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# *Zwarte Piet* and Cultural Aphasia in the Netherlands<sup>1</sup>

John Helsloot

## **Abstract**

In recent articles American historian Ann Laura Stoler has introduced the concept of ‘aphasia’ for describing metaphorically the cultural ‘inability to recognize things in the world and assign proper names to them’, especially in matters relating to the colonial past in Western societies. Taking this concept as a lead, the author analyzes an incident in the Netherlands in November 2011, when two young black Dutchmen were arrested for wearing a T-shirt on which the phrase ‘*Zwarte Piet* is racism’ was printed. *Zwarte Piet* [Black Peter] is the imaginary character in blackface acting as the helper of *Sinterklaas*, the central figure in the Dutch ritual of gift-giving that has its apex on 5 December. For some decades now, there has been a debate in the Netherlands as to the precise nature of this blackface. By and large the Dutch deny, as was again the case in the aftermath of this arrest, any relation to a portrayal in caricature of a black person, producing instead associations that are difficult to grasp. After presenting the arguments of opponents of *Zwarte Piet* that there is such a connection, termed racist, the author focuses on the performance context of *Zwarte Piet*’s presence, in order to try to understand why Dutchmen generally fail to make this connection. In an epilogue the author makes a plea for going beyond the mere conclusion that *Zwarte Piet* is contested. Sharing himself the protesters’ perception of *Zwarte Piet* being racist, in his view the metaphor of cultural aphasia obliges professional ethnologists to re-associate this connection as well, and to make this known to the general public.

‘Colonial histories’, American historian Ann Laura Stoler writes, ‘raise unsettling questions about what it means to know and not know something simultaneously, about what is implicit because it goes without saying, or because it cannot be thought, or because it can be thought and is known but cannot be said’. This is not a matter of either/or, a neat distinction between ‘stubborn ignorance or sudden knowledge’. Rather, it has to do with ‘the confused and clogged spaces in between’ (2011, 121-122). Denouncing concepts such as ‘collective amnesia’ as inadequate, she proposes ‘aphasia’ as a metaphor to denote the mental opera-

tions active in these spaces. ‘In aphasia, an occlusion of knowledge is the issue. (...) a difficulty generating a vocabulary that associates appropriate words and concepts with appropriate things’ (2011, 125). Stoler refers to Foucault, who equally noted - in Stoler’s words - ‘how aphasiacs disassociate resemblances and reject categories that are viable’. Instead, they produce ‘endless replacements of categories with incomprehensible associations that collapse into incommensurability’ (2011, 154).

In another recent article, Stoler introduced the metaphor of ‘imperial debris’ or ‘ruins of empire’, to replace the in her view static idea of ‘colonial legacy’. ‘To speak of colonial ruination is to trace the fragile and durable substances and signs, the visible and visceral senses in which the effects of empire are reactivated and remain’, is ‘to attend to their reappropriations and strategic and active positioning within the politics of the present’ (2008, 195,196). Referring to various shocking incidents in contemporary France, she portrays French culture as ‘a culture of concealment that severs racism from ruination as it disconnects the comfortable ranks of French society from the history of racialised privilege and wealth. There is nothing “forgotten” here about French colonialism. This is aphasia, a “disconnect” between words and things, an inability to recognize things in the world and assign proper names to them’ (2008, 209-210).

In advocating the concepts of aphasia and ruination, Stoler aims to gain ‘more insight about the political, scholarly, and cognitive domains in which knowledge is disabled, attention is redirected, things are renamed, and disregard is revived and sustained’ (2011, 153). At stake is to re-establish ‘connections that are not otherwise readily visible. Such renaming relocates processes dislodged from their specific histories’ (2008, 200). This pursuit is pre-eminently part of the mission of any historian or ethnologist. It cannot be ruled out, however, that such a critical stance may be considered by some as partizan or prejudiced. Stoler – like me – opposes to this and states that ‘Making connections where they are hard to trace is not designed to settle scores but rather to recognize that these are unfinished histories, not of victimized pasts but consequential histories that open up to differential futures’ (2008, 195). That is not to say that a researcher’s personal values do not come into play in directing his attention. Since Stoler merely wants to see to it that ‘the conditions of restraint and injury be reckoned with and acknowledged’ (2008, 210), I assume that few will dismiss this stance.

Stoler is not explicit in the articles quoted above about the mechanisms responsible for cultural aphasia and colonial ruination. Herself a Foucauldian, she undoubtedly here too operates within the framework of Foucault’s idea of a ‘regime of truth’, the interplay of power relations defining what knowledge is socially accepted as ‘true’. Foucault’s position, as paraphrased by Jenny Edkins, is that criticism of this ‘truth’ often comes ‘from knowledge located on the margins, knowledge that has not depended on the approval of the current hegemonic régime of truth in its production’, ‘from those whose voice was disqualified and

whose views did not count'. These voices will be silenced 'in order to submerge conflicts and give the appearance of consensus' (2003, 53).

It is within this elementary theoretical framework – in summary; focusing on a cultural disability, grounded in power relations, to talk about phenomena and to see things as 'they really are' – that I want to tackle the case of the blackface sidekick of St Nicholas (*Sinterklaas*) in the Netherlands: Black Peter (*Zwarte Piet*).

