

“Racism is an American Problem”: Dutch Exceptionalism and its Politics of Denial

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ABSTRACT

Through various topical examples, this article expounds on how the cultural legacy of the Dutch Transatlantic Slave Trade is institutionalized and permeates through Dutch society, while it is simultaneously being negated through the politics of Dutch exceptionalism and the ubiquitous myth of the Netherlands being a “color blind” country. The lack of awareness of the role of the Netherlands during the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the anti-black cultural production that accompanied it stems from a complex merger of political, economic and cultural interests that prohibit the prospering of a critical understanding

of Dutch racism and its history. Moreover, this political economy of Dutch exceptionalism has both discursively and institutionally served to exclude black and non-black Dutch people of color from the public debate, thus marginalizing their voice and delegitimizing them as cultural stakeholders.

In the course of this piece I will propose that a thorough educational reform as well as a radical democratization of the Dutch system of cultural decision-making is necessary in order to facilitate a societal awareness process that will help dismantle Dutch institutional racism.

Introduction

During the autumn of 2013 a nationwide debate on racism arose in the Netherlands, largely fuelled by grassroots critique of the Dutch blackface tradition of Black Pete [*Zwarte Piet*]. In a November 6th, 2013 article for the left-liberal Dutch current affairs magazine *Groene Amsterdammer*, sociologist Jan Willem Duyvendak weighed in on the Black Pete debate, arguing that “without a doubt there is a big difference between Americans and Dutch in their level of color sensitivity. In the USA [...] people see each other rather black-and-white [...]” After accusing Black Pete critics of calling those who celebrate *Sinterklaas* racists,¹ Duyvendak concludes that “the racism-reproach is often made too quickly and is above all too massive and too imprecise” and “the Dutch should not become as color sensitive as Americans. Americans are hypersensitive.” Duyvendak instead proposes, in what some would argue a typical Dutch “polder” fashion, only a “certain amount of color-sensitivity” (42–43, translation mine).

The ahistorical politics of denial put forward in Duyvendak’s article illustrates the Dutch sense of exceptionalism, rooted throughout Dutch academic and intellectual culture, and therein also Dutch institutions and public debate with regards to matters of race and racism. The main thrust of Dutch exceptionalism is twofold: (1) The suggestion that Dutch history of race and racism is different than that of other Western countries; (2) the idea that the Netherlands is, marginal exceptions or incidents aside, a “color blind” or non-racist country. In this article I will argue that Dutch exceptionalism, as an integral part of institutionalized intellectual thinking in the Netherlands, has served to “pasteurize” the reality of both the history and the current day material effects of Dutch racism.

Pasteurization

When milk is pasteurized it will not upset the consumer’s stomach. It will not cause any inconveniences after consumption and will thus become marketable. This analogy can be applied to Dutch institutions

1. The Dutch variation on Santa Claus who has the Black Petes as his “helpers.”

as well as intellectual currents that systematically underplay the role of the Dutch during the period of Transatlantic Slavery, the anti-black cultural production that has since then been part of Dutch culture and, consequently, the institutionalized racism prevalent in current Dutch society. My notion of the “pasteurization” of (the history of) racism in the Netherlands encompasses political and intellectual discourse, institutions of collective remembrance, research institutions—even antidiscrimination bureaus (see for example: Martina)—and education (see for example: Weiner). Essential to this pasteurization process is a selective presentation of history rather than a complete erasure or denial.

In her well-documented study on the depiction of slavery, the Dutch role in the slave trade and the commemoration of slavery in Dutch primary school textbooks published since 1980, Melissa Weiner concludes that Dutch textbooks

obscure and distort the Netherlands’ role in enslaving Africans [and] justify their history of colonialism, exploitation, oppression and genocide for profit and labor [...] Furthermore, they racialize White Dutch as largely uninvolved with the dehumanization and exploitation of Africans but as good traders, or businessmen [...] (16–17)

Weiner’s conclusions are also applicable to other domains of institutionalized Dutch collective remembrance.

