

Demonstrating Dutch: Nationalism and Cultural Racism in the 2013 Anti-Putin and Pro-Black Pete Protests in the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

This article examines two separate events of 2013: the pro-Black Pete demonstration in the Hague and the anti-Putin demonstration in Amsterdam. By analyzing the contexts and bodies of these debates, this paper looks at several ways in which a Dutch national subject is imagined within these events. I argue that these are local and global

sites that are both creating, and created by, structural forces of in- and exclusion within and beyond a notion of “Dutch national identity.” In this paper, I use a transnational feminist framework and queer of color critique to analyze the multiple linkages within, between, and among both spaces to ask how Dutchness is demonstrated.

Introduction

The Netherlands is often referred to in public discourse as a nation defined by its progressive gay laws, liberal values, and secularism. Dutch national identity is celebrated every year in December with the holiday of *Sinterklaas*, a figure somewhat similar to Santa Claus. He arrives from Spain at the end of November on a large ship filled with presents and candy. Besides these treats for children, *Sinterklaas* is accompanied by many blackfaced helpers, sharing the name of *Zwarte Piet*, or Black Pete. In the last few years, voices criticizing the figure of Black Pete for its racist character have become increasingly audible, yet for every critical note dozens of counterattacks have been fired, vouching Black Pete as an essential element of the Dutch tradition. In November 2013, this discussion was a motivator for a demonstration in The Hague supporting the continuation of the Black Pete tradition (Vossers 2013). Only five months earlier, Amsterdam was the site of a different demonstration, where recently implemented Russian homophobic laws were the point of critique. The direct occasion was a visit by the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, to the Netherlands. This event was organized by the COC [*Cultuur- en Ontspannings Centrum*], the largest organization for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people (LGBTs). Thousands of people came together, all dressed in one color of the rainbow, singing and chanting to make the voice of the Dutch gay community heard (“Demonstratie tegen anti-homowet”). The participants in both events were largely white, middle-aged, upper-middle or middle class Dutch citizens. The first event was directed at UN allegations of racism in the figure of Black Pete, the second was a sign of support for LGBTs in Russia, and against Putin. The pro-Black Pete demonstration was not only smaller, encompassing one third of the anti-Putin protest, but the media coverage was not as significant either. Even though both expressed a sense of “Dutchness,” and an urge to protect Dutch values, the public reception was very different due to the position of the protests in the overarching discourse of each respective debate. The debate about Black Pete is a heated argument internal to the Netherlands, characterized by a harsh separation of those who oppose and those who support the tradition. In this case, “pro” means being racist, according to opponents, and “contra” implies the rejection

of Dutch identity. On the other hand, discussions about acceptance and visibility of LGBT people are no longer positioned as a relevant problem *within* the Netherlands, considering gay tolerance is imagined as a marker of national identity and thus as an essential part of a symbolic Dutch citizenship. Instead, the issue is now directed outward, as is the case with the demonstration against Russian laws.

These local sites, with their specific histories and contexts, both create a certain image of Dutch national identity and both respond to a situation imagined as “elsewhere”: either as a UN critique or as a Russian law proposal. In this paper, I will look at the ways in which a Dutch national subject is imagined. In continental feminism, specifically in the Netherlands, there is no well-established critical framework to think through these processes of inclusion and exclusion. A theoretical framework that is especially valuable in this case, is US- and Canada-based feminist and queer critique. The framework used in this paper is not as well established in continental feminism, yet it provides essential tools to understand the politics of exclusions in contemporary Europe. It is argued that in order to account for the specifics of the aforementioned events, as well as for the broader discourses of nationalism, it is necessary to bridge this transatlantic divide. Besides an analysis of these events, this paper can be read as an example of such a theoretical project in approaching “continental” issues as international, transnational sites that are both local and specific, as well as embedded in global discourses. Furthermore, I will elaborate on this critical transnational, queer of color, intersectional critique as enabling an understanding of the several ways in which Dutch national identity is imagined and constructed. In the first part of this paper, I will elaborate on this particular framework, after which I will analyze both events separately and together.

I argue that these events are not only extremely specifically bound to a particular place and time within the formation of Dutch national identity, but that they are local and global sites that are both creating, and created by, structural forces of in- and exclusion beyond Dutch national identity. In this paper, I will thus use a transnational framework to analyze the multiple links between both spaces, in order to ask: how is Dutchness demonstrated, and how do the Dutch demonstrate?