St Nicholas and Black Peter are the main characters in the Dutch annual present-giving *Sinterklaas* festival, which culminates on the evening of 5 December (for an overview in English see e.g. Wheeler & Rosenthal 2005, 213-229). The basic premise of the ritual is that the imaginary figure of St Nicholas hands out presents to all children who have behaved well, and punishes those who have been naughty. This idea is expanded to the world of adults as well, who in the name of St Nicholas exchange gifts on this annual day of reckoning, in an atmosphere of benevolent charivari. The belief in the reality of St Nicholas's existence is greatly enhanced by his live appearance on various occasions. Of these his arrival in mid-november by steamboat from 'Spain' (so the story goes) and subsequent festive parade through town is the most spectacular – especially because every town and village will have its own *Sinterklaas* to do the arriving. One such arrival and parade, preferably from a picturesque 'old-Dutch' town, is broadcast by national television. St Nicholas, dressed in the full, if somewhat fanciful, attire of a Roman Catholic bishop, comes not alone, but in the company of another imaginary character: Black Peter – or rather: of a multitude of Black Peters. The Peters all wear a similar brightly-coloured 16th century-style costume, with tights, a frilly collar, and a plumed hat on top of a curly black wig. But their most prominent feature is their blackface – from which the Peters derive their title – with additional red lipstick and golden earrings. The *Zwarte Pieten* dance, joke and frolic whilst scattering *pepernoten* (traditional gingerbread cubes) around among the children in the crowd watching the parade. Everybody clearly has a good time and is looking forward to the cosy of the later family celebration of the *Sinterklaas* ritual. Amidst this spirit of unison and jollity, however, some take a dissenting view.

## The incidents in Dordrecht and elsewhere

'*Zwarte Piet* is racism'. On Saturday 12 November 2011, two young black Dutchmen stood in silence in T-shirts with this phrase in Dordrecht, the town in the west of the Netherlands where the official televised arrival of St Nicholas took place that year. At the very least for a few hours, such a place is the focal point of nationwide attention. Therefore this television broadcast is highly prized by Dutch municipalities as marketing vehicle for the city as a whole. Some 60,000 visitors were expected in Dordrecht itself, with an estimated television audience of 1.8 million. With this in mind, the quarter million euros budgeted for staging the parade

were considered well-spent by the city council.<sup>2</sup> Under such circumstances, it is only natural that local authorities will try to avoid anything that might compromise the spectacle. On the other hand for anyone intent of making a point, this is a prime occasion.



Fig. 1: Sinterklaas entry in Dordrecht, November 2011. Quinsy Gario and Kno'ledge Cesare wearing a T-shirt with 'Zwarte Piet is racism'. Photo: <http://zwartepietisracisme.tumblr.com/>.

With this in mind Amsterdam-based poet and dramatist Quinsy Gario and poet and rapper Jerry Afriyie alias Kno'ledge Cesare set off to Dordrecht. The preceding months, in an art project of their own making, they had toured poetry and summer festivals wearing and selling the same type of T-shirts. Their text 'Zwarte Piet is racism', somewhat reminiscent of Kurt Tucholsky's 1931 controversial dictum 'Soldaten sind Mörder', aimed at provoking a discussion on relations between 'whites' and 'blacks' in the Netherlands. Public attention, though, was rather modest. In Dordrecht, however, things would be different.

In 2009 photographer Philipp Abbass alias 'Stereopiet' posted pictures in Rotterdam's city centre, figuring for example an aggressive Sinterklaas with the KKK logo on his arm. With no comment provided the implicated message was assumed to be obvious. 'Artists have always tried to expand the boundaries of the "normal" display of art, often coming into contact with the law by doing so', 'Stereopiet' further explained his action in an essay on his website. 'Also in this

case the question will probably be if legal measures will be imposed due to an “offense” against the regulations concerning public space’.<sup>3</sup> This proved to be a foreshadowing of the Dordrecht case.

Whereas mainstream media kept a guarded silence that weekend, on the internet a video was posted showing Gario first being dragged away by both uniformed and undercover police and then kept violently to the ground for several minutes, resisting and protesting ‘I didn’t do anything at all’.<sup>4</sup> Together with Cesare and two young women – a journalist and a Danish anthropology student – accompanying them, he was subsequently arrested and taken into custody. At first, so it later transpired, Gario and Cesare wanted to hold up a banner with the ‘Zwarte Piet is racism’ text, coupled, this time, to the slogan ‘the Netherlands can do better’. When told by police officers passing by they were not allowed to do so, because of a local authority ban on ‘demonstrations’ that day, they rolled up the banner. Instead, they exposed their T-shirts with only the Piet text. They claim the police officers then acquiesced in this. But later other officers took offence and summoned them – several times official sources later confirmed – to take off the T-shirts. From the moment they refused to obey police orders, the video begins. They were held in custody for over seven hours at the police station, fined for 140 euros, which they refused to pay, and then set free.