For example, the *Mauritshuis*, a seventeenth-century villa built in The Hague by Johan Maurits van Nassau–Siegen (1604–1697), is nowadays a museum. When the museum reopened on 27 June 2014 after a two-year renovation, the official website of the *Mauritshuis* stated that the opening exhibition *Mauritshuis–The Building* “looks back at its rich history and the illustrious residents and people who used the premises” of this “icon of The Hague on the Hofvijver since 1644.” However, the website fails to mention the unembellished history of the *Mauritshuis*. It is only pointed out that the 17th century count commissioned “the most famous architect of his time [...] to build the house which now bears his name, the current *Mauritshuis*.” Beyond these two sentences there is no background information.

From 1637 to 1644 Johan Maurits was governor-general of Dutch Brazil, which was colonized by the Dutch Republic between 1630 and 1654. The Dutch West India Company (WIC) paid Maurits a salary and a share in the profits that the WIC was making via the slave trade as well as the slave labor on the sugar plantations of Dutch Brazil. Consequently, Maurits became extremely rich. Moreover, in order to secure the supply of slaves to the sugar plantations in Dutch Brazil, he sailed to the African Gold Coast with nine ships and twelve hundred men and conquered the Portuguese slave station of Elmina. Later on he went on to conquer the slave station Luanda in Angola. The Dutch ships that took enslaved people to Brazil were “floating coffins for their miserable passengers” (Gonsalves de Mello 187). With the money Maurits earned he surrounded himself with splendor and luxury. Among other things, he financed the construction of his residence in The Hague, the Mauritshuis.

Not only is this history absent from the official website, but also from official documents on the Mauritshuis, such as the educational material for children that is for sale on the Mauritshuis website.² For instance, in the children’s book *Nèt echt!! Of tóch niet* [Almost real!! Or maybe not quite?] one page is dedicated to Johan Maurits. On this page he is presented as an exciting and benevolent figure. The historical reality of how slave trade and slave labor in sugar plantations were the *raison d’être* of Maurits’ wealth is completely ignored:

Because Johan Maurits was so important, he naturally had to receive dignified guests and throw big parties. That is why his house became a real palace, in the middle of the city. A ‘city palace’ [...] The Mauritshuis was not built as a museum, but as a residence. As the house of Maurits, like the name already suggests [...] He was rich, famous and important. And not only because he was a count, but also because he was the boss [sic] of a piece of Brazil that belonged to Holland in those days. While he was in Brazil, Johan Maurits had a house built in The Hague. A huge building, with as many as ten rooms, just for himself! You see, he was not married and did not have any children. (Verhoeven 79)

In the opening exhibition of the museum Mauritshuis itself, a huge text is displayed in the main hall, describing Maurits as a “colorful man.” In the entire Mauritshuis, there is only one small interactive screen where Maurits’ role in slavery is described. Accompanied by an animation, visitors can listen to the following text when they put on headphones:

[Maurits] commissioned scientific research, supported artists, built palaces and established a tolerant society. But he was also the first to involve the Dutch in the slave trade. Why? When Johan Maurits arrived in Brazil it became apparent that there weren’t enough laborers to do the backbreaking work on the sugar cane plantations. Taking his cue from the Portuguese, Johan Maurits decided to bring in slaves from Africa. One of his first acts as governor, therefore, was to organize an expedition to the West coast of Africa, where he seized Elmina castle from the Portuguese in Ghana. This would become the base for the Dutch slave trade. The so-called Triangular Trade originated as a result. Dutch ships loaded with weapons, gunpowder, alcohol and textiles were sent to West Africa, where their cargo was traded for slaves. These slaves were then transported to Brazil and sold on to plantation owners. On the final leg of the journey, Brazilian sugar made its way to Holland, where it was sold. The Triangular trade would then start all over again. The triangular trade kept the Dutch company in Brazil going and ensured that Johan Maurits had sufficient funds to build the Mauritshuis. It explains why the Mauritshuis was sometimes derisively referred to as the Sugar House.³

This audio in the Mauritshuis’ opening exhibition is the only reference to slavery. The historiography is clear about how the WIC employed Maurits for consolidating Dutch hegemony, expanding the sugar plantations in Dutch Brazil and securing the supply of enslaved people from Africa, yet the audio in the Mauritshuis suggests that Maurits was

2. See www.mauritshuis.nl.

3. Text recorded at the Mauritshuis by author.

more or less forced to “bring in slaves” because of a deficiency of labor and, moreover, that he was inspired by the Portuguese.