Critically Transnational

According to Chandra Talpade Mohanty and M. Jacqui Alexander, transnational feminism is a research praxis that looks at the relations between local people and global forces (Mohanty 24). This is particularly anchored in studies of race, (de-)colonization, and women of color critique, and works against heterosexist, imperial, racialized structures and projects by foregrounding an intersectional critique. Intersectionality is a concept grounded in US women of color feminism. It generally refers to an emphasis on interconnectedness of race, gender, sexuality, religion, class ethnicity, and even more factors. This broad transnational feminist framework as intersectional critique encompasses anti-racist feminism, women of color, and queer of color critique, and is overall defined by a strong analysis and deconstruction of politics of the in- and exclusion. However, in this article I will limit the scope of this framework by focusing on two strands of critique. The first is the relation of the in- and outsider in nationalist discourse as connected to cultural racism, and the second a queer of color critique toward LGBT politics. In order to approach the concept of the nation, I will draw on the argument of Sunera Thobani. In her book *Exalted Subjects*, Thobani proposes a framework for analyzing the structures of nationalism in relation to excluded others. Exaltation creates an ideal of national subjectivity, hereby fabricating a certain image of national identity. In this symbolic nationalism, the figure of the white European national subject is referred to as a personification of the superior nation, a process which “has had devastating consequences for this subject’s excluded Others” (248). Thobani shows how this exaltation of white subjectivity as a superior national citizen is deeply racialized and dependent on the exclusion of the Other. This hierarchization of humanity legitimizes colonial violence and limits the access to citizenship for non-nationals. Furthermore, the national subject can only be exalted in relation to these “strangers” in the figure of the immigrant. Because these strangers are always different and moving, the project of the nation is without possible closure, since the boundaries of “the nation” continue to shift. Similar to Thobani, Stuart Hall argues that the nation is always negotiated against differences to which relations toward and with a symbolical Other are crucial (Hall 178). Knowing yourself as a national subject implies a

confirmation of this Otherness. As both scholars argue, this project of nationalism aims to stabilize that which is inherently unstable and furthermore built on exclusion and an imagined Other.

These politics of nationalism and exclusion take a somewhat different form in contemporary Europe, where the immigrant Other has become increasingly culturalized, with a focus on the “cultural” or “ethnic” Other. Alana Lentin and Gavan Titley argue that the reduction of anti-racist politics to culture, and the change of “race” to “culture” as categories of difference, rehearses a narrative implying Europe has reached a post-racial state. Referring to Etienne Balibar, the authors state that “[historically,] ‘race’ and racism, and culture and culturalism, have been profoundly intertwined” (Lentin 127). Balibar further argues that the focus on cultural and ethnic difference instead of race is a reiteration and transformation of racism within Europe (Balibar 21). Instead of biological differences, the focus now is on “culture” as a marker of difference, considering culture “can also function like a nature, and it can in particular function as a way of locking individuals and groups a priori into a genealogy, into a determination that is immutable and intangible in origin” (22). “Culture” thus becomes naturalized as an inherent and essential difference between groups of people, where Western liberal whiteness remains the unchallenged norm. The discursive transformation from “race” to “culture” does not imply that Europe is raceless, as dominant national narratives aim to argue, but racism in this process is transformed and changed to a more implicit form of cultural diversity management (24). The impossibility of raising issues of racism within Dutch society is part of similar processes within Europe where “cultural difference” is emphasized and anti-racist critiques are regarded as anachronistic. Furthermore, cultural racism, or neo-racism, as Balibar states, is connected to notions of sexual and gender emancipation, developments often aligned with an imagined “post-racial secular Europe.” This imagining of Europe and the Netherlands as post-racial, or as raceless, is noticeable in the relative absence of Dutch colonial history in national imaginings. In this narrative, colonial violence is placed in the past as something that “we” should not have done. Contemporary relations between the former colonies and the Netherlands are not taken into account, yet it is implied

who is meant by the “we,” namely white Dutch national subjects, descendants of colonizers. The term often used to refer to “non-Dutch” is *allochtoon*, translated as foreigner. Legally, only people with at least one parent born outside of the Netherlands are considered *allochtoon*. Yet this term has become stigmatized, coming to represent symbolical non-Dutch ethnicity; that is, non-white people with a supposedly different cultural background (Demmers 60). Here all bodies are coalesced in this single term, without contextualizing the various ways in which non-white people are present in Dutch society. The history of colonialism is interwoven with immigration in such a way that even though people with Surinamese or Caribbean ancestors are often legally Dutch, they are continuously and structurally treated as secondary citizens. This ambivalent position of black Dutch bodies, between Dutch national subjects and immigrants, creates a cultural elimination of this group and reinforces the coalescence of all non-Dutch national subjects into immigrant and outsider; as cultural and ethnic Other, *allochtoon*.

