

Zwarte Piet and the legacy of Dutch slavery: Another Bitter Pill for the Dutch to Swallow.

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Once again, despite its international reputation for tolerance, moderation and progressiveness, the Netherlands finds itself at the back of the bus, on the ride to fairness, equality and justice, in its treatment of slavery and its legacies. Any reasonable person from another country watching the current Netherlands controversy over Zwarte Piet might get confused as to what all the protests are about. Even the British newspaper, *The Economist*, a staunch defender of the British establishment – says that the current debates reveal the “contemptible racial attitudes” of some people in Dutch society, including people in high places. But anyone familiar with controversies like this in other countries will know that there is more to this than meets the eye.

Zwarte Piet, the so-called helper and servant of Sinterklaas, is presented by many Dutch people as a beloved Dutch tradition. He is a key figure in parades each year in November and December. Zwarte Piet has a black face, curly hair, bright red lips and intensely smiling eyes. He is invariably portrayed by a white person painted black face, and presented as eternally friendly, smiling, subservient and, the Dutch tell us “entirely harmless fun”. They also claim that Zwarte Piet has no relation to Black people, and that he simply makes Dutch children happy. But it is highly offensive, insulting – and hated – by most Black people in the Netherlands. Black people and their allies across the Netherlands have mobilized, protested and highlighted the links between the subservient Zwarte Piet and the Dutch expectations of Black people under slavery, and since slavery. Dutch people are resisting, insisting that they will never give up a beloved Dutch tradition. Accusations are circulating around Dutch society, counter-accusations too: racism versus tradition, tolerance versus intolerance and trouble-makers versus decent people. On the right, Geert Wilders in reaction to criticism by Professor Verene Shepherd of the University of the West Indies (in some capacity related to the United Nations) says he would rather abolish the United Nations than Zwarte Piet. The mayor of Amsterdam says maybe Zwarte Piet can be modified to make him less offensive. And the prime minister says that Zwarte Piet is just black, plain and simple! Once again, some Dutch people are saying that Black people have come to the Netherlands but don't accept its norms and rules and customs. And yet, at the same time, throughout this year, 2013, during the 150th anniversary of the legal abolition of slavery in the Dutch world, educators and scholars are providing more and more information - readily accessible – about the deep, long-lasting and

profitable role of the Dutch in slavery and the slave trade. And of the long-lasting, if less visible, legacy of slavery in the Netherlands itself today.

What may come as a surprise to Dutch people is that a similar controversy took place in England in the 1970s and 1980s, when the beloved British 'Gollywog' was put on front stage. The Gollywog was a caricatured black character that first appeared in children's books, was borrowed and reproduced in British literature, and eventually reincarnated as a figure on a bestselling commercial product, Robertson's jam, dating back to the start of the 20th century. The Gollywog had a black face, curly hair, bright red lips and intensely smiling eyes. It was, we were told, widely beloved by many British people. But it was highly offensive, insulting – and hated – by most Black people. When I was growing up in England in the 1960s and 1970s, white kids my age, would mock and persecute me, imitating the gollywog; and telling me to 'go back to Africa'. When I protested, teachers in my school told me that I was getting upset over nothing. But it left me ashamed, angry and hurt. The Gollywog was supposedly friendly, smiling, and subservient and, the British said, 'entirely harmless fun' that made British children happy. They meant of course British white children. But I am a British child too, born and bred in Liverpool, and many of my friends were Black British children, too. It was not harmless to us; and it did not make us happy. As a result, Black people and our allies in England, mobilized, protested and highlighted the links between the subservient Gollywog and the British views of Black people under slavery. British people resisted, insisted that the gollywog was innocent, and that they would not give up a beloved British tradition. But they did give it up.