Because the case was not brought to court, and it seems unlikely it ever will be, there is no jurisprudence on whether wearing a T-shirt with a text expressing an opinion is within or beyond the limits of the constitutional liberty of expression prevailing in the Netherlands. According to at least one professor of law the odds seem to be against the latter. Apart from this, the arrest gives the impression of being made, not on the basis of law-enforcement, but rather because the police officers simply disagreed with the *Zwarte Piet* statement. This is corroborated by Gario’s question to the police whether a banner with a pro-Sinterklaas slogan (*Hup Sinterklaas*) would be allowed, to which the answer was affirmative. The *Zwarte Piet* text, however, was considered ‘not funny’. Furthermore, a spokesperson for the local authority explained afterwards, because of that text ‘public safety was at stake. The parade is a children’s festival. Keep things tranquil there’. The mayor himself equally pointed to the freedom of expression allowed to the local Occupy movement, camping in front of Dordrecht’s city hall. ‘But in the case of the St Nicholas parade, things are simply different’, he said. To him that was the end of the matter, and there seemed to be no need for further discussion.<sup>5</sup>

The next day, Sunday 13 November 2011, St Nicholas and his *Zwarte Pieten* held their festive parade in Amsterdam and a handful of young black men and women tried to copy the Dordrecht protest. While spray-painting their T-shirts with ‘Zwarte Piet is racism’ and another slogan, they too were harshly arrested by police, on the grounds of disturbing the peace. Also present in this case is the suggestion that what primarily spurred the officers was their personal disapproval of the protesters’ action, as one of them is reported to have said ‘Sinterklaas too has rights’.<sup>6</sup>



What makes the 2011 Dordrecht and Amsterdam incidents unique in the history of *Zwarte Piet* in the Netherlands is the actual intervention by the police, up to the level of violence, in suppressing opposing views.<sup>7</sup> But in hindsight they were foreshadowed by events taking place in August 2008, in the town of Eindhoven in the southern part of the country. As part of a long-term exhibition in the local Van Abbe art museum on 'Be(com)ing Dutch', two young female artists, Annette Krauss and Petra Bauer, coming from Germany and Sweden respectively, made a project called 'Read the masks. Tradition is not given' – the mask in question being that of *Zwarte Piet*. On the assumption, as they stated, that *Zwarte Piet* was 'a cultural tradition that has been depoliticized, neutralized and then incorporated into the collective memory and consciousness of present society', the public was invited to partake in an artistic 'performance' of a protest march meant to give 'voice to a critique against the phenomenon of *Zwarte Piet*'.<sup>8</sup> At the museum, participants were to be provided with signs bearing slogans like 'Black Peter doesn't exist any more' and '*Zwarte Piet* – a white man's construction'.

As soon as the media and public opinion got news of the planned protest march, there was a public outcry condemning the initiative. The museum received hundreds of negative emails and thousands of similar comments were posted at the websites of local and national newspapers, and discussion boards. The hopes of the organisers that this performance in August, i.e. well before the actual festive occasion in December, would facilitate an open exchange of views, were smashed. What was even more, the management of the museum considered that the mails they received were of such a threatening nature that the safety of participants in the planned march was in jeopardy. Therefore, the march was ultimately cancelled. The 'mere' threat of violence, in 2008 coming from outraged ordinary citizens, materialised three years later in real violence, by the Dutch police.

Perhaps the most astonishing thing about this is, especially when seen from abroad, that only very few voices publicly denounced the police actions.<sup>9</sup> It's a fair guess that the majority of the Dutch approved of these. This is also evidenced, in contrast, by the intensity of that year's public debate, in response to the activists' compelling claim, on how to qualify *Zwarte Piet*.<sup>10</sup> It may be safely assumed that a majority, yet again, rejects his equation with 'racism'. Their reactions and argumentations may be characterised, I argue, as evidence of cultural aphasia.

## Aphasia exposed

Primarily operating in this discourse is a process of 'active dissociation' (Stoler 2011, 125). The implicit negative charge of the – unspecified on the T-shirts – concept of 'racism' is emphatically denied because of the apparent misfit with inner convictions, emotions, and most importantly, intentions. This then produces a chain of other associations, with questionable degrees of, in Foucault's

model, comprehensibility. The combined argument basically runs along the following lines.

The whole idea of *Zwarte Piet* representing a real black person is misguided. 'I have never associated *Zwarte Piet* with our coloured fellow countrymen. It's very obvious that *Zwarte Pieten* are white people in blackface'. 'He has no African background but is his own species'. The origin of his blackface to people reasoning thus is quite simple: it is caused by the soot in the chimneys as he climbs down from the roofs to deliver the parcels in the children's shoes. By far this is the most popular explanation of *Zwarte Piet*'s blackface. 'It has nothing to do with portraying a negroid fellow human being as inferior'.<sup>11</sup> The obvious inconsistencies – *Zwarte Piet* being already blackface when he arrives in the Netherlands; his beautiful costume showing no traces of soot at all – are ignored without further ado.

The argument shifts to history when it comes down to explaining *Sinterklaas* having a black companion – to use the most neutral term. How is their relationship to be defined? To the Dutch public at large, the figure now known as *Zwarte Piet* was introduced in a children's book from 1850, with rhymes and pictures, written by Amsterdam former schoolteacher, Jan Schenkman. It was titled: 'St Nicholas and his servant' (*Sint Nikolaas en zijn knecht*). Suggestions equalling their relationship in reality as one of slave and master are denounced as lacking a factual basis. *Zwarte Piet* was a servant 'of his own free will'.<sup>12</sup> And whatever it may have been in the past, clearly nowadays the relationship is one of – almost – equal partners.

In an effort to have the racism charge hit an impermeable wall which would justify a refusal to engage in any further discussion at all, the *Sinterklaas* ritual, of which *Zwarte Piet* is part, is framed as 'a children's party', in addition eagerly qualified as 'innocent'. It simply makes no sense, it is argued, to interrelate these concepts.<sup>13</sup> The reported sight of so many children's fondness, if not love, of *Zwarte Piet* aims at supporting this.