This distinction between Dutch national citizens and Others is sexualized and intersected with LGBT politics. Here, queer of color critique, built on the argument of Roderick Ferguson, comes into play. Ferguson argues in *Abberations in Black* that nationalist discourses in the United States are constructed through heteropatriarchy, which is intrinsically racialized. Ferguson argues that in order to restore the superiority of the nation, idealized norms of heteropatriarchy are constructed. He argues that racism and heterosexualization are intrinsically connected, and continue to exclude non-white bodies. Tolerance of LGBT identities has long been a part of Dutch national imagining (Hekma 129). However, there are many limits to this idea of “gay tolerance,” and this concept of tolerance should be problematized as it idealizes a specific kind of homosexuality, built on heterosexual racialized norms. Many right-wing politicians have aligned themselves with LGBT rights and have urged for the importance to defend these against threats from “outside.” This outside, then, is framed on cultural and ethnic terms. Liberal values and tolerance toward homonormative gays are seen as an essential element of Dutch identity, while respect for religious and ethnic diversity is reduced and criticized by these parties. Increasingly aligning sexual freedom with conservative right-wing politics,

the discourse of Dutch national identity has become homonationalist. This concept by Jasbir Puar builds on Lisa Duggan's notion of homonormativity, referring to a normalization of gay culture anchored in consumption and domesticity by which norms of LGBT identity and behavior are constructed. Within heterosexual norms, LGBT bodies are included in nationalism in the process of homonormative nationalism, or homonationalism. Puar argues that "the production of gay and queer bodies is crucial to the deployment of nationalism, insofar as these perverse bodies reiterate heterosexuality as the norm" ("Mapping US" 68). In homonationalism, LGBT bodies are thus called upon to symbolize national boundaries, to exclude and affirm the distinction between exalted subjects and imagined Others. Sarah Bracke and Suhraiya Jivraj argue that similar processes of homonationalism have taken place in the Netherlands, where ideas of "gay tolerance" are celebrated as inherent to Dutch national identity (Bracke 244, Jivraj 158). Dutch national subjectivity is constructed by narratives of emancipation and sexual freedom. Furthermore, Wekker argues in her book *The Politics of Passion* that this narrative is characterized by a structural absence of colonial, ethnic, and racial relations in the imagining of Dutchness. These theoretical critiques point to the construction and imagining of the exalted Dutch subject as white, secular, and "gay tolerant." In this mode the implicit Dutch citizen is presented as tolerant of LGBTs. Yet, as Sarah Bracke, Gloria Wekker, and Jasbir Puar argue, such a conception is limited and conditional, since it upholds a narrative that excludes non-white LGBT people. These politics of sexuality are not separate from cultural racism; instead, they are connected and intersectional. This becomes evident in the analyses of the previously introduced events, both of which are examples of these discourses as well as events that point to the necessity of introducing transnational critique in continental feminism.

pro-Black Pete

On the morning of October 27th, 2013, roughly three thousand people gathered in The Hague to express their support for the figure of Black Pete. Some of them were dressed up, with their faces painted

black. Although the figure of Black Pete has received criticism over the past years, in 2013 the discussion was more heated than ever. One of the consequences of the public debate was the pro-Black Pete demonstration.

Direct motivation for this gathering were two public anti-racist statements in Dutch public discourse. On October 7th artist, scholar, and activist Quinsy Gario appeared on the talkshow *Pauw & Witteman*, expressing his concern with the figure of Black Pete and proposing a change in the tradition of *Sinterklaas*.¹ A few weeks later, Verene Shepherd, head of a UN research group, expressed her concern with Black Pete in a recorded interview during the news show *EenVandaag*. On October 22nd, Shepherd stated: “If I would be living in the Netherlands, as a black person, I would object to it,” further arguing that “people in the Netherlands cannot see that this is a throwback to slavery, and that in the 21st century this practice should stop.” A dialogue about this issue was quickly shut down by the various racist comments that Shepherd and Gario received. Both were threatened many times through social media outlets, which eventually led to the demonstration on October 27th. The allegations of Verene Shepherd against Black Pete received many responses driven by anger, and opponents often referred to her statements as a threat to Dutch national identity. Shepherd was further framed as an outsider, a status that renders her incapable of truly knowing the significance of tradition.²