Accusations circulated around British society, counter-accusations too, racism versus tradition, tolerance versus intolerance, troublemakers versus decent people. On the right, Peregrine Worsthorne, a British newspapers editor, suggested it was a lot of fuss over nothing. Others suggested that the gollywog image could be modified to make him less offensive. Many British people said that criticism of the gollywog by Black people was another example of how Black people have come to Britain and don't accept its norms and rules and customs. During all of this educators and scholars were providing more and more information – readily accessible – on the deep, long-lasting and profitable role of the British in slavery and the slave trade. And of the legacy of slavery in Britain, in stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination. The Robertson's company took the Gollywog out of circulation only in the early 2000s. But its role had already significantly decreased since the early 1980s, and its withdrawal from circulation was simply the final nail in the coffin. At the present time there are still some images of the Gollywog floating around British society, but they are now firmly at the margins rather than in the center of society. And in

recent years, several politicians or media presenters that make reference to the gollywog favorably have been ostracized.

The decline and death of the Gollywog in Britain did not happen because the British are decent and tolerant. No! It only happened because Black people and our supporters in Britain refused to accept the insults and caricatures any longer. We mobilized in groups and organizations and we campaigned to bring an end to the Gollywog. We held discussions, had meetings and protested on the streets. We contacted politicians, and we challenged educators and academics to reveal the truth about the racism behind the Gollywog. And our mobilization was part of a wider campaign to end racist images on television, in newspapers, in movies, in museums and in education. Just as the campaign to end Zwarte Piet is part of a broader campaign against racist images across Dutch society. And for greater acknowledgement of the role of the Dutch in slavery, and of the legacy of Dutch slavery. And it wasn't just Black people in England who protested. Indians and Pakistanis and other groups were also insulted and offended in caricatures on British television and in the cinema. In films like "Carry on up the Khyber" and television shows like 'Mind Your language', saturated with racist and insulting representations of Indians and Pakistanis, and other groups too. So people from all these groups, including English people, mobilized together. Bookstores like Bogle L'Ouverture and New Beacon Books produced and disseminated Books that portrayed more accurate and representative images of Black people. There was the Campaign Against Racism in the Media, organizations like the Commission for Racial Equality and The Campaign Against Racism and Fascism. The Race Today Collective and the Institute of Race Relations challenged racism in all sectors of British society, and produced articles and publications. The Institute of Race Relations produced a series of books about racism in Britain with items on the media. Black women were highly active in these campaigns, as evidenced in Brixton Black Women's Group, Liverpool Black Sisters, in the Organization of Women of African and Asian Descent, and in books written by Black people, like 'The Heart of the Race'. Black women especially highlighted the ways in which racist images like the gollywog led to mockery, pain and suffering for their children in school. In other words, the campaign against the Gollywog was linked to the work of other Black and multi-racial organizations across the country. With this kind of collaboration and strength they we succeeded.

As many people already know, the United States has had similar controversies there. No other nation has a longer history, or a far bigger and wider distribution via the media of these highly offensive and insulting racist stereotypes than the United States. From Uncle Tom and Mammy to Aunt Jemima. Uncle Tom from the novel 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' was the faithful slave, dedicated to his white master who would give up his own life before seeing his master hurt or injured. Mammy played the same role as Uncle Tom, but she was dedicated to the white mistress and her children, cooking, cleaning and serving them, and protecting them from bad people – especially Black people. The image of the mammy was mostly popularized in the movie, Gone with the Wind. The fact that the actress who played mammy in this

movie – Hattie McDaniel – was the first African American to win an Academy Award in the movies shows how popular the image of a smiling, serving Black woman is to white America. Both images circulated during American slavery and afterwards. Aunt Jemima appeared on a breakfast cereal in the 1890s, another smiling, serving Black women, there to feed and nourish white people; the image was widely circulated in American theatre shows, where she was singing and dancing to entertain white people as well as serving.