A related argument labels *Zwarte Piet* an inextricable part of Dutch national 'tradition' or 'cultural heritage', a domain which is deemed impervious to claims of racism. Opponents should keep clear of this and show respect for a country's traditions. If not, their Dutchness is questioned. That is why Quinsy Gario and Know'ledge Cesare kept stressing, in the aftermath of the Dordrecht incident, their Dutch nationality and common Dutchness, entitling them to condemn the arrest as being 'so un-Dutchlike' (see Balkenhol 2011, 154-159 for the context of this position).

Further, and to many final, proof of all this is pointing to the public statements, and in fact participation in the ritual, of numerous Dutchmen of Surinamese and of Antillean descent, of their having no problems at all with *Zwarte Piet* and, on the contrary, of enjoying the tradition (cf. Oostindie 2010, 130,132-133,172; Balkenhol 2010, 79).





Fig. 2: Sinterklaas entry in Haarlem, November 2010. Photo: John Helsloot.

By severing links, disassociating and disconnecting,<sup>14</sup> and, to fill the gap, introducing concepts pertaining to other domains, defenders of *Zwarte Piet* divert the meaning of the slogan ‘*Zwarte Piet* is racism’ into other directions. From the model of cultural aphasia adopted here, these are unrelated areas, making no sense.

### Curing cultural aphasia?

‘We began this project because we signalled a want of historical knowledge about the figure of *Zwarte Piet*’, Quinsy Gario explained. It aimed at starting a ‘sane dialogue, based on facts’. ‘We don’t say: “stop celebrating *Sinterklaas*”. We say: “study the origin of the phenomenon of *Zwarte Piet* and ask yourself the question if that is still acceptable in today’s world”’. At the same time, they left no mistakes about their own position in this debate. A continued indulgence in the *Sinterklaas* ritual, for them, came down to ‘condoning the fact that slavery is thought lightly of. *Zwarte Piet* is a caricature of black people’. As his only job is to serve his master *Sinterklaas*, *Zwarte Piet* represents ‘a caricature image of a black slave’.<sup>15</sup> This then condensed into the racism charge.

On a basic level, the question of the ‘origin’ of *Zwarte Piet* might be interpreted as referring to Jan Schenkman’s ground for including this character in his 1850 booklet. Was he, as the activists’ charge of racism was construed by some, at that

time portraying a real slave? Rejecting the aforementioned thesis that *Zwarte Piet* was Sinterklaas's servant 'of his own free will', it was stated that 'arguing that there is no relationship at all between *Zwarte Piet* and a slave is simply not true'.<sup>16</sup> Recent scholarship on the legal status of blacks living in the Netherlands proper, however, provides no unambiguous answers. Officially prohibited, slavery occasionally seems to have been tolerated (Haarnack, Hondius & Kolfin 2008, 106). But also there seem to have been, especially in the late 18th and early 19th century, freed slaves or free blacks, usually hiring themselves out as domestic servants. Probably such a black man was employed, for instance, by the novelist Jacob van Lennep (1802-1868) in the early 1830s in his country house near Haarlem (Van Lennep 2001, 28). Because Van Lennep was the editor of some of Schenkman's posthumous works, *Zwarte Piet* might have been modelled on this, most likely, free man – although I was unable to find documentation for this connection.

There has been a general consensus among researchers of *Zwarte Piet* that he is of Jan Schenkman's own creation. A chance discovery by myself in November 2011 questions this. In 1884, at the age of 64, catholic man of letters Jozef Alberdingk Thijm (1820-1889) remembered attending in 1828, i.e. as an eight year old boy, a St Nicholas party for children in the house of a wealthy Amsterdam merchant. There he saw St Nicholas entering the room, in the company of 'a curly-haired negro' (*een kroesharige neger*). If his memory is correct, and he gives clues to assume it is, then already well before Schenkman's 1850 book *St Nicholas* was entrusted with a black servant, in all likelihood an employee of the merchant in question.<sup>17</sup> Again, (rumours about) such enactments later may have inspired Jan Schenkman. No details are given by Alberdingk Thijm about this man's legal status. Still, it is fair to assume, of course conditional upon further archival research, that he was a free black man. That would mean that on the basis of this and similar sources, and within the scope of this kind of reasoning, i.e. focused on finding 'facts' to a product of fancy, a children's book, the issue of *Zwarte Piet* being 'originally' a slave cannot yet be decided, the odds being, however, that he was a free man indeed. What the 1828 source did, however, was to provide Quinsy Gario the fact he needed to prove to his opponents that a real black was at the origin of the imagery of *Zwarte Piet*.<sup>18</sup>

An important perspective on the 'origin' of *Zwarte Piet* was opened in 1993 by art historian Eugenie Boer (Boer-Dirks 1993). She convincingly documented the striking parallels between the pictures of Sinterklaas and his black servant in Schenkman's 1850 book and 17th and 18th century paintings of Dutchmen of wealth and importance, who are similarly portrayed with a black servant in attendance.<sup>19</sup> Much of the present-day costume of *Zwarte Piet* derives from this broad pictorial tradition. As Boer perceptively writes, this imagery of black servants 'could only have been realised because there was a trade in black human beings' (Boer 2009, 30). It is the fact of this representation of black persons, infusing both the appearance and ritual role pattern of *Zwarte Piet* in the *Sinterklaas* festival,

and its historical embeddedness, i.e. the context of slavery or colonialism, that Gario and Know'ledge referred to primarily in their indictment of *Zwarte Piet*. As Ruby Savage (2009, 7) summarised, 'Whatever his origin may be the present-day image of *Zwarte Piet* has a strong resemblance to the European stereotypes of African slaves created during colonial times'.

