such as Stuff Dutch People Like present various disadvantages with regard to validity, particularly due to anonymity and/or lack of information about those writing the comments, the blog provided many other fields of relevant information. Contrary to numerous Dutch Internet forums, this English blog discussed significant sensitive issues concerning Black Pete from both insider and outsider perspectives.
In his introductory remarks in *The Invention of Tradition*, Eric Hobsbawm (1983:1) makes the claim that “traditions which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent and sometimes invented.” Considering the many rumored origins of Black Pete, it is argued that the tradition of the Saint Nicholas servant has changed overtime.21 This is important to understand, as the tradition is fiercely defended due to its believed long history. However, the character of Black Pete is relatively modern and invented. Black Pete first appears in 1850 in *Sint Nicolaas en zijn knecht* (*Saint Nicholas and His Servant*) a children’s book authored by Dutch schoolteacher Jan Schenkman (Helsloot 2012). The book portrays a white Saint Nicholas and a black servant (Schenkman 1988). Two areas of interest are worth mentioning in this invention of Black Pete including: the links between the significance of the “color” black and Black Pete’s African heritage, and the connections between (the legacy of) slavery and Black Pete’s role as a black servant.

In many, but not all cultures, the use or appearance of black often signifies evil, death, mystery, and an overall negative connotation (Faber 2004; Gergen 1967:397). In the comment section of the blog *Stuff Dutch People Like*, many readers relate Black Pete’s origins with the devil or other unworldly characters, black ravens or dark mythology, all things associated with shades of black or that are black in appearance. Concerning the dark devilish character, it is speculated that Saint Nicholas tamed the devil that accompanied him—enchained—throughout the Middle Ages (Blakely 1993:45). In other European traditions, Saint Nicholas is often accompanied by a different devilish or otherworldly character, which has received a variety of names over the years. Often this character is portrayed as hairy, dark, with horns, and associated with darkness (Blakely 1993:45; Nederveen Pieterse 1990, 1998). In Germanic folklore, this character is known as “Knecht Ruprecht,” who accompanies Saint Nicholas to assist him with punishing or rewarding children. This version of Saint Nicholas’ servant is often depicted as dark in color, monstrous/devilish, and with horns. In Austria, Northern Italy, and other parts of Europe this figure is called “Krambus,” who more closely resembles common portrayals of the devil and has hooves, horns, and a monstrous tongue. In his book *Blacks in the Dutch World*, Allison Blakely discusses the tradition of Black Pete and the negative connotations of the “color” black. Blakely (1993:63) states:

The likening of the Zwarte Man (Black Man) [one name given to previous Saint Nicholas companions] to a Negro in color shows that the bridge

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between fantasy and reality may often be very short. As in the case of Zwarte Piet, some looking in the real world for human types with which to associate the black monsters in the world of the imagination are drawn to comparisons using black people.

Connecting the many culturally negative connotations of the “color” black with the dark colored, evil character accompanying Saint Nicholas, Black Pete resembles aspects of the myth in human form. The negative connotation of the “color” black and its application to black skin is evident in Dutch culture including in songs, card games, jokes, and expressions. For example, a popular song, sung during the Saint Nicholas holiday, includes the lyrics “even though I am black as soot, my intentions are good,” indicating the link between mischievousness and blackness, specifically the black skin of Black Pete. Martinique-born, French-Algerian psychiatrist Frantz Fanon, discusses the negative connotation of the “color” black and its application to black bodies in his 1952 work *Black Skin, White Masks* (Fanon [2008]:146):

The torturer is the black man, Satan is black, one talks of shadows, when one is dirty one is black-whether one is thinking of physical dirtiness or of moral dirtiness. It would be astonishing, if the trouble were taken to bring them all together, to see the vast number of expressions that make the black man the equivalent of sin. In Europe, whether concretely or symbolically, the black man stands for the bad side of the character.

The connection between black and sin, as discussed by Fanon, is found in various aspects of Dutch culture, such as the Saint Nicholas song mentioned previously. In the tradition, the white/black and good/evil paradigm is exemplified in the skin colors of the two holiday characters. Saint Nicholas is the saint, the symbol of purity. Replacing unworldly figures, Black Pete appears as the human representation of all negative black connotations, which Fanon mentions in the above quotation (see also Smith 2014).