All these portrayals played the same role as Zwarte Piet and the Gollywog, but were far worse. And all of them were modified for different historical periods and in different regions of the nation. They were gross distortions of Black people, based on exaggerated or misinformed understandings about the realities of Black life, and indifferent to the injustice and violence against Black people that was regularly a fact of life in the United States. And they were designed and promoted to make white Americans laugh, mock and show contempt for Black people, while also expecting Black people to be servants, subservient and docile. Like the Gollywog in Britain, they are not entirely dead. I have seen images of these characters across American museums in the last 10 years. But like England, these images in the United States have been banished to the margins of American society, rather than playing a prominent role at the center. I know that the United States is very different from Netherlands and England. It had systematic racist laws, a large proportion of Blacks that were enslaved right there, legal segregation, state sanctioned violence and injustice, cities and neighborhood that are 70% or 80% Black (so-called ghettos), a massive civil rights movement and Black power and Black feminism. It also has a Black president. And yet there are similarities with the Netherlands and England too; all three nations involved extensive economic activity and profits from the slave trade and slavery over several hundred years; all three nations developed slavery as a racist institution, based on endemic violence and brutality; all three nations experienced multiple forms of resistance and opposition to slavery from Black women and men; and all are still coming to terms with direct and indirect legacies of slavery.

So despite the fundamental differences there are still lessons to be learnt from comparing the Netherlands with the United States – in terms of indifference, insensitivity or hostility towards Blacks. Still the better comparison is with England,

and in terms of the struggle against racist stereotypes. At least this is how it seems for the moment, as we are still waiting for more information on Spain and Portugal.

What we have here is different nations, different time periods, same characters and the same controversies. What do these common experiences tell us? One question is whether Zwarte Piet is racist or not. Clearly it is racist. It draws directly on misperceptions of Black people, and so-called moors. But most people in the Netherlands don't accept that because it all depends on your definition of racism, and too many people use a simplistic and unconvincing definition of racism. For them, racism is something that happened in the United States, or in South Africa in the past, and only exists where there are laws, or extreme right groups preaching hatred and murder. But racism takes many forms, follows many patterns and is articulated in many different ways. But my main point here is not about whether Zwarte Piet is racist or not. My main question is what the debates about Zwarte Piet reveal about Dutch attitudes towards race, and towards Black citizens in this nation.

So another question is whether Zwarte Piet is a reflection of larger issues in Dutch society. It is clear to me that the controversy over Zwarte Piet is really a proxy for other emotions. It is a proxy for other feelings, other grievances and other unease. For both Blacks and whites. For many whites, it reveals their underlying feelings towards Black people. For some people these feelings will be notions and support for equality, fairness and justice. There may even be radical notions of progressive action. Many other people around the country no doubt have feelings of indifference. But there are also clearly underlying feelings of impatience, or anger, or hostility. It's not that they think Black people should be like Zwarte Piet, in roles as servants or subservient. But more about the idea that Black people should be grateful that they were allowed to immigrate and settle in Dutch society. And that they shouldn't push too far. For Black people Zwarte Piet is the last example of some of the most offensive publically expressed attitudes of hostility towards Blacks. Black people are sick and tired of it. Just as we were sick and tired of false information and lies about slavery and the slave trade, in all three nations. And Black people are sick and tired of the injustice and inequality that shapes their lives each day. And we are tired of the everyday racism.

So while most people simply focus just on Zwarte Piet, many of us need to look at the bigger picture; we need to read between the lines; we need to look behind the scenes; and we need to bring information, knowledge and education to the discussions. Not because it will change everyone. It won't change everyone. But it will change many people. And it will help many others understand. We must do it because we must have the facts at hand. And because it is the right thing to do. There is clearly a role for education in this debate on Zwarte Piet. And hopefully there will be enough of us involved in the debate to keep the focus on information, education and knowledge. One of the main reasons that so many scholars and educators in the Netherlands are examining the legacy of slavery is because we feel most popular understanding of Dutch slavery is confused, incorrect or simply misinformed.