In the media debate ensuing from the arrests some, if relatively few, voices, popular singer Anouk among them, came in support of this claim, in an effort to cure the prevailing aphasia in Dutch society with respect to *Zwarte Piet*, the plain fact that 'most Dutch people will argue that there is no relation between *Zwarte Piet* and a stereotype of a black person' (Savage 2009, 7)<sup>20</sup>, and 'a negro in caricature'.<sup>21</sup> Although in posts in the debate on internet sometimes (links to) visual sources are offered in support of this argument, the debate in its oral and newspaper forms clearly suffers from the absence of these. To anyone with a trained eye, and in his right mind, *Zwarte Piet* equalling a wilful caricature of a black person will be apparent. As a reference he/she will have consulted printed publications on this theme (e.g. Nederveen Pieterse 1990; Kapelle & Tang 2008). And even without the help of such sources it seems almost impossible not to notice this connection. However, and to the absolute stupefaction (cf. Stoler 2008, 211) of those opposing *Zwarte Piet*, many, if not the majority of Dutch people fail to establish this obvious link.

'With a little effort surely even the most ardent of *Sinterklaas* supporters should be able to empathise with the activist's point of view. An affable white master with only cheerful black servants simply isn't a matter of coincidence, but a consequence of events in history that were gruesome for people of African descent, frequently leading to their deaths'.<sup>22</sup> Here the argument shifts to the role relationship of *Sinterklaas* and *Zwarte Piet*, what this represents, and how this is experienced. '*Zwarte Piet* didn't just drop out of the chimney. He derives from our colonial past'. 'It's about this white man, this good children's friend. And his stupid, submissive black servants. It quickly links up with slavery and its past'. 'A black servant with golden earrings and thick red lips cannot be dissociated from slavery, from colonialism'.<sup>23</sup> These are not detached observations; black people argue this way because they identify with *Zwarte Piet*, as he is experienced to reflect their own status in Dutch society. 'He is someone with my colour of skin'. 'We are implicated in this festival on the basis of a submissive, second-rate position in the *Sinterklaas* story. It's purely about slavery. The festival upholds the myth that the white man is lord and master'. '*Zwarte Piet* is racist because he comes from an age in which the principle that "races" are equal did not exist'.<sup>24</sup> At issue here is less the 'reconstruction of history' as well as 'the truth experience of someone grasping this past as meaningful' (Frijhoff 1991, 132). Writer and anthropologist Jef de Jager summed up these arguments, referring to the past in the present, eloquently: 'Even if you are against getting rid of *Zwarte Piet*, when nowadays a servant were to be devised for the *Sint*, no one would come up with a negro. It's

as simple as that'.<sup>25</sup> As far as I know, the answer to this is not only aphasia, but aporia, and, as is claimed; indifference and a lack of empathy. 'A white person in blackface, with a curly wig and red lipstick is something I, and many others, feel uncomfortable with'. 'The pain that Zwarte Piet conjurs up in people, to many others seems incredible. My hopes are on a little more consciousness of that sensitivity'. 'The whole point is that you cannot denigrate coloured people that way'.<sup>26</sup> In general, such pleas are given the cold shoulder, although some are not entirely deaf to them – without, however, endorsing the legitimacy of these feelings. It is here that symbolic power relations become manifest.

### The context of cultural aphasia

'I am sick and tired of these one-dimensional subtleties bent upon torpedoing a piece of Dutch folklore', a participant in the internet debate stated.<sup>27</sup> To ethnologists too, claims of a ritual having only one specific meaning cannot be but unsatisfactory. Theoretically, but also on empirical grounds – as in this case, people dressing up as *Zwarte Piet* seem to communicate a more complicated message than of exclusively representing, by their blackface and ritualized behaviour, a black person in caricature. And their audience does appear to perceive it as intended. Clearly, they first and foremost relish in their carnivalesque dressing up, *Sinterklaas* being one of the ever more numerous occasions in today's Western societies (Braun 2002) to do so. Their beautiful costumes combined with their blackface appear to have effectuated their 'ritual transformation (...) into a being of another order' (Crumrine 1983, 1). As Dale Cockrell (1997, 53) wrote in his book on American black minstrels: 'In fact, it appears that in the culture of common people, masking in blackface was making a statement more about what you were not than about race. (...) Of course, on one important level blackface minstrelsy took as its signature characteristic the representation of black people, but in the ritual background loomed more profoundly Otherness, the accumulation of centuries of metaphorical use'. It can be argued that in the present-day's Netherlands too, the blackface of *Zwarte Piet* is also expressing this sense of 'otherness', which emerges and is experienced during the performance of the ritual itself (Hughes-Freeland 1998, 15). Most likely it was, in part, at the basis of the creation of the *Zwarte Piet* character itself (Helsloot 2008, 100-101). This otherness is, of course, hard to articulate. There is a tension between 'reflexivity in ritual and reflexivity on ritual' (Köpping, Leistle & Rudolph 2006, 28; cf. Turner 1967, 27; Lewis 2008, 52). The blackface of *Zwarte Piet* through performance seems to have acquired new emerging or 'operational' meanings, more or less disconnected from its origin: its 'exegetical' meaning (Turner 1967, 50-51). In such a case, 'meaning would be found in temporalized "structures of experience" (...) rather than formal categories of thought' (St John 2008, 4).