It is important to remember that Black Pete appeared in 1850 as Dutch colonization and enslavement of Africans continued. During colonization, Africans were portrayed as savage, heathen, and as lesser beings than their white colonizers and enslavers (Sheller 2003:109). It is not surprising that such representations contributed to superior notions of whiteness and derogatory perceptions of blackness, placing the black body in a subordinate position.

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22 Slavery in the Dutch colonies formally came to an end in 1863.
within a larger system of white supremacy. It is in this historical context that Schenkman created the figure of Black Pete, or as Smith (2014:228) argues: “Drawing off the old ... Pagan tradition of the nature/troll-like helper, Schenkman reimagined the figure as an exotic servant/slave for the saint.” Is it possible then, that Schenkman was reproducing a white master/black servant paradigm that was embedded in the system of slavery? How were relations between whites and blacks represented to white Dutch audiences at the time? In viewing Dutch paintings from the years 1668–1818, a number of works of art depict enslaved Africans at the service of a white master. In the works observed, many included a young, enslaved African male of adolescent or preadolescent age serving at least one white master (Brienen 2014; Schreuder 2008). Of course it is unknown whether Schenkman had exposure to these works or similar ones. However, his depiction of the white master/black servant relationship in Sinterklaas en zijn knecht closely resembles the depictions in these works of art and the iconography of that time.

Schenkman chose a black body to represent the previous evil, devilish figure. It is interesting to note that readers of Stuff Dutch People Like also saw this connection over 160 years later. Many readers justified the black skin of Black Pete stating that it was simply a linear progression from devilish origins to black skin, and one that holds no racist origins. In her text accompanying Anna Fox’s photo collection titled Zwarte Piet, Mieke Bal (in Fox & Bal 1999:2; see also Bal 2004) recalls her experiences as a white child with Black Pete. She discusses this unspoken understanding of the presence of good and evil, demonstrated in the skin colors of the two holiday characters, stating that “the symbolisms of white equals good, black equals evil, were not spoken aloud.” The tradition and its symbolism seem to be accepted due to an almost commonsense mentality. The latter fits in Hobsbawn’s notion of “invented tradition,” particularly when he argues that it “is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms or behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past” (Hobsbawn 1983:1). Did Schenkman create Black Pete based on such “accepted rules” that deemed black to be negative and applied them to black skin? If so, Black Pete is an invented tradition that has reproduced this notion overtime, mimicking not only the ideologies surrounding race, but also essential aspects of enjoyment in dominance and submission (see Smith 2014).

As is well known, the overall system of slavery was based in the oppression of enslaved Africans that forced them into unfree labor, and a position of exploitation and inferiority. The latter is still manifest in the present-day masquerade, especially in the dynamic between saint and servant. The distinction of posi-
tion and, hence, value between Saint Nicholas and Black Pete is for instance clearly visible in the arrival parade as described in the introduction of this article. Consider also Joy Smith’s (2014:225–226) observations:

Saint Nicholas rides on a horse while Black Pete walks, runs and jumps, the Saint speaks impeccable Dutch, while Pete stumbles through the language, the Saint is noble and takes his yearly duties seriously, while Black Pete is irresponsible, and does all the heavy lifting when delivering toys and sliding down chimneys during the Sinterklaas season.

Saint Nicholas obviously occupies a virtuous position, one that must be protected and served. In each and every parade, there is also only one Saint Nicholas. If he is hurt or missing, the parade cannot continue. His body is valued. In contrast, each city’s parade features many Black Petes who play different, though always submissive roles, such as the “lead Pete” ("hoofd Piet"), acrobat, musician or stilt walker, which are reminiscent of the many roles required of black people (Blakely 1993:275). The black bodies are ubiquitous, anonymous in their number, and in a sense devalued in these parades. As Saint Nicholas elegantly and proudly parades atop his white horse, the Black Petes service the crowds with entertainment and sweets. Besides, some of them speak Dutch with an accent that sounds childish or foolish, in order to add an additional source of entertainment. In some situations, this accent is meant to impersonate a Surinamese person speaking Dutch. Although this aspect has been changing, the trait clearly links Black Pete to the Afro-Surinamese, most of who are descendants of enslaved Africans (see Helsloot 2005; Smith 2014).