While Maurits sent out a naval force in 1637 with the specific task of conquering the Portuguese slave station Elmina (see for example: Den Heijer 76) in order to secure the slave trade for Dutch benefit, the Mauritshuis presents this history as “an expedition to West Africa,” subtly implying that Maurits coincidentally bumped into Elmina and conquered it. Moreover, the tolerance of Maurits praised by the Mauritshuis in the beginning of the audio refers to his open policy towards mostly Portuguese Catholic and Sephardi Jewish sugar plantation owners in Dutch Brazil. What the Mauritshuis omits, however, is that Maurits only implemented this tolerant policy when it became clear that his attempts to bring in Protestant Dutch colonizers failed and he, hence, had to lure back plantation owners who had fled when the Dutch took over (Den Heijer 44–45). Thus, by systematically downplaying and justifying the centrality of the oppression and exploitation of enslaved people in its own history, the museum completely “pasteurizes” Johan Maurits van Nassau and his Mauritshuis. Just like pasteurized milk becomes easily digestible, the Mauritshuis makes its own veiled history of violence easily digestible and in line with the Dutch narrative of a benign market of trade.

The characteristic examples of Dutch primary school textbooks and the Mauritshuis illustrate the core mechanism behind Dutch exceptionalism. Not only does the pasteurization of the history of the role of the Dutch in slavery contribute to the “social forgetting of the horrors of slavery even as they are explicitly articulated” (Weiner 16), it also lays the foundations of an institutional dismissal of experiences, perspectives and analyses by black and non-black Dutch citizens, activists, intellectuals and academics, unless they comply to the boundaries of pasteurization. Consequently, unlike in the English-speaking world, Dutch historiography, culture and Dutch lexicon lack analytical depth in regard to understanding racism. Concepts like whiteness or a critical understanding of the toxic history of the N-word in all its forms is absent in Dutch mainstream discourse, despite the fact that black and non-black Dutch people of color have addressed these issues for many years. For example, there is no

analytical distinction between the concepts of “slave” and “enslaved” in mainstream Dutch discourse, even though the Afro–Dutch community introduced the term “enslaved” in an act of “epistemic disobedience” around fifteen years ago (Nimako, Abdou and Willemsen 34). The dismissal of analysis by black and non-black people of color stems for a great deal from the institutionalized marginalization, fuelled by pasteurization, which keeps the spectrum of mainstream academic and public debate extremely narrow.

The pasteurization of history explains why this Dutch exceptionalism and its politics of racism-denial is often accompanied by variations on the claim that “the Netherlands is not America.” For example, despite decades of well-documented studies on the severe level of ethnic discrimination in the Netherlands, the public debate on this issue has just recently and hesitantly started.⁴ Another example is the unapologetic denial that the Dutch blackface tradition of Black Pete is in fact blackface, let alone racist. This negation runs throughout the spectrum of debate in the Netherlands. Not only conservative or right-wing commentators and academics, but also progressive leftwing public figures have reinforced Dutch exceptionalism by openly denying that Black Pete is part of the historically established blackface iconography. This politics of denial reached an Orwellian apex when Erik van Muiswinkel, who has been playing the “head Pete” on Dutch public TV since 1998, declared: “I don’t think Black Pete is blackface. But this is very hard to explain, because I paint my face black” (“Why is St. Nick’s Helper in Blackface”).