This is favoured by the overall carnivalesque atmosphere in which *Zwarte Piet* and his audience participate. A further reflection of this is that many a *Zwarte Piet* is actually a woman (Pleij 2009, 71). Thereby blackface and cross-dressing are combined as carnivalesque devices in this ‘cultural travesty’<sup>28</sup>. Unrecognisable as a result, the *Pieten* experience a sense of freedom and otherness,<sup>29</sup> ‘encouraged’, as Terry Gunnell notes on cross-dressing, ‘by the atmosphere that this particular “inappropriate” costume opens up’. ‘Indeed, the surrounding atmosphere of humour and entertainment (...) reflects the fact that what has been brought into being is an essentially comic situation’ (2009, 214).



Fig. 3: Sinterklaas entry in Oostzaan, November 2009. Photo: John Helsloot.

These experiences, gained by performers and audiences alike, over time become fixed, and as memories ‘are “sedimented in the body”’ (Mitchell 2006, 389, quoting Paul Connerton). The physical disgust often felt and expressed over criticism of *Zwarte Piet* testifies to this. The low degree of reflexivity in ritual, the effect of ignorance, and in turn producing it, may explain the easy recourse taken in retrospect to the already mentioned secondary explanation of the soot in the chimneys causing the blackface, and in general, the testimony of the majority of Dutchmen that in their view, the blackface of *Zwarte Piet* has no racial or racist connotations. They simply do not experience it that way, and are thus prevented from engaging in a dialogue. Combined with a general indifference in Dutch society towards the



history of slavery (Oostindie 2010, 170-172), they are able to uphold a regime of truth in this respect by their sheer numeric preponderance. Their perceptions have become 'biografied tall tales', as Konrad Köstlin wrote about participants in German *Fastnacht* that proclaim a festive sense of freedom similar to that of those engaged in *Zwarte Piet* performances. 'Biografied folklore works from a public awareness of history, that must be positive and optimistic', 'free of contradictions and free of conflicts', and that 'blocks taking into account other groups than those in a power position to define the ritual, or other pasts'. 'The monistic schemata of interpretation are without alternatives; they do not tolerate a "counter culture"'. Those unwilling to sympathise with these views 'are framed as atypical outsiders' (Köstlin 1980, 70-71).

This mentality, perceptively diagnosed by Köstlin, is by and large also typical of those unable to see *Zwarte Piet* as 'racist'. They hear the shaking of the door that locks and guards their views, and refuse to open it.<sup>30</sup> The present cultural climate in the Netherlands, of course, is not particularly helpful in persuading them still to do so. Questioning *Zwarte Piet* is widely felt as an attack on Dutch national identity (for a comparable case, Capo Zmegac 2008; see also Van Ginkel 2004; Bronner 2005). Because of that, *Zwarte Piet* has grown into a key or master symbol of Dutch society, 'a way of talking about' (Wolf 1958, 34,38) the Netherlands.

A year before the ultimately cancelled August 2008 anti-*Zwarte Piet* demonstration in Eindhoven, in april 2007, right-wing populist politician Rita Verdonk, at that time representing one sixth of the electorate in virtual polls, had publicly stated that an unspecified 'they' – clearly meaning black Dutchmen and by extension immigrants in general – were intent upon abolishing the St Nicholas ritual. In an indirect reference to *Zwarte Piet*, she ridiculed the emerging memorialisation in the Netherlands of slavery as a shameful part of Dutch history. In the discourse about the 2008 Eindhoven protest march even a link to Dutch Muslims was established, and with them also to left-wing, elitist politicians; because the march was instigated by an art museum. Over and over again it was repeated, that Islam and Muslims are taking over Dutch culture with the blessing of their leftist cronies, that 'we' are giving in endlessly by tolerating 'their' strange ways, but now it's time to say 'enough is enough' and to draw the line: any attack on *Zwarte Piet* is the death blow to Dutchness. In this still prevalent neo-nationalist mind-set, essentialising 'national tradition' and denying ambiguity is the only option. It is, of course, a phenomenon only too well known to ethnologists (Anttonen 2005, 86,103; Gingrich & Banks 2006). As Reginald Byron and Ullrick Kockel (2006, 14) stated: 'This encourages the absolutization and concretization of those cultural attributes that are held to be the essential stigmata of difference. Once created, these stigmata become integral to the group's *raison d'être*. They must not change (...) Questioning their legitimacy, or subjecting them to any sort of objective scrutiny, comes to be regarded as a kind of blasphemy'. However, 'Gatekeeping of



this kind (...) hinders the discussion and negotiation of things that ought to be discussed and negotiated in open and liberal European democracies’.

## Epilogue

It is precisely such a discussion that the two Dordrecht protesters, yet again, tried to open before they initially were stopped so violently. They were primarily interested in getting the Dutch public to acknowledge the ‘racist’ origins of *Zwarte Piet*. Ideas for adapting him, for instance leaving his face white with only a few brushes of soot, they considered a matter of secondary importance.

As an ethnologist specialising in ritual, I consider it to be my job to describe and analyze a ritual character like *Zwarte Piet* and the debate, continuing for decades now, surrounding it. In the previous section I tried to understand how this character ‘works’ in the *Sinterklaas* festival, and how it remains immune to criticism. Taking notice of both sides of the divide, my position as a professional, for some time has been that it must be considered ambiguous what *Zwarte Piet* represents. Siding with one of the parties engaged in this ongoing battle of recognition, fighting each other by strategic essentialism – of black identity and Dutch cultural heritage respectively, would collide with my professional ethos. This said, however, I claimed my right to express myself on this issue as a common participant in Dutch society. Thus framed, I denounced *Zwarte Piet*’s presence in the *Sinterklaas* ritual as objectionable (Helsloot 2009, 83-84, and in several public debates in November 2011).

