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Ordinary culture in a world of strangers: toward cosmopolitan cultural policy*

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ABSTRACT

The image of Zwarte Piet, as part of Dutch Sinterklaas celebrations has caused heated debate in the past decade, which has polarized tensions between the ‘Dutch’ and ‘strangers’. This article argues that the debate cannot be resolved within a framework of a methodologically nationalist cultural policy. Building on Kwame Anthony Appiah’s book Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers, I argue that a cosmopolitan framework for belonging is not only a normative but also a policy imperative. Cultural policy should recognize our shared global belonging, rather than building a national polis predicated on difference that sets us apart. However, a methodologically cosmopolitan cultural policy cannot be a blanket approach to replace or undermine national frameworks. It should embed the nation in a cosmopolitan public policy to accommodate cultural and religious diversity under globalization that has irrevocably eroded the illusion of a national unity.

‘Doe Normaal of Ga Weg!’

On 23 January 2017, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte published a letter to ‘all Dutch people’ (‘Aan alle Nederlanders’) in several major newspapers across the Netherlands.1 One paragraph of the letter immediately touched a nerve:

We feel a growing discomfort when people abuse our freedom to spoil things here, while they came to our country precisely for that very freedom. People who refuse to adapt, complain about our habits, and reject our values. [People] who attack gays, harass women in short skirts, or derogate ordinary Dutch for racists. I understand that people think if you so fundamentally reject our country, I prefer that you leave. That is the feeling I have too. Act normally or leave.2 (Rutte 2017)

This paragraph explicitly and unapologetically divides Dutch citizens and residents into two opposing groups: we, who live in ‘our country’ (‘ons land’) and they who challenge and change what is ‘normal’ in ‘our country’. This poses two immediate challenges. First, the statement is performative rather than analytical; it polarizes debate into two groups, rather than empirically making the case that society is indeed polarized. Second, it negates the complexity of a diverse society like the Netherlands, where multiple identities in terms of religion, class, ethnicity, and belonging are rife.

The divide used in the letter echoes the idea and message of the far-right; as the social and cultural values of the country are allegedly under threat because of the presence of ‘the other’, they should ‘act normally or leave’ (‘doe normaal of ga weg’). Rutte merely uses a more nuanced language. Contrary to

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his far-right contemporary Geert Wilders (and his predecessors such as Pim Fortuyn and Rita Verdonk), Rutte does not specify or define ‘the other’ to whom he refers.

On Saturday 12 November 2011 (five years prior to Rutte’s letter), the city of Dordrecht awaited the arrival of Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet. Among the many families lined up to welcome their annual visit to the Netherlands, were several protesters wearing t-shirts stating ‘Zwarte Piet is Racisme’ (‘Black Pete is Racism’) as part of a larger campaign, including Quinsy Gario and Jerry King Luther Afriyie. Despite their silent and non-violent protest, they were arrested, marking the intensification of a yearly recurrent debate on the origins, role, and place of Zwarte Piet in Dutch society. The protests were indeed not new, and neither was the controversy:

In April 2007, right-wing populist politician Rita Verdonk [Trots op Nederland], 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. (Helsloot 2012, 13)

This blunt distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ has exposed a tension in Dutch society, which has now found its way into mainstream politics, as Rutte’s letter illustrates. Though rather than taking the strict dichotomy between ‘us’ and ‘them’ as an analytical starting point, I follow Gloria Wekker in arguing that the discussion around Zwarte Piet (which I address below) in fact actively constructs a racialized distinction between ‘a white ‘us’ vs. a black ‘they’” (Wekker 2016, 143). While the debate is ostensibly about Zwarte Piet, it conceals a fissure that runs deeper. Some argue that Zwarte Piet is an ‘innocent tradition’ (‘onschuldige traditie’) or ‘celebration for children’ (‘kinderfeest’). Others argue the practice is rooted in the Dutch slave trade throughout the colonial era, because of which it is connected to the racist orthodoxy that served to justify slave trade and colonialism because, Zwarte Piet ‘has a strong resemblance to the European stereotypes of African slaves created during colonial times’ (Savage in Helsloot 2012, 10). This annual celebration has become subject to heated and polarized debates, as some people argue Zwarte Piet is a racist remnant of the Netherlands’ colonial history, while others uphold the practice as a mere innocent tradition.

Rutte’s reference to racism (‘[people who] derogate ordinary Dutch for racists’) is more striking, as it clearly alludes to the debates around Zwarte Piet, the blackface ‘helper’ of Sinterklaas (see Figure 1). In this debate, as in Mark Rutte’s letter, there seem to be only two options: you accept Zwarte Piet and as part of Dutch culture (because that is ‘normal’), or you question and criticize this practice – and thereby once Dutch culture as a whole (in which case, you might as well leave, because it means you’re ‘niet normaal’, not normal). The parties to the debate and the debate itself are heterogeneous and cannot be captured in binary terms. But the dominant framing of the debate does strongly rely on a strict dichotomy: ‘they’ who dare criticize or question Zwarte Piet become (through that very action) ‘strangers’ who allegedly aim to undermine Dutch culture. In doing so, they seem to lose their right to voice their arguments as part of public debate.