Appie Tayibi and Institutional Racism

The term “institutional racism” was first coined in the 1960s by Black Panther activists Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton. Since then, the term has been expanded on by academics

4. See the many studies on Dutch labor market discrimination, published by statistical institutes and anti-discrimination bureaus since at least 1986. For example: Den Uyl et al. *Mag het ook een buitenlander wezen?*. Rotterdam: LBR, 1986; Andriessen et al. *Liever Mark dan Mohammed? Onderzoek naar arbeidsmarktdiscriminatie van niet-Westerse migranten via praktijktests*. The Hague: SCP, 2010.

and intellectuals in the United States and elsewhere in the English-speaking world (see for example: Haney Lopéz; Penketh; Pilkington). In its essence, institutional racism refers to systemic racist practices in society. Institutional racism stands in analytical contrast to racism, discrimination or bigotry by individual actors.

As part of Dutch exceptionalism, racism is de facto only defined as the latter in the Netherlands. Moreover, Dutch exceptionalism dictates that the cultural benchmark for even this narrow view on racism is very high. For example, when the popular Dutch glossy magazine *Jackie* described the African American singer Rihanna as “ultimate niggabitch,” there was protest by Dutch activists and intellectuals of color. At first, both the all-white editors of *Jackie* and white Dutch commentators dismissed this uproar in a Duyvendakian way as either “over-sensitivity” or “seeking racism.” Eva Hoeke, editor-in-chief of *Jackie*, reacted on twitter by saying that her terminology was “only a joke.” On the blog of Dutch newspaper *de Volkskrant*, columnist Rutger Bregman argued that “the fierce reactions to the usage of the term ‘niggabitch’ [in *Jackie*] show a huge over-sensitivity” and that “only American fidgets think that we are racists.” Only when both international media and Rihanna herself expressed outrage after being made attentive of *Jackie*’s terminology, did Hoeke reluctantly quit as editor-in-chief, claiming in her statement that “the term ‘niggabitch’ came over from America and we only meant to describe a clothing style” (ANP Pers Support, 20 December 2011. Translation mine).

The *Jackie*-episode did not arouse mainstream awareness in the Netherlands on the institutional dynamics behind having an all-white editorial board, which is standard in Dutch mass media as well as in cadres of other institutions. The fact that the combination of a racist and sexist term (incidentally concocted by *Jackie* as it is not a “street term” in the United States) would be extremely offensive to black Dutch people did not cross the minds of the editorial board. Rather than empathy and self-contemplation, a mixture of Dutch exceptionalism and white privilege was manifest in the reactions of *Jackie* as well as those of white Dutch commentators when black and non-black Dutch people of color protested.

Describing black people as *neger* [“negro”] is common practice in the Netherlands, including by politicians and government officials. The societal refusal to acknowledge that the term has a toxic history and dehumanizes black people, as the *Jackie* episode illustrates, is one of the many manifestations of Dutch exceptionalism. Another issue that has come to the fore through the *Jackie* episode, is that of how institutional racism prevails in Dutch mass media. One of the outcomes of a virtually non-existent diversity in the editorial boards and ownerships of mass media is the normalization of racial and ethnic stereotyping, which stems from deep-rooted anti-black iconography. For instance, in their study of Dutch televised soccer commentary, Van Sterkenburg et al. conclude:

Dutch soccer commentary seems a place where hegemonic, historically informed and globalized discourses about racial/ethnic groups are reconstructed, confirmed and “naturalized,” but also a site where existing racial/ethnic categorizations and hierarchies are challenged. In other words, although the soccer commentators drew on and reinforced widely circulating, centuries-old and internationally shared discourses, their representations also appeared to be important sites themselves for the creation and (re)construction of racial/ethnic meanings and categorizations. (435)

The reproduction of historically informed ethnic and racial stereotyping in Dutch news reporting, talk shows, commercials, children’s programming and so on is, furthermore, an underexposed topic within Dutch academia. I would argue that the conclusions of Van Sterkenburg et al. are applicable throughout Dutch mass media.

One example is the very popular children’s show *Het Huis Anubis*, which was broadcast on Dutch public TV over the course of 404 episodes from 2006 to 2009 and later ran in syndication. In the show, a group of teenagers encounters various adventures that are themed around Ancient Egyptian mysteries. Out of the nine main characters, only one is a non-white character. His name is “Appie Tayibi,” which is a Moroccan Arabic name. Appie Tayibi was played by Moroccan–Dutch actor Achmed Akkabi in the show’s first two seasons.