The dynamic of enjoyment in dominance and submission, as depicted here, divulges a long history of the objectification of black bodies for the purpose of amusement, which is reproduced at the arrival of Saint Nicholas and Black Pete in the Netherlands. In former times, black bodies were frequently displayed in zoos and exhibitions for Europeans to analyze and gawk (Magubane 2001:830; Westerman 2004). One famous example is that of Sara Baartman, a Khoikhoi woman from South Africa who came to Europe where she faced humiliation and was named “Hottentot Venus,” as her “exotic” black body fascinated Europeans. Baartman was sold to a circus and later became a sex worker, all before her premature death at the age of twenty-five, after which her body was medically examined, molded, and put on further display (Magubane 2001:817). Baartman’s emotional and physical pain was ignored as her body was seen only as a source of entertainment and pleasure; an object to be gazed at. Saidiya Hartman (in Smith 2014:224–226) considers this relation between pleasure and subjection as the fundamental organizing principle for slavery. Within the sub-
missive role of Black Pete, the character’s body is also viewed as a source of entertainment and pleasure for a principally white audience. Often, a Black Pete is comically hurt. This act is not met with empathy as the fictional pain is performed to extract laughter. Reciprocally, the white bodies that perform Black Pete derive entertainment from their participation in this tradition. In the parade, it is a pleasure, even an honor to play the lead Black Pete who is constantly at the service of Saint Nicholas. In the comment section of Stuff Dutch People Like, mentioned previously, many readers stated that they enjoy performing Black Pete and look forward, every year, to this “playful tradition.”

The Saint Nicholas feast, in other words, still reproduces the expectation of entertainment from black (blackfaced) bodies and continues the white supremacy/black inferiority paradigm (see Helsloot 2005:268): the Black Petes are present for the service of a white Saint Nicholas and the pleasure of a mostly white audience. As such, the body of Black Pete, comparable to Sara Baartman’s and other exhibited black bodies, principally holds value in its ability to entertain. Its humanity, culture, history, and dignity are erased and its voice is silenced. This notion is supported by Paul Gilroy (1993:188), when he argues that “racisms work insidiously and consistently to deny both historicity and cultural integrity to the artistic and cultural fruits of black life” (see also Essed & Hoving 2014b). As mentioned above, various movements and projects have worked to adjust or eradicate (particular aspects of) the Black Pete tradition. One of the first recorded projects, titled “Witte Pietenplan” (White Pete Plan), already dates back to 1968. Several projects followed.23 Most of them aimed at introducing a black Saint Nicholas or blue-, red-, yellow-, and green-faced Petes or rainbow Petes. But these initiatives did not realize structural change. Quinsy Gario’s much debated, ongoing art project Zwarte Piet Is Racisme and his recent media actions seem to have more far-reaching impact. We have seen that the resulting uproar in 2013 and 2014 makes it increasingly difficult to carry on in ignorance and denial, especially for those people who take pride in their culture’s tolerance—even if just a myth. At the same time, pro-Black Pete activists, supported by a considerable part of the Dutch population (think of the “Pietitie” page) hold on to common sense beliefs that refuse to reflect on the dynamics mentioned above. In discussions with defenders of Black Pete, many

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23 An in-depth review of all the projects exceeds the scope of this article. For a detailed overview see Helsloot 2005. The documentary film that resulted from the earlier mentioned art project Read the Masks displays also a list of initiatives. One of the most recent projects is “Ceci N’est Pas de l’Histoire” in Utrecht, May 20, 2013, see http://cecinestpasblog.tumblr.com (last visited May 3, 2014).
stated that the Saint Nicholas feast actually honors the black Dutch community as the Black Pete figure has a prominent role in the holiday tradition and is favored over Saint Nicholas by most Dutch. But does the tradition really honor the Black Pete character and, at a more abstract level, the black body, including its culture and history, or does it merely reproduce its devaluation, only serving to entertain and bring pleasure to a mostly white population? The many examples of “ignorant” statements of Black Pete defenders, then, rather show the immanence of a white supremacy and habitus, dictating which notions and representations count as legitimate and which not (see also Jordan 2014).