Misinformed by the mistaken idea that the Dutch did not buy and sell many Africans, because, as some Dutch people say 'we only had 5%' of the slave trade'. When in fact the issue is not how many but the very fact that the Dutch were involved, deeply involved; when the fact is that 5% of the slave trade adds up to more than 554, 000 human beings kidnapped, transported or enslaved by the Dutch in the Americas; and of that number includes more than 79,000 Africans killed during the middle passage – that deadly trip across the Atlantic; and even, worse, at least another 2.5 million family members in Africa lost loved ones - children, siblings, parents - and saw their lives severely disrupted or destroyed due to Dutch involvement in the slave trade.

Misinformed by the mistaken belief that the Dutch did not make much profit from slavery, when in fact millions and millions of guilders were made, century after century, and thousands and thousands of jobs were created, decade after decade, that supported extensive economic activity, not only for those Dutch people directly involved in the slave trade and slavery, but for many others who worked in related areas building ships and sails, weapons and chains, and providing supplies such as food, and salt for the thousands directly involved.

Misinformed by the mistaken view that somehow slavery in Curacao was mild, while slavery in Suriname was violent; when in fact there is no such thing as 'mild' slavery because how can kidnapping, the forced buying and selling of people, whipping, beating and brutalizing ever be 'mild'? And make no mistake, violence, cruelty, deprivation of rights, were everyday activities during the entire period of slavery in Curacao, just as they were everywhere else under slavery, whether Dutch, British or Spanish, French, Portuguese or Danish.

Misinformed by the mistaken idea that the legal abolition of slavery by the Dutch in 1863 was the same thing as social emancipation; when in fact abolition of slavery in the Dutch world was no more than a legal act, that did not create the conditions for real emancipation, equality or justice; legal abolition meant that the people that owned the enslaved received millions in compensation, while those who had been enslaved got nothing; and legal emancipation was followed, in Suriname and the Dutch Antilles – by a society in which power, exploitation and injustice remained just as firmly entrenched as they did under slavery.

Misinformed by the mistaken idea that Dutch slavery was not racist, when in fact the entire institution of Dutch slavery – the kidnapping, transportation and enslavement of Africans and their descendants - was entirely based on racism; the entire institution of Dutch slavery was based on the belief in the alleged inferiority and inhumanity of Black people; and it was based entirely on ideologies of racism that were developed and disseminated across the Europe and the United States, which insisted that Blacks and white were two separate races, and that the white race was superior.

By the mistaken idea that there is no legacy of slavery within the Netherlands society itself, when in fact the legacy of slavery in Dutch society is everywhere – in the houses and streets named after the merchants involved in slavery; in the art and sculpture that drew its inspiration from Dutch slavery, and which is currently housed in the Netherlands's many museums; in the languages spoken by the majority of Dutch citizens from Suriname, Curacao, Aruba and elsewhere, whether it is Dutch, Sranan Tongo or Papiamentu. The legacy of slavery is widespread in the very idea of racial difference, of alleged racial inferiority, commonly expressed from day to day, in popular culture and popular conversation; it is evident in the collective organization of Black people and their allies to demand recognition and commemoration of slavery's legal abolition, and to demand that knowledge of slavery should be more accurate, more complete, less concerned with national achievements, and more concerned with resistance and the human dignity of the enslaved; the legacy is evident in the Ninsee monument in Oosterpark; it is evident in the personification of Zwarte Piet; and it is evident in the vast and growing opposition to Zwarte Piet. And the legacy is also evident in what is not said - the silences, evasions, denials and the euphemisms, about Dutch slavery. Including the refusal to consider race and racism as social forces that shaped – and continue to shape – Dutch life.