The remainder of this article is organized in five parts. First, I sketch a brief history of Zwarte Piet. Second, I discuss how debates around Zwarte Piet have polarized notions of becoming Dutch. Third, I introduce the theoretical framework through which I aim to resolve this challenge. Fourth, through Appiah’s notion of cosmopolitanism, I stress that disagreement is part of public debate, but the ways in which we disagree need further attention. Fifth, I outline how cosmopolitan is a way through which we could build a kind of cultural policy that enables (rather than polarizes) respectful public debate, bearing in mind the prevalence of disagreement. In conclusion I stress that this normative proposal is no panacea, but a necessary first step in trying to rethink the ways we can give diversity a central place in cultural policy.

At a time when critical accomplishments of progressive political thought are under pressure of conservative and reactionary forces, a mere defense of these accomplishments is pointless. We need to formulate a bold and ambitious counter-narrative that pushes us to imagine what could be possible. This article is a part of my attempt to do exactly that.
The origins and meaning of Zwarte Piet are contested. Historians, ethnologists, legal scholars, and art historians have attempted to shed light on the meaning of the practice and image of Zwarte Piet, but their findings remain inconclusive (Boer-Dirks 1993; Bal 1999; Helsloot 2008; Bijnaar and Maris 2014; Kozijn 2014). There are primarily two overlapping (though partially contradicting) ways of explaining the practice. Yet, no matter the interpretation, the use of Zwarte Piet in the Sinterklaas celebrations (more so than the latter as a whole) is an ‘invented tradition’ (Hobsbawm 1983). While the way in which Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet are celebrated in the Netherlands today is an invented tradition dating back to 1850, the figure of Sinterklaas is based on the historical figure of Saint Nicholas (270–343AD), the Bishop of Myra in the Roman Empire (in present-day Turkey). The appearance of Zwarte Piet has two common – albeit conflicting – explanations.

In one reading of its history, Jan Schenkeman (a schoolteacher from Amsterdam) invented Zwarte Piet in 1850, publishing the first children’s book on Sinterklaas in which he featured. He, thus invented the tradition 13 years before the Dutch abolished slavery in their colonies of Surinam, the Antilles, and Indonesia. Here, Zwarte Piet resembles child slaves of the era in dress, role, and accessories. Moreover, the invention of this tradition occurred shortly after the black faced ‘minstrel’ shows peaked in popularity in the U.S.A. in the 1830–1840s. Johan Helsloot (2008) argues that the book by Jan Schenkman in fact served as an attempt to revive Sinterklaas celebrations (5–6 December) in response to the increasing popularity of Christmas (24–25 December) in the region. Traditionalists, including Schenkman, aimed
to revive the rapidly folklorizing image and tradition of Sinterklaas. In order to do this, they downplayed the Sinterklaas’ earlier image as a ‘boogieman’ and passed on the role of punishment to a (black) helper. Through such imagery, Jan Schenkman (and others) managed to help revive (and creatively re-imagine) the fading tradition of Sinterklaas celebration mid-nineteenth century.

In another reading of its history, the figure of Zwarte Piet has complex roots, long preceding the popularity of Sinterklaas (Boer-Dirks 1993; Helsloot 2012). Some argue that Zwarte Piet dates back to Germanic mythological figures such as Ruprecht, Grampus, or Wodan’s Helpers (van der Pijl and Goulordava 2014, 273–275). While their evidence of a historical continuum is limited at best (Boer-Dirks 1993, 1), this remains a popular belief. Even if Zwarte Piet may have a pagan origin, its connections to the Christian Sinterklaas celebration and the rise of visits to family homes as a helper date back to the middle of the nineteenth Century (Boer-Dirks 1993, 8). In his present-day appearance, Zwarte Piet, is a blackface with a curly wig, thickly colored red lips, and a colorful outfit akin to those worn by nineteenth-century black ‘household helps’ and bears little resemblance to images of Ruprecht, Grampus, or Wodan’s Helpers.

Whatever its origins, Zwarte Piet is a blackface. Though some argue that Zwarte Piet is not a blackface, but a person with a black face (Erik van Muiswinkel, cited in Òzdil 2014, 55). And yet, they reason that the color of his face has no relation to melanin (as U.S. minstrel shows certainly did), but rather to the soot of the chimney through which Zwarte Piet descends to deliver Sinterklaas’ presents to children. Or so the story goes at least, even if it neither accounts for either his clothes (reminiscent of nineteenth-century domestic slaves), nor the fact that these clothes remain unspoilt by the very soot that colors his face. Moreover, in the Netherlands, ‘blackface’ is associated with U.S. American racism, which does not align with Dutch self-perception as an innocently color blind and non-racist society (Essed and Hoving 2014a; Wekker 2016).