The Self-Preservation of the White Dutch Habitus and the Value of the Black Body in the Netherlands

In a number of works, bell hooks states that we live in an “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy,” implying that nonwhite, nonmale, and non-western bodies are assigned less value than their white, male, western counterparts in a capitalist society (e.g., hooks 1992, 2004). This notion is a useful lever to understand the (re)production of a hierarchy of people and the ways black bodies are employed as a resource and/or locus of exploitation and excess of entertainment (see Jordan 2014). Valued bodies are protected and their physical life is valued. These bodies are further valued and recognized for their contribution to the sociopolitical system described by hooks. Other bodies, on the contrary, are less valued. They are considered disposable, and their cultures, histories, and languages are deemed inferior and unnecessary within the system. Paradoxically, these bodies do hold value, but only insofar as they can be exploited by this system, with no other recognition of their contribution. There is a hegemony and hegemonizing logic, hooks reminds us, wherein all bodies can be used for their physical labor, but some bodies are also allowed to contribute to other domains, such as culture, language, art, music, et cetera. Fanon (2008:21) uses his experiences with patients to illustrate the absence of value in black history, language or culture, as he writes:

I meet a Russian or a German who speaks French badly. With gestures I try to give him the information that he requests, but at the same time I can hardly forget that he has a language of his own, a country, and that perhaps he is a lawyer or engineer there. In any case, he is foreign to my groups, and his standards must be different. When it comes to the case of the Negro, nothing of the kind. He has no culture, no civilization, no “long historical past.”
Fanon encounters that his culture and history are not acknowledged, re-sounding the mechanisms of colonization and enslavement: “the Negro” was only valued for his labor necessary to maintain a system of exchange and commodification, and to ensure its growth. So less valued were the lives and bodies of enslaved Africans, especially in comparison to the commodities that they produced, that:

The over-working of the Negro and sometimes the using up of his life in 7 years’ of labor became a factor in a calculated and calculating system. It was no longer a question of obtaining from him a certain quantity of useful products. It was now a question of production of surplus-labor itself.

Lawrence 1975:6

In other words, these men and women fit into the system until they could no longer provide labor, at which point they became valueless. Although Lawrence discusses the production of cotton, similar statements could be made concerning the production of other commodities, such as sugar, in the Dutch colonies (e.g., Oostindie 1993:4). In her book Consuming the Caribbean, Sheller (2003:75) states that “the Dutch ... pioneered the creation of a global trade empire stitched together by the flow of commodities and wealth from colonial peripheries back to the metropolitan core.” The enslaved Africans were the necessary tools to maintain and ensure the trade of commodities. As a matter of fact, they became commodities as well: their bodies, bought and sold and becoming the property of the slave owner, were essential to produce the commodities that fueled new forms of consumption and lifestyles in Europe (Sheller 2003:23, 81; see also Mintz 1985; Stuart 2012). They also contributed to the system in their ability to reproduce and, in the particular case of women, in their forced sexual availability, ensuring continuous free labor with their offspring (Kempadoo 2004:3). Furthermore, enslaved African women were used for sex work and as sources of sexual pleasure for the slave owner and other white, male plantation workers and guests (Kempadoo 2004:31, 40). In this respect, enslaved Africans, male and female, had as little agency over their own bodies as over their labor, and whether for the production of commodities or sexual labor, they were principally used for the benefit of capitalist trade (Mintz 1985:54).

Altogether, black bodies were assigned meaning based upon physical characteristics and productivity and we might wonder if these bodies were only valued as long as their physical (productive or entertaining) contribution persists. Within the holiday character of Black Pete, we see elements of this logic both
in the creation of the character and in the way the tradition is practiced today. With this, history has been separated from the character and “forgotten.” In his notion of habitus, Pierre Bourdieu (1990:56) refers to a similar cycle of repeated history that is simultaneously forgotten. He defines habitus as “embodied history, internalized as second nature and so forgotten as history,” and explains how the development of this habitus is dependent on history and memory (Bourdieu 1990:54):

The habitus, a product of history, produces individual and collective practices—more history—in accordance with the schemes generated by history. It ensures the active presence of past experiences, which, deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the ‘correctness’ of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms.

