The Dutch Saint Nicholas celebration [Sinterklaasfeest] is a yearly event. On the eve of December fifth, the great saint, dressed as a bishop in a white robe-like garment, a red cloak, and a large staff, travels throughout Holland on a white horse, leaving toys for children. He rides onto rooftops with his trusty helper, known as Zwarte Piet [Black Pete] who enters into attics or slides down chimneys, fulfilling the assigned role as the nimble and athletic servant for the Saint.

The celebration is a much bigger affair than just one night, however. A good two weeks before December fifth, “Sint,” as he is affectionately known, simultaneously arrives into various cities in the Netherlands with much fanfare, a parade, in fact, surrounded by his helpers, who throw candy and pepernoten (tiny, round spice cookies) to children, while performing gymnastic feats. Saint Nicholas is the patron saint of Amsterdam, and on his arrival from Spain, the streets are closed and Sinterklaas is greeted by the mayor of the city. For several weeks leading up to December fifth, stores are filled with iconic imagery of Sinterklaas and Black Pete which features pitch-black skin, ruby-red, exaggerated lips and wooly dark hair. Schools become institutional outlets for the celebration, with gift exchanges and visits from Black Pete or Saint Nicholas.

In addition to the Sinterklaasfeest, Christmas is also celebrated in the Netherlands, but it is a much more subdued, less commercial affair than in the United States. The real fun, the celebration geared around children, involving a carnivalesque public performance, with activities in school, as well as familial bonding rituals, such as writing and exchanging poems, giving and receiving small gifts and eating sweets, is celebrated on the evening of December fifth.
Over the last few decades, one aspect of the tradition, in particular Sinterklaas’ helpers, has come under fire. Though most of the population seems to have no problem with the tradition, for some the problem turns on the relationship between the saint and his black servant, the historical connotations of this relationship, and perhaps most disturbing, that Black Pete is performed in blackface suggesting derogatory, stereotypical, African phenotypic features.

Black Pete is a fun-loving, childish character who plays the fool, but in earlier times, he was also a scary figure who would threaten to take naughty children back to Spain in his toy bag. He is performed by adults in blackface who wear colorful garb, large gold earrings, and a curly or wooly, dark wig, topped off by a large hat that sports a feather that adorns his nineteenth-century Spanish Moor costume, reminiscent of a court jester’s outfit. As a child growing up in the Netherlands, assuming the role and costume of Black Pete, and donning the blackface mask in a public performance, is almost a rite of passage. Its importance lies in the ubiquitous nature of it and the affective dimension of Dutch cultural identity tied to the tradition, heard in the most common refrain and defense, “It’s our culture.” This call to Dutch cultural tradition, the supposedly unchanging, authentic nature of the holiday ritual, is continually invoked in strenuous attempts at defending this social practice against any kind of criticism.

Intermittent attempts at self-reflexive critique have sparked controversy. For Pete is a pariah for some, and, as I argue here, has turned into a symbol of Dutch national identity for others. The defense of an authentic, eternal piece of Dutch culture, what Black Pete has come to represent, is at issue here. Despite attempts to address this blackface, subservient aspect of the tradition since the late nineteen-sixties, Black Pete, performed in blackface, has stubbornly remained an integral part of the celebration.

The Sinterklaas ritual, its yearly repetitive performance, is a social practice that includes theater, carnival, masquerade, and excess—forms of play. It is a common assertion in Dutch society that because Black Pete is a fantasy figure, designed as part of a children’s party, he is simply not that important, and thus does not merit criticism. People who are against this aspect of the tradition are thought to be taking a playful part of culture too seriously.

However, there has been much academic work supporting the viability of play as a worthy object of inquiry. Specifically, poststructuralist concerns with identity and gender, most notably Judith Butler’s theories of the performative, have emphasized the subversive and transgressive aspects of play. These theories describe the ways in which the playful turn, in acts and critical theory, may undermine hegemonic roles and move forward social movement agendas (Butler; McClintock; Garber). In the realm of race and postcolonial theory, mimicry, minstrelsy, and racial and ethnic cross-dressing have yielded knowledge that goes beyond the colonized—colonizer binary,