Afro–Dutch actor Kevin Wekker took over the role for the show’s final two seasons, while the name of the character remained Appie Tayibi. Whereas the white characters in *Het Huis Anubis* have traits that are associated with intelligence, rationality, control and vigor, Appie Tayibi is the diametrical Other: his gullibility, superstition, cowardice, impulsivity and lack of intelligence serve as an epistemic reminder of white supremacy. Appie, because of his “primitiveness,” is variously and sometimes concurrently the jester, the unwitting obstacle, the unwitting savior and the helpless victim. He is sometimes even the proverbial “useful idiot” for the main antagonist of the series, the white male Jeroen, who through his intelligence manages to dupe Appie for his evil schemes. Appie Tayibi thus embodies a 21st-century rendition of the stereotype of the noble savage. In this rendition, Orientalist as well as “buffoon” or “jester” iconography is dialectically synthesized with the classic *bon sauvage* (for a historical outline of the noble savage see: Ellingson), who in various configurations throughout post-Enlightenment Western cultural production serves as a mirror to the European who has achieved the “highest state” of evolution and has lost touch with his “primitive” and more carefree past.

In the Netherlands, the study of ethnic and racial stereotypes in mass media is still relatively marginal. Several important yet isolated studies, such as Sterkenburg et al. on soccer commentary, have taken place. However, comprehensive research projects that utilize concepts like “whiteness” or institutional racism are lacking. The general cultural attitude in the Netherlands is that “whiteness” is a term that supposedly “bears no relevance to the Netherlands,” despite the fact that, just like the case with the term “enslaved,” black and non-black Dutch activists, academics and intellectuals of color have been writing and discussing “whiteness” in the Netherlands for many years. An often heard response by white Dutch academics and intellectuals holds to the analytical appliance of “whiteness” to the Netherlands is that “white,” “whiteness” or “white privilege” are anglicized terms and that the correct term should remain the generally accepted and “neutral” *blank* (see for example van der Horst).

The politics of denial with regards to the term “whiteness” is exemplary of Dutch exceptionalism: Dutch intellectuals who brush aside

the term “white” while promoting the term *blank*, fail to recognize that the term *blank* itself is a prime example of white privilege. Whereas “white” and “black” are descriptive terms, *blank* and the N-word are normative. *Blank* not only means “white” but also fair, beautiful and clear.

The kind of doublethink related to the dismissal of the term white while promoting the term *blank* also applies to the denial of institutional racism in the Netherlands. Although specific and comprehensive research on racism in the Netherlands is relatively scarce, structural racial or ethnic discrimination in for example the labor market (Andriessen et al.), administration of justice (Wermink et al.), mass media (Sterkenburg et al.) and conduct of police (Amnesty International 2013) is well documented. Nevertheless, when in the winter of 2013 Amnesty International, the UN, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), and, consequently, the National Ombudsman Alex Brenninkmeijer expressed concerns about racism in the Netherlands, virtually the entire Dutch political establishment responded with denial. For example, when referring to the ECRI report on racism in the Netherlands, a Dutch TV reporter asked Diederik Samsom, leader of the social democratic party *Partij van de Arbeid*, “why don’t they [ECRI] mind their own business?” Samsom replied: “I am using very polite words to say exactly that.” State Secretary for Security and Justice Fred Teeven reacted to the ECRI report by saying: “I am not alarmed, because I totally do not recognize myself in that” (meaning the ECRI findings). Leader of progressive liberal party D66 Alexander Pechtold’s reaction was: “I do not think that we are incongruous in that respect” (referring to racism). Similarly, when the Black Pete issue gained nationwide attention in the same period, Prime Minister Mark Rutte of the liberal conservative VVD party responded by saying that “Black Pete is simply black. I cannot change anything about that.” Later on Diederik Samsom, of the PvdA, concurred in a tweet: “Rutte said it well. Black Pete is black” (Qtd. in JW Navis).