Regarding this constancy, we see that the less value that was assigned to black bodies due to the negative connotations of black, has been (re)produced during slavery, and appears to continue in the “Dutch habitus” today, at minimum in the tradition of Black Pete. As the “habitus” is inherently resistant to change and protects itself by always reinforcing its dispositions (Bourdieu 1990:61), it continues to demonstrate self-defense. In Understanding Everyday Racism, Philomena Essed (1991) argues: “the dominant group believes that their version of reality and the ‘truth’ is right and objective.” As a result, “[people of this group] are incapable of seeing the world from another point of view ... and they don’t see the racism that is there” (Essed 1991:271; see Essed & Hoving 2014b). This solitary view of “truth” is a demonstration of the habitus and its self-protective properties. This is evident, at least not until recently, in the absence of a constructive national discussion on race in the Netherlands, a lack of educational focus on the Dutch slave trade, and the defense of Black Pete by a majority of white Dutch citizens (see Essed & Hoving 2014b; Horton & Kardux 2004:64; Smith 2014). We have seen, for instance, that the white Dutch habitus is at work in the frequently used statement “but this is our tradition, we have been doing this for hundreds of years,” to defend Black Pete. Here the collective, “white Dutch habitus” manifests itself as many people state the same reasoning.

The denial of racism, within the tradition of Black Pete, is a demonstration of a “Dutch habitus” that over the centuries has “forgotten” its historical roots, such as the often forgotten, sheer invention of the Black Pete tradition in 1850. Applying Bourdieu’s notion of “habitus” helps us to understand the continual separation of race and racism from the holiday tradition of Black Pete, which
is evidence of a persistent historical forgetfulness. The seminal ideas of Mary Douglas (1966:37–38) work, thereby, in tandem with Bourdieu’s conception of the self-preservation of the “habitus.” She argues that the more consistent our experience is with the past, the more confidence we can have in our assumptions, whereby “we find ourselves ignoring or distorting [‘uncomfortable facts, which refuse to be fitted in’]” so that they do not disturb these established assumptions. Hence, as the white Dutch habitus has remained self-protective for a long time, it has reinforced a certain image of a collective white Dutch consciousness preventing it from seeing racism in the Black Pete character. Such are the workings of “smug ignorance” (Essed & Hoving 2014b), which Essed (1991:274) explained in earlier work as follows:

Whites would not see the racism that is there. The reinforcement of their nondiscriminatory self-image leads to further reluctance to deal with racism in general or to admit racism. Because the Dutch have strongly internalized the idea that they are not to discriminate, they are more reluctant to acknowledge that racism is a Dutch problem as well.

Due to constant social reinforcement of a nondiscriminatory white Dutch consciousness, any challenge to the “white habitus” is strongly resisted and quick explanations are used as a defense. Challenging facts that cannot be refuted are swiftly ignored. We have shown, for example, how many white Dutch people defended the black skin color of Black Pete by stating that the blackness is a result of rubbing against chimney soot as he travels up and down chimneys to deliver presents. Questions such as “why are his clothes clean and what is the reasoning for the Afro hair and lip makeup?” were unanswered. Due to the nature of the “habitus,” the majority of white Dutch people ignore this uncomfortable fact, meanwhile also ignoring, forgetting, denying or being unaware of any historical memory of the abuse of black bodies.

Critical antagonists such as Quinsy Gario are aware of these dynamics. In November 2012 we discussed the meaning of Black Pete within Dutch society and the significance of calling the tradition racist. Gario explained that realizing this racism is a painful and unpleasant process, especially as it would require white Dutch people to reflect on their childhood, since Black Pete is a tradition for children. Gario stated that confirming that Black Pete is indeed a racist tradition would result in admitting to one’s own personal racism. As elaborated above, such realization is something that the habitus staunchly resists.