The reading of Ann Laura Stoler’s recent articles has prompted me to reconsider this neat, and relatively safe, distinction between professional and private positions, and to go against pressures (e.g. Paasman 2002, 11-13; Oostindie 2010, 175,178) to take a balanced and differentiated view in matters of the history of slavery and colonialism. Merely establishing that *Zwarte Piet* is contested will in my private as well as my professional opinion not do. I concur with Walter Leimgruber’s (2010, 178) comment that ‘Raw, discriminatory, insulting, or degrading forms of cultural expression should be taken seriously as manifestations of societal default lines and conflict zones – taken seriously not in the sense of contended acceptance, but in the sense of critical analysis’. Here I was struck by the acuteness of Stoler’s analysis, which I think is an eye-opener in the case of *Zwarte Piet* as well. As Polish anthropologists Dagnoslaw Demski and Kamila Baraniecka-Olszewska (2010, 15) write: ‘ethnic caricatures sometimes fall outside dispassionate analysis’ and ‘force researchers to defend or to present their world view, their interpretation of the history of the nation – that is to respond to those stereotypes’.<sup>31</sup> On the one hand that might be considered a ‘failure as an objective, value-free scientific approach’. But on the other hand it seems ‘obvious that any analysis of ethnic stereotypes cannot be free of the author’s own point of view on those stereotypes’. In the case of *Zwarte Piet*, my private and professional views

coincide. The ghosts of the ethnological past, fraught with awkward wrong positioning, must make one very wary in taking a step like this. But as Regina Bendix (2008, 119) and Albert van der Zeijden (2011, 378-379) recently argued; ethnologists sometimes do have an obligation to make their voices heard in current debates in society.

Here in particular I have in mind the situation after the ratification by the Netherlands of UNESCO's Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage. As was to be expected, the Dutch St Nicholas Society (*Sint Nicolaas Genootschap Nederland*) announced that it will strive to give the *Sinterklaas* ritual a prominent position on the upcoming national inventory of intangible cultural heritage in the Netherlands, and, in cooperation with its Belgian counterpart, even on the representative list of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity. If in doing so their agenda would be to isolate the ritual from change or criticism – aphasically<sup>32</sup> the chairman of the Dutch St Nicholas Society seemed intent on fixating the explanation of *Zwarte Piet*'s blackface from the chimney soot – they would be misguided. Of course, this is not the way the Convention is intended, or how the upholding of tradition takes place. The director of the Dutch Centre of Popular Culture and Immaterial Heritage (VIE) Ineke Strouken repeatedly has stressed that also under the UNESCO regime, traditions like *Sinterklaas* and *Zwarte Piet* will evolve and adapt to changing circumstances. I do hope that those responsible for executing the Convention in the Netherlands will listen to, give voice to, and wholeheartedly support, the justified denunciations and demands, by what is now still a minority, for the eventual dismissal or substantial modification of *Zwarte Piet*. In this respect, an information campaign, based on existing and new research and supported by a rich visual documentation, aimed at raising public awareness and countering cultural aphasia and re-associating resemblances between *Zwarte Piet* and caricatures of black people, would be well-suited.

## Notes

1. I took the term 'cultural aphasia', an adaptation of Ann Laura Stoler's 'colonial aphasia', from Paulus Bijl. Cf. his 'Nederlands als Geesteswetenschap', *Nieuwsbrief voor afgestudeerden van de opleiding Nederlands van de Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam* nr. 36, September 2011, 23-27, 26. His unpublished doctoral dissertation, *Emerging Memory. Photographs of Colonial Atrocities in Dutch Cultural Remembrance* (2011), was at the time of writing this article not yet available to me. I integrate in this article parts of a paper presented at the 'Power of the Mask' conference of SIEF's Ritual Year Working Group in Kaunas in 2009, which is yet to be published. The present article builds and expands on that paper, of which a slightly abridged Dutch version can be found in Helsloot (2009). Comments made by an anonymous reviewer were used to the benefit of the article.
2. *Metro* (NL), November, 11 2011 (Marlies Dinjens), *Trouw*, 14 November 2011.
3. Research paper Stereopiet, 27, <http://www.stereopiet.nl/> (Accessed, as all internet sites mentioned below, December 2011).