And misinformed by the mistaken belief that there is no racism in the Netherlands today. The idea that the Netherlands has never been like the United States, or South Africa in the past that there should be no discussion of race in the Netherlands today. But there is evidence that racism has been widespread in the Netherlands – not in the forms of laws, or legal segregation or lynching, but in the forms of caricatures, stereotypes, biased and partial images of Black people, and in the form of prejudice, discrimination, and unfair victimization. Evidence that racism has been expressed in the media, in newspapers and on television, and in educational institutions and schoolbooks. There are books about racism and the legacy of slavery in the Netherlands by Allison Blakely, Teun Van Dijk, Philomena Essed, Kwame Nimako and Glen Willemsen, Gloria Wekker, and by others too. In fact a book edited by Philomena Essed and Isobel Hoving called 'Dutch Racism' will be published in 2014. It has chapters by Dienke Hondius, Guno Jones and Esther Captain. I also wrote a chapter in that book. And Professor Melissa Weiner of the College of the Holy Cross in Massachusetts is about to publish an article on stereotypes of slavery and Black people in Dutch school books. It will appear in the Dubois Review in 2014. But this evidence is often ignored because it does not suit the national Dutch self-image. And when scholars say that there is no racism in the Netherlands, they never make mention of these books.

The sooner we confront the harsh and unpalatable facts of Dutch slavery, the sooner we'll have a more complete and accurate understanding of Dutch slavery and its legacies. And maybe awareness of these harsh and unpalatable facts by more people in Dutch society might lead to some better understanding of where Zwarte Piet fits in.

One problem with the current controversy in the Netherlands is that some things are being said that can never be unsaid. And some things are not being said that should be said. So one important question we must ask about this entire debate is: where are the academics, the educators in all of this? What are they doing to contribute facts and analysis of Zwarte Piet and his links to slavery, the legacy of slavery and to racist images at the present time? What are they doing to challenge the misperceptions that Dutch people have about the role the Kingdom of the Netherlands played in slavery and the slave trade? What are they doing to document the legacy of slavery in the heart of the Netherlands? These facts have been known for decades. Some scholars and educationalists are doing these things. But not enough of us. And many things have happened this year – 2013 – but will they disappear in 2014? So I call upon more people in the academic community, education specialists and others to make their voices heard in both condemning Zwarte Piet, and in working constructively and actively towards principles and practices of education, information and knowledge that reveal how Dutch slavery and legacies of Dutch slavery in the Netherlands continue to prevent Black people and white people from mutual understanding, mutual cooperation and mutual progress. And I make this call because I believe that in addition to making history more inclusive, I also believe that if we can create better more inclusive narratives of the past we can create better narratives of the present so as to create a better vision of the future.

Our goal as educationalists is to build relationships, not destroy them, and we should utilize education as our tool, and our ally. So this means that while there is fury in the streets, those of us in the world of education, information dissemination and knowledge production should keep our cool. And we should work collectively and steadfastly towards providing the information and education that highlights the true context of Zwarte Piet as part of the legacy of slavery. And while the fury is raging, we should continue to disseminate information about the significant steps being made alongside the fury. The NiNsee Monument, the NiNsee institute (though its funding has been decreased) and a wide range of activities this year, 2013, probably more than in the last ten years combined. For some this is far too slow. For others it is far too fast. Such is the nature of disagreement.

It is likely that there will be more tension, more conflict and possibly violence over Zwarte Piet. This is unfortunate and regrettable. But I take comfort in the lessons of history. And I take comfort in the comparisons with other nations. Some Dutch people will try to keep Zwarte Piet for a while. And they may have some success. He may be modified, made less offensive. But they will eventually lose him. History is against them. Zwarte Piet's days are numbered. Just like the British Gollywog and the racist caricatures of the United States days were numbered. Like the British and the Americans, this is another bitter pill that the Dutch will have to swallow. They will find a way to swallow it and the society will move on to dealing with more fundamental issues of knowledge, education and education that reveal the full extent of Dutch involvement in the slave trade and slavery, and the continuing legacy of slavery in Dutch society today.

Further Reading

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