The process of culturalized racism, as explained in the previous paragraph, is present in the Black Pete debate, in which Quinsy Gario received comments as “go back to your own country.” Which country this might be is unclear, but at least it is not with “us,” the Dutch national citizens. This points to a fundamental lack of historical sensibility and awareness of colonial relations, something which John Helsloot, in the context of Black Pete, calls cultural aphasia (Helsloot 7). Building on Ann Laura Stoler’s work, Helsloot writes that “in aphasia, an occlusion of knowledge is the issue [...] a difficulty generating a vocabulary that associates appropriate words and concepts with appropriate things” (Stoler in Helsloot 2). The cultural disability to talk about the phenomena of racism is grounded in power relations, and results in the downplaying of arguments against the Black Pete

tradition. The notion of “tradition” functions in contradictory ways in this nationalist discourse, as it is often seen in opposition to modernity, and thus as hardly reconcilable with the narratives of progress present in Dutch nationalist discourses. In her analysis of the Black Pete minstrelsy rituals, Mieke Bal argues that tradition in this case functions as an ideology. This ideology is not *antagonistic with* a narrative of progress, but *intrinsic to* it. Bal argues that “rather than being traces of a past to be cherished with nostalgic longing, traditions are inventions, fictions of continuity necessary for a conception of history as development or progress” (Bal 115). What follows is that tradition becomes embedded within a narrative of progress and modernity, seeing certain “traditional values” as crucial for emancipation. Often heard phrases in the debate are that the Netherlands is not a racist country, but that it is post-racial, and that “race” is mainly a US issue. Therefore, paradoxically, the presence of a figure such as Black Pete is a sign of this idea of post-raciality and progress. In the case of Black Pete, the celebration of *Sinterklaas* comes to stand for a celebration of Dutchness. Yet, in line with Balibar, the distinctions between Dutch and non-Dutch are clearly formulated in racist and cultural terms. The support for the controversial figure even culminated in the public support of thousands of blackfaced people.

Anti-Putin

Another important debate shaping Dutch public discourse in 2013 was the anti-Putin demonstration. On April 8th, several thousands of people gathered on a quay in Amsterdam to protest against a set of Russian laws that would criminalize the public display of “gay symbolism.” The demonstration was held in the center of Amsterdam, a city often

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1. In November 2012 Gario dismantled his initiative “Black Pete is Racism” [*Zwarte Piet is racisme*], yet he remains active in multiple anti-racist organizations such as “we stay here” [*wij blijven hier*]. See <http://zwartepietisracisme.tumblr.com/> for Gario’s own website, and www.wijblijvenhier.nl for the currently active foundation.
 2. A few days after Shepherd’s remarks, the UN posted a blog about the role of independent researchers. While they criticized the hate speech and intimidation toward Shepherd, the UN distanced itself from such independent researchers who work on a voluntary and individual basis (“What Is the Role of Human Rights Independent Experts”).

associated with sexual freedom, yet paradoxically a place where gay bars are closing on a daily basis and where homophobia is very present (Hekma 140). The largest Dutch institutionalized LGBT organization, the COC, has continuously criticized the developments in Russia. When President Putin visited the Netherlands to celebrate the “Dutch-Russian year,” this was plentiful reason for the COC to organize a demonstration in coalition with Amnesty International (“Demonstratie tegen anti-homowet,” “COC”). Participants were asked to dress up in one color of the rainbow in order to express the support for international LGBT rights of expression. The rainbow is a symbol often associated with LGBT emancipation and is one of the signs that were to be prohibited in Russia. There was a large stage with performances, where protest signs and flags were handed out, and slogans such as “Putin go home!” were chanted. The message was clear: Dutch LGBTs do not accept institutional violence towards fellow LGBTs in Russia. Nevertheless, on Sunday June 30th 2013, Putin signed the bills that criminalized “propagation of non-traditional sexual relationships.”

In order to analyze this event in relation to Dutch nationalism, Ferguson’s queer of color critique combined with Jasbir Puar’s notion of homonationalism reveals the multiple ways in which the immigrant Other is embedded in Dutch national discourse. The anti-Putin event contributed to this image by vouching for progress in the form of sexual freedom within a narrative where the Netherlands is presented as a site of progress and inclusion. This progressive and inclusive society is then put in contrast with the exclusionary and oppressive laws of Russia. Voices of Russian people were lacking because it was for the most part a gathering from within what is imagined as the Dutch gay scene. Within this narrative of progress, the critique toward Putin contributed to the exaltation of national subjectivity by reconstructing the image of Amsterdam as gay capital of Europe. The event on April 8th, labeled “stop the anti-gay law,” had at least two implications: the violent Other was now President Putin, and the political power and supposed unity of Dutch LGBT communities were reinstated. Yet at the same time, non-white bodies were largely absent from this demonstration, and continue to be absent in the mainstream LGBT organizations. This could be regarded as a homonationalist event, where white Dutch

privileged people were called to support their country's values by alienating "outsiders," at this instance Russians. In this case the attention toward this Other draws the attention away from internal differences among LGBT people in the Netherlands.