4. A link to the video on <http://zwartepietisracisme.tumblr.com/page/7>. See also <http://www.youtube.com/watch?NR=1&feature=endscreen&v=BSwHoFCq58Y>.
5. *AD/Algemeen Dagblad*, 14 November 2011 (Karlijn van Houwelingen), 15 November 2011 (Ingrid de Groot); *AD/De Dordtenaar*, 14/17/19 November 2011; *NRC Handelsblad*, 18 November 2011 (Anil Ramdas); *Het Parool*, 14 November 2011; *Trouw*, 15 November 2011 (Bart Zuidervaart).
6. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=79Q4ngUARDM&feature=related>, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?NR=1&feature=endscreen&v=HBV7PeuoPpQ>. And <http://oralistisch.nl:80/2011/11/verslag-van-arrestaties-intocht-sinterklaas-amsterdam/>.
7. Cf. Markus Balkenhol's blog 'Policing Tradition', <http://standplaatswereld.nl/2011/11/17/policing-tradition/>.
8. Flyer *Read the Mask*, Van Abbe Museum, 2008.
9. E.g., 'Really out of proportion', Gertjan van Schoonhoven, *Elsevier*, 26 November 2011; 'There seems to be a ban on political correctness', Sabine Roeser, professor of political philosophy and ethics, *Trouw*, 23 November 2011 (Marc van Dijk).
10. See Hofstede (1990, 374-376) and Helsloot (2005) on the previous history of protests against, and defences of, *Zwarte Piet*. Here is shown how the 2011 debate by and large is a repetition of public discussions in preceding years.
11. Letters to the editor in *Het Parool*, 17 November 2011; *Trouw*, 19 November 2011; *Metro* (NL), 14 November 2011.
12. Frits Booy, secretary of Stichting Nationaal Sint Nicolaas Comité, *de Volkskrant*, 24 November 2011.
13. 'References to gruesome slavery are without any foundation at all. This is about a homely and innocent children's festival that wrongly is incriminated and at which no one has to feel excluded', *De Telegraaf*, 18 November 2011.
14. Cf. the very similar case of 'Saracen' horse collars in the Provence. These 'create a confusion of the Self and the Other: they are obviously exotic and "Saracen", but at the same time they symbolize a deep-rooted Provençal local identity and they are supported by a very conservative audience, in a political right-wing area. In this case, the "Saracen" Other is disconnected from the present immigration issues and connected with legendary time [i.e. the Middle Ages when Saracens occupied the Provence] (...) in order to anchor today's Provençal identity' (Fournier 2008, 67).
15. *AD/De Dordtenaar*, 14/19 November 2011; <http://nos.nl/op3/artikel/313172-actievoerders-zwarte-piet-vertellen-over-arrestatie.html>; *Het Parool*, 15 November 2011 (Patrick Meerhoek).
16. Roelof Jan Minneboo, letter to the editor, *de Volkskrant*, 26 November 2011.
17. <http://www.meertens.knaw.nl/cms/nl/nieuwsbriefteksten/nieuwsbriefuitgelicht/143677-de-oudst-bekende-naam-van-zwarte-piet-pieter-me-knecht-1850>.
18. <http://debatop2.ncrv.nl/ncrvgemist/3-12-2011/zwarte-piet-racistisch-of-niet>.
19. Still under the impression that it was Schenkman who invented *Zwarte Piet*, I tried to find out, in a 2008 article, what might have motivated him to revive, in 1850, this pictorial tradition, which was already in decline in the late 18th century, and to connect it to the *Sinterklaas* ritual. Adducing much 'circumstantial evidence', I failed to come to a definite conclusion. Schenkman's own position on blacks and slavery, of

- which he left no written account, remains unclear, and must provisionally be characterised as ambiguous (Helsloot 2008).
20. In her paper Dutch photographer Ruby Kwasiba Savage approached Zwarte Piet from the perspective, more or less related to the one adopted here, of Leon Festinger's psychological theory of cognitive dissonance.
  21. Asha ten Broeke, *Trouw*, 22 November 2011.
  22. Frank Ligtoet, *de Volkskrant*, 17 November 2011.
  23. Nurah Hammoud of the Overlegorgaan Caribische Nederlanders (OCaN), Roy Khemradj of the Surinaams Inspraak Orgaan, *Trouw*, 17 November 2011 (Rob Pietersen); Devika Partima, *NRC.Next*, 5 December 2011.
  24. Journalist Liesbeth Tjon A Meeuw, *Trouw*, 15 November 2011; Irving Eleonora of Dordrecht's Antillean community, *AD/Algemeen Dagblad*, 15 November 2011 (Ingrid de Groot); Astrid Essed at <http://www.at5.nl/artikelen/71402/zwarte-piet-demonstrant-is-amsterdammer>.
  25. *Leeuwarder Courant*, 26 November 2011.
  26. 'Whut' on <http://amsterdam.blog.nl/nieuws/2011/11/17/zwarte-piet-blijkt-helaas-inderdaad-racistisch-te-zijn>; Shantie Jagmohansingh, *Trouw*, 17 November 2011; 'Eddie' at <http://www.ad.nl/ad/nl/1002/Showbizz-TV/article/detail/3064932/2011/12/05/Anouk-Het-wordt-tijd-om-Zwarte-Piet-te-verbannen.dhtml>.
  27. 'Roel' on <http://www.trouw.nl/tr/nl/4492/Nederland/article/detail/3035721/2011/11/15/Zwarte-Piet-doet-elk-jaar-weer-pijn.dhtml>. 'The activists' take as their starting point the very worst, depicting that as the truth, 'Auredium' on <http://nos.nl/op3/artikel/313172-actievoerders-zwarte-piet-vertellen-over-arrestatie.html>.
  28. A term coined by (Zwarte Piet opponent) dramatist Felix de Rooij, *NRC Handelsblad*, 12 November 2008.
  29. 'It's great to act as a fool without anyone recognising you', *AD/Groene Hart*, 14 November 2011; once dressed up as Zwarte Piet, 'I get funny in the head, go dancing etcetera. Great!', *Leeuwarder Courant*, 24 November 2011. Cf. Graf (2010, 102,105), Sussman (2001, 79).
  30. Cf. Frank Ligtoet in *Het Parool*, 26 November 2011.
  31. See for a closely related case, Anglickiene (2010).
  32. Aphasically, naturally not in the literal sense, but in the sense used earlier in this article.  
<http://www.nu.nl/binnenland/2684268/sinterklaas-snel-erfgoedlijst.html>.

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