On a recent December afternoon outside of Miami, I watched a white sailboat displaying a Dutch flag glide gently into a small marina. What made this boat stand out among the others was not the flag, but the fact that it was carrying three costumed figures: Sinterklaas or Saint Nicholas, the gift-giving saint of Dutch tradition (upon which the American Santa Claus is based) and his two Zwarte Piet (Black Peter) helpers. A Dutch and American crowd, which included me, my two young daughters, and my husband, viewed the Sint and his helpers from the balcony of a club house. Both children and adults broke into Sinterklaas songs and waved enthusiastically at the costumed figures below. My husband took pictures, careful to frame the figures against the palm trees, manatee warning signs, and tropical waters, so family members back in the Netherlands could also marvel at the incongruity of this manifestation. As the red-robed, bearded, and bishop-like Sint and his merry, dancing attendants disembarked, I could not help but wonder what the non-Dutch affiliated audience of boaters and passersby could possibly make of this spectacle, especially the two Piet figures, played by white women in blackface with dark curly wigs (fig. 1).

As a North American, a participant in the festivities around the Sinterklaas holiday, and a scholar of early modern Dutch art, I have always found the Zwarte Piet phenomenon both fascinating and unsettling, particularly since many of the images that support it are close to the stereotypical representations of blacks propagated by the hugely popular minstrel shows in the United States and Europe during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (fig. 2). I was nonetheless acutely aware that any critique of these happy, go-lucky, and somewhat naughty Zwarte Pieten would not be welcome at this Sinterklaas party for Dutch expatriates and their families in South
Figure 1  M. W. Brienen, *Sinterklaas, Zwarte Piet, and a Manatee Sign*, December, 2009. Digital Photo. Collection of author.