Demonstrating Dutch

The anti-Putin event was a political critique against Russian institutionalized homophobia. The potential for change was central, urging for a transformation of the system to allow for more sexual freedom. The pro-Black Pete event, however, did not aim for a change or disruption of structures. Rather, it was an expression of frustration in reaction to pleads for change, hence it was a protest *against* change. Labeling these events as liberalism versus conservatism, or as a plea for modernization against a desperate attempt to preserve traditions, would be overlooking the complexities of these debates. A transnational analysis allows for a more in-depth perspective that points to the multiple linkages and relations within this supposed dichotomy. The anti-Putin demonstration was a critique against change, whereas the proposed Russian homophobic laws were presented as a backlash in LGBT rights and sexual freedom. The system that allows same-sex couples to live as legal equals to heterosexuals in the Netherlands is here framed as central to Dutch national identity and as crucial in the quest for universal gay rights. This homonormativity becomes fetishized as an ahistorical marker of Dutch national subjectivity, sanctifying this as a tradition without acknowledging the exclusive politics of this homonationalism, in much the same way the Black Pete discussion leaves no room for critical voices. It has to be noted that the stakes in both events were mostly different, and that the direction of protest varied. In contrast to the pro-Black Pete demonstration, the anti-Putin event in Amsterdam was not an internal debate, nor did it start off a discussion about the role of the COC in LGBT discourse and politics. Rather, media coverage subscribed to the anti-Putin sentiment and portrayed this demonstration as cheerful. Moreover, due to the absence of critical voices, the image was presented as if it was a homogeneous

representation, firstly of the entire gay community, secondly of Dutch values, and thirdly of naturalized universal rights. Such a particular reception leaves hardly any room to question these naturalizing processes. Challenging this demonstration of Dutchness supposedly critiques “Dutch” identity, and by critiquing this one is not truly Dutch in the first place. The difference in response from media and politics reveals the contested role of “tradition” in this narrative, a notion which is both central to, and imagined as beyond narratives of progress. However, in the Black Pete discussion, language of “racelessness” and progress is a reiteration of the justification of the blackface helper. The centrality of these arguments opposes racism to Dutch national identity, without taking into account the historical, post-colonial, and racial relations. A transnational critique shows that these statements cannot but affirm the centrality of racism and the impossibility of embedding awareness of racism in Dutch nationalist politics. In order to understand these complicated intersections in Dutch national imaginings, a critical framework has yet to be established within the country. Here tools and insights from transnational feminism and queer of color critique might enable us to reflect on these issues without reiterating a dichotomy between US and European feminist causes.

Analyzing these events together shows how they both benefited from a construction of Dutch national identity and an exaltation of national subjectivity in relation to an immigrant figure. To both events, the role of the imagined Other is central. Although President Putin is not an immigrant, he represents the feared foreign influences that threaten Dutch sovereignty. This is similar to Thobani’s figure of the immigrant as a point of concern and possible disruption of national superiority. In the case of the pro-Black Pete demonstration, Verene Shepherd was directly addressed as a source from outside. Similarly, Quinsy Gario is considered non-Dutch and is referred to as an immigrant, thereby disregarding the structural forces of racism within the Netherlands. Both the anti-Putin demonstration and the initiative to maintain Black Pete are built around the figure of the Other, the Immigrant, and it is in relation to this Other that an exalted Dutch national subject is constructed. No longer is the Other seen as biologically different, but rather cultural and ethnic differences are emphasized, creating a form of cultural racism in

both protests. The particular type of Dutchness that is shown in these demonstrations is not ahistorical or “traditional.” Rather, it is embedded in local and global processes of Europeanization, international LGBT rights movements, and cultural racism. This creates a nationalism that is emancipated, while at the same time traditionally “gay-tolerant” and “fond” of Black Pete. These are structures that remain untouched in Dutch political and public discourse. Here the exaltation of a Dutch national subject is reinforced as inherently beyond racism, sexism, and homophobia. Most importantly, it is progressive. In both cases, voices of non-white Dutch people are absent due to the framing of Dutch national citizenship as white, whereas non-white Dutch people are referred to as non-citizens without comprehension of the context. This analysis shows how the demonstrated Dutchness in these events is intrinsically dependent on the Other and its exclusion. What this analyses tells us is that the Netherlands might not be as progressive and liberal as the nationalist master narrative would like us to imagine.

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BIOGRAPHY

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