24 Interview by Karina Goulordova in Amsterdam, November 2012.
We can encounter this resistance in every age group. During an interview session at a predominantly white Dutch high school, I, Karina Goulordava, asked a class of 15- and 16-year-old students about the controversial tradition. Unanimously the students defended Black Pete with responses feeding off of one another in rapid succession. Reasons, such as “we already don’t have a greater issue of racism here so we don’t need to make this little thing an issue” and “but I don’t have a problem with it,” were used to defend the tradition. In asking the students what they would say to an Afro-Dutch opponent of Black Pete, one student stated, “If you talk about it this way, you make it a problem and make it racist.” Another student noted, “But some black people play Black Pete too.” The feelings of black people who oppose Black Pete were disregarded and deemed illegitimate. During the conversation with Gario, he posed the question “who gets to decide what is racist?” The student interview demonstrates the notion presented by Essed (1991; see also Essed & Hoving 2014b) that the dominant group only sees one truth and is therefore blind to the racism due to the self-protective qualities of the habitus. Moreover, the dominant group feels the right to define what is and is not racist (see Jordan 2014:215).

Due to this, Black Pete remains, at least until the latest events in 2013 and 2014, a means “by which whiteness colonizes and mediates blackness in the public sphere” (Jordan 2014:215). Uncomfortable and challenging meanings are still systematically ignored, endorsing a caricature of blackness, in which Black Pete is persistently portrayed as inferior, silly and aloof, while his black body is relegated to the form of an object that might be used for entertainment and, as will be shown in the last section of this article, serves as a continuous source for commodification and consumption.

Black Pete and the Commodification of the Black Dutch Body

Before analyzing how the black body is “consumed” through the holiday tradition of Black Pete, it is important to remember that the black body became a commodity during European colonization and enslavement of Africans, in which Dutch companies and later the empire participated (Barbosa 1987:359). Black bodies were traded, valued for their labor power, and desired as a tool that brought profit to not only white slave owners, but to various sectors of white dominated, Dutch business society. In discussing the economic benefits of the Dutch slave trade, Gert Oostindie (1995:3) argues that:

25 This interview session was conducted in November 2012 in the province of South Holland.
If any one country could be called upon to confirm that an intense involvement in the Atlantic slave trade was fully compatible with a record of early capitalism and modernity at home, the Netherlands would be a perfect case. There is no dearth of studies underlining the astonishing economic growth and prosperity of the Dutch Republic. This growth encompassed virtually every sector of the economy, ranging from agriculture through industry to trade and banking.

Much of the benefit came from the selling of commodities produced by enslaved Africans, but also from the commodification and selling of black bodies. As shown in the sections above, black bodies were additionally used as a commodity that resulted in pleasure and entertainment. Especially black female bodies were seen and used as a source of constantly available sexual pleasure (Kempadoo 2004:40), and black bodies were brought to Europe, including the Netherlands, to be exhibited (e.g. Magubane 2001:830). Later, black bodies were further commodified to sell commodities. Caricatured images of black men, women, and children were placed on hundreds of products to generate profits for white owned businesses. The image of black bodies, often separated into just parts, appeared on a variety of products including tobacco, coffee, liquor, cleansers, rice farina, candy, shoe polish, and toothpaste (Blakely 1993:164). Today, black bodies are still used as images to sell products, and thus continue to be commodified.

Directly following bell hooks’ (1992:23) statement that “within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture,” we might argue that black bodies have been used to "spice up" mainstream, white supremacist societies for centuries—whether it was by providing actual spices or through the commodification and exoticization of their bodies. When considering Black Pete, the commodification of black bodies in this Dutch holiday tradition can be contextualized in a very long history of direct and indirect consumption of black bodies (see Sheller 2003). The enslaved Africans were used to produce commodities such as sugar, cotton, and tobacco but without their forced labor, these products would not have existed. In other words, through the consumption of these products, consumers were (indirectly) consuming the enslaved Africans.

26 Please note that findings about tremendous economic benefits are also criticized. Different scholars (e.g. Emmer 1974, 2000; Oostindie 1993, 1995; Postma 1990, 2005; Postma & Enthoven 2003) have discussed the extent of the (alleged) profits, whereby positions and findings are divided.
This pattern of commodification and consumption of black bodies persists into today’s commodity driven consumer society. For instance, in her book, *No Logo* (1999:77–78), Naomi Klein chronicles how the fashion brand Tommy Hilfiger used its popularity with inner-city black youth in the United States to reproduce and commodify their street style to generate more profit for the company. The street inspired “ghetto” fashion was then sold to the “larger market of middle-class white and Asian kids who mimic black style in everything from lingo to sports to music.” It could be argued that the exposure and adaptation of black culture in the mainstream is a positive acknowledgement. A similar argument has been made in the case of Black Pete. In conversations with the white Dutch, many have stated that Black Pete cannot be a racist tradition because he is featured prominently in the most popular Dutch tradition. But does Dutch society and its retail not solely use the black body as a prop in its celebration? Again, hooks’ notion might be helpful in understanding the subtle mechanism of “Othering,” meaning, in this case, the “commodification of difference.” This form of commodification, hooks (1992:29) explains, “promotes paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, via, exchange, by a consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other’s history through a process of decontextualization.” As discussed above, mixed ideas on the origins of Black Pete exist, but especially in the public realm almost none of them acknowledge the history of the enslavement of Africans that contributed to the white master/black servant paradigm. Thereby, the commodification of the black body through the figure of Black Pete ignores, denies, and decontextualizes the history of black bodies in the Netherlands. As in the example of Tommy Hilfiger, it is the dominant white culture that decides how aspects of blackness are incorporated.

In understanding the commodification of the black body within the tradition of Black Pete, it is insightful to scrutinize what makes Black Pete and, more specifically, how the black body is broken down into several body parts and characteristics. In order to become Black Pete, the skin must be painted, the lips are covered with lipstick, and an Afro wig completes the physical look. In some cases, the face paint is labeled as “Negro,” thereby expelling any doubts that Black Pete is of African origin.27 Once a black person is reduced to a black body and has been relegated to the form of an object, it becomes easier to further objectify its individual parts. According to Lesley Sharp (2000:289) “the body may be fragmented both metaphorically and literally through language,

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visual imagining, or the actual surgical reconstruction of specific parts." In the case of the body of Black Pete, in three simple steps a white Dutch person is transformed into Black Pete, a black person. To complete the Black Pete look, one must wear appropriate clothing and accessories. Thus, Black Pete is represented through color, hair, and clothing. The experiences of the black body are decontextualized and eradicated through this act, as blackness becomes nothing more than store bought color, hair and clothes. Sharp (2000:293) further states that “commodification insists upon objectification in some form, transforming persons and their bodies from a human category into objects of economic desire.” In the case of Black Pete, blackness is broken down into individual body parts, thereby losing control over personhood. Sharp (2000:290) discusses this loss of control by stating that the commodification of the body results in depoliticizing it and denial of its sociality. In the tradition of Black Pete, the black body is depoliticized, as any reference to race, racism and/or the legacy of slavery is deemed irrelevant, whereas the black body experiences a denial of sociality as it is deemed the ultimate “Other.” While some white Dutch people argue that Black Pete allows a black person to occupy a prominent space in white dominated Dutch society, it is always the dominant society that allows him or her—through the body—to occupy this space, only for a short period of time each year, and only for the entertainment of a mostly white audience.

The ambiguous prominence of Black Pete during the months of November and December is further reflected in the numerous products displaying the character. Such marketing is reminiscent of Blakely’s (1993) research as he documented the use of the black body on labels and advertisements in order to sell products. Often, the images were caricatures of black people. The use of the image of Black Pete, a caricature of blackness on various commodities, is a continuation of this history. Of course, consumers can also purchase and consume the body of Saint Nicholas. However, this consumption does not take place within a long history of problematic consumption of white, male bodies, as such a history does not exist. Already months before the arrival of Saint Nicholas, Black Pete becomes a tool to sell products. A consumer can purchase a chocolate Black Pete to eat, and the figure is seen on candy, gingerbread, holiday wrapping paper, in window displays, and more. The image of Black Pete is used to encourage consumption and generate profit. Consequently, Black Pete becomes a product in various ways. Hence, from times of slavery the black body is used to sell products but also to consume and enjoy. As such, the black body continues to be commodified and consumed within and for the benefit of a predominantly “white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy,” to put it in bell hooks’ terms once again.
Coda

In discussing the popular Dutch Saint Nicholas celebration it has become clear that the controversial but beloved Black Pete character is far from ideologically empty. For centuries, blackness has been associated with evil, inferiority, servitude, exoticism, and entertainment. Of course, the present-day Black Pete cannot be related to all these attributes as his role has changed over time. For example, he has transformed from a frightening, dim-witted, and foolish speaker of broken Dutch, into a character of joy, and he is, according to many supporters of the tradition, virtually on equal footing with Saint Nicholas (see Brienen 2014; Smith 2014). On the other hand, this playful, carnivalesque character still embodies a stereotypical caricature of blackness and a master-slave dynamic in order to entertain a mostly white audience. As such he is firmly entrenched in Dutch society and popular imagery. Quite paradoxically, he even has turned into a symbol of “authentic” Dutch culture and identity (Smith 2014).

Until recently, it seemed that criticism and protests against Black Pete failed to provoke any serious reflection on possible racist and/or insulting aspects of the holiday tradition: Black Pete is black and that cannot be changed. But current controversies over the black-faced character, particularly the 2013–14 public uproar and resulting debates, seriously challenge the future of Black Pete; Black Pete’s role and representation may be adjusted if not entirely eliminated. Yet, the same events also show a strong refusal of a white Dutch majority to change “their” much-loved “old tradition” and find an acceptable compromise. Especially references to slavery and racist elements of the popular character are still massively and sometimes aggressively ignored and denied. The latter, we argued, is related to a remarkable Dutch inclination to conveniently “forget” colonial history and slavery too easily, which the editors of Dutch Racism (Essed & Hoving 2014a) coined as “smug ignorance.” Yet in our understanding of the controversial holiday tradition, we have no other choice than to include the historical context of Dutch colonialism and slavery, and acknowledge the long history of the enslavement and trade of Africans, as well as their legacy in contemporary Dutch society. That does not mean that we wanted to prove that the Black Pete character is unmistakably grounded in this history, however, we rather aimed to show how this history provides the background for past and present Black Pete.

28 Take special notice, although the article does not seek for an intersectional analysis of Black Pete, the gendered, feminized aspect of Black Pete is important to note, as white women mainly play him.
recent controversies, and the heated debates triggering passionate feelings and hostile responses.

Recently, a couple of scholars discussed the “Dutch strategy” of innocence, ignorance, and denial in relation to the persistent Black Pete tradition (Essed & Hoving 2014b; Jordan 2014; Smith 2014). Further to their contributions, we considered it crucial to examine the tradition not only through a postcolonial lens, but also in terms of a white capitalist supremacy for which we have drawn on bell hooks’ conceptualizations. Additionally, in analyzing why the tradition is still present in Dutch society and, until recently, quite reluctant to criticism and change, we delved into the logics of a “white Dutch habitus.” By employing Bourdieu’s notion of “habitus,” we exposed the subconscious areas of racism that have allowed the invented Black Pete tradition to exist since 1850 and to continue to exist. Moreover, the self-preservation and self-protective qualities of this “habitus” showed why and how the historical context of colonialism and slavery, earlier described in the article, is so conveniently “forgotten” by a Dutch majority. We further argued that this historical forgetfulness contributes to an ongoing devaluation, objectification, and consequently commodification and consumption of the black body in present-day Dutch society. In the last section of this article, we asserted that these processes do not only reproduce stereotypical representations of blackness, but also continue to reduce the black body to a commodity and a tool to sell products in favor of a predominantly white economy of pleasure.

Nevertheless, the recent debates and 2013–14 turmoil seem to attack the white Dutch habitus and its self-preserving nature, as we have argued earlier. To put it differently, they expose some serious cracks in it; albeit “habitus” is self-protective, it “is not fixed or permanent, and can be changed under unexpected situations or over a long historical period” (Navarro 2006:16). It remains to be seen, if this now leaves room for a broad-based critical reflection on the meaning of Black Pete.

References