Conclusions and Recommendations

As I have pointed out, institutional racism is still a marginal topic within the intellectual and academic climate in the Netherlands, despite the fact that black and non-black Dutch academics and intellectuals have been trying to structurally address institutional racism, and despite the fact that racism and discrimination in the Netherlands has been well documented in specific studies on the labor market, legal system, education and media narratives. The marginalization of academic research, activism and intellectual critique on institutional racism in the Netherlands should be considered within the broader context of “pasteurization.” Through an analysis of topical examples within academia, intellectual debate, institutions of collective remembrance and mass media I have explained how pasteurization is an intricate part of institutional racism. The ahistorical assumption of Dutch exceptionalism, which renders critical, systemic analyses of institutional racism outside of the mainstream spectrum of debate, is thus structurally reproduced and perpetuated.

Consequently, there exists an obstinate lack of general public awareness on Dutch racism, despite many elaborate and well-documented studies that have repeatedly shown that racism and discrimination are institutionally rooted in Dutch culture. Moreover, through the use of the analogy of “pasteurization,” I have demonstrated how history has been moulded and written along a severely narrow spectrum of mainstream Dutch discourse on current-day racism, while virtually completely denying the social, cultural, political and economic trajectory of circa four centuries of anti-black cultural production in the Netherlands. Thus, a cultural framework of Dutch exceptionalism and a politics of denial is constructed. The examples discussed in this article deal with political debate, mass media and academia, and illustrate the comprehensiveness of Dutch exceptionalism.

In order to tackle the politics of Dutch exceptionalism, an urgent democratization of the Dutch decision-making process in institutions of power, such as the government and mass media, is necessary. An important task in order to accomplish this is an expansion of the public debate, both in terms of its spectrum and in terms of the participants. As of yet, a systemic circle of exclusion prevents this from happening.

Institutional racism and white privilege prevents black and non-black Dutch people of color from achieving lasting positions of cultural decision-making in mass media, government and academic institutions. Hence, a societal lack of awareness about both the history and current-day effects of Dutch racism is perpetuated. As a result of this, there is no large public pressure on Dutch institutions to comprehensively increase diversity and address the concerns of Dutch people of color.

In order to break this cycle, a bottom-up education and awareness process is needed: Dutch activists, intellectuals and academics need to, as it were, “radicalize” their activities. Through a higher level of organization and democratic civic activism—for example by organizing or participating in more sit-ins and boycotts of businesses that discriminate—more pressure should be put on Dutch politicians and businesses to address institutional racism in the Netherlands. Also, structural educational reform on all levels of the Dutch school system should be demanded through increased public pressure via activism. In other words, Dutch anti-racist activism should become “mainstream”: intellectuals, politicians and others that have a position of nationwide exposure should help bring the valuable work that has been done by Dutch grassroots activists to the fore.

Furthermore, intellectuals that reinforce and reproduce Dutch exceptionalism should be put under more public scrutiny. Dutch intellectuals and academics who work on ethnic and racial discrimination in the Netherlands should, therefore, be more engaged in the public debate in order to increase awareness among, in particular, white Dutch society. This cannot be achieved without a willingness to abandon obscurantism. Especially academics often tend to obscure their, in many instances very poignant and valuable, studies on racism and discrimination with unnecessarily complicated jargon or “theories,” rendering their work incomprehensible and useless for grassroots activists. Without “translating” our work to accessible language, whether in writing or in speech, anti-racist academia will largely remain a hermetically closed bubble, reaching only those who had the privilege of getting a higher education, and hence a grasp of academic jargon.

Also, more interaction and debate is vital in this democratization process. Studies on various specific aspects of racial and ethnic discrimination in the Netherlands should be comprehensively and theoretically linked to each other. For example, ethnic stereotyping in soccer commentary is not isolated from, but rather an organic part of, the broader cultural and historical dynamics behind the “pasteurization” of history, discrimination in the labor market, ethnic profiling, stereotyping in mass media and white privilege in Dutch social and political institutions. Moreover, I believe that the relative lack of a comprehensive analysis and debate on racism in the Dutch public sphere, prevents intersectional studies of systemic oppression from getting mainstream attention, even though a significant number of Dutch academics of color have produced poignant and well-documented intersectional and comparative analyses on racism in the Dutch context.

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