**Be[com]ing Dutch: how ‘they’ challenge ‘our’ culture**

One of the crucial and defining moments in the debate around the image and meaning of Zwarte Piet emerged through a series of events and exhibitions under the banner Be[com]ing Dutch (in 2008). The exhibition at the Van Abbe Museum in Eindhoven explored the meaning of being and becoming Dutch in a twenty-first century where the impacts of (post-) colonial and labor migration could no longer be downplayed (Baetens et al. 2009, 32–48). In this context, the artists Annette Krauss and Petra Bauer set out to question the figure of Zwarte Piet through the exhibition Read the Masks: Tradition is not Given, as part of Be[com]ing Dutch. Annette Krauss is German and Petra Bauer is Swedish, which undermined their political legitimacy to publicly (if artistically) question Zwarte Piet. Their ‘otherness’ was not an issue a priori, but became one because they spoke out against Zwarte Piet. Their disagreement with Dutch culture undermined the legitimacy of their voice. As a result, their artistic intervention was met with such negative responses and threats that much of the activities were canceled by police order (Baetens et al. 2009; Helsloot 2009, 2012; van der Pijl and Goulordava 2014; Wekker 2016).

Following this exhibition at the Van Abbe Museum in 2008 and the ‘Zwarte Piet is Racism’ campaign (2010–2012, see Quinsy Gario’s arrest above), Dutch and international media widely covered the ensuing debates and generated much popular interest (see e.g. Helsloot 2012). In the aftermath of these mediatized discussions, The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD, the body that monitors the implementation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination) (United Nations 1965) started looking into the debate around Zwarte Piet:

> While the Committee understands that the tradition of Sinterklaas and Black Pete is enjoyed by many persons in Dutch society, the Committee notes with concern that the character of Black Pete is sometimes portrayed in a manner that reflects negative stereotypes of people of African descent and is experienced by many people of African descent as a vestige of slavery, which is injurious to the dignity and self-esteem of children and adults of African descent. The Committee is concerned about the discriminatory effect of such portrayals, which may convey a conception at odds with the [1965] Convention. (CERD 2015, 4)

The question underlying their inquiry is how to deal with the tensions between a nineteenth-century ideal (the nation) and a twentieth-century Convention (on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial
Discrimination, 1965) in the twenty-first century (when debates about belonging, history, and representation are magnified and decontextualized through a globalized mediascape).

The CERD Report resulted from earlier questions from the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (Shepherd et al. 2013). Their letter, written by Verene Shepherd directed questions regarding the practice of Zwarte Piet to the Dutch Government. Yet Dutch news media (maliciously) interpreted their questions as Shepherd’s attack of on the ‘tradition’ of Sinterklaas as a whole (e.g. Bloem and van Rijssingen 2013). While Shepherd, a professor of social history at the University of West Indies at Mona (Jamaica), did express her personal disagreement with the portrayal of Zwarte Piet, neither she nor the CERD argued against the Sinterklaas celebration as a whole.

Quite to the contrary, the CERD ‘recommends that the State party actively promote the elimination of those features of the character of Black Pete which reflect negative stereotypes and are experienced by many people of African descent as a vestige of slavery’ (CERD 2015, 4). Though, as many Dutch citizens perceived this recommendation as interfering with both their national identity and national sovereignty, it caused uproar among the Dutch demos. This was illustrated in an opinion poll days after the revelation of the CERD report, which revealed that a majority (83%, \( n = 20,163 \)) of respondents did not want the government to act on the CERD recommendations (Diagne 2015).

The voices of minorities have generated fear across the world as they highlight tensions resulting from cultural changes through migration and globalization (Appadurai 2006). And while it cannot and should not be ignored, this fear has created a context in which problems were increasingly framed as cultural (Beck 2004, 432). As a result, the culturalization of problems calls for cultural solutions, by recreating ‘a more comfortable national feeling, a “real” national identity, the coherence of which seemed to have been lost in decades of growing immigration and globalization’ (Boomkens 2010, 308). This resonates strongly with the discourse of Dutch neo-nationalist political parties like Trots op Nederland (‘Proud of the Netherlands’) and Partij Voor de Vrijheid (‘Freedom Party’) and is now reflected in mainstream politics. However, it clashes with the CERD’s recommendation ‘that the State party find a reasonable balance, such as a different portrayal of Black Pete and ensure respect of human dignity and human rights of all inhabitants of the State party’ (2015, 4). This raises the question of how the popular and widespread celebration of Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet (as ‘ordinary culture’) provoke challenges in what Kwame Anthony Appiah calls ‘a world of strangers’?

**Ordinary culture in a world of ‘Strangers’**

‘Ordinary culture’ derives from Raymond Williams (1958) essay *Culture is Ordinary*. In this seminal text, he discusses how the anthropological notion of culture (as everyday practice) encounters, in its ordinariness (and therefore importance), elitist notions of culture as the canonized body of works as valued by educated minorities. In its banality, the annual celebration of Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet forms one of the cornerstones of ‘ordinary’ Dutch culture. Even though the celebration exists in other parts of Europe, the importance of Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet in the Netherlands resides in its ability to connect people through their childhood memories within and between generations. While nearly every family, business, and municipality takes part in the celebration, it is neither part of the national cultural canon nor does it explicitly feature in Dutch cultural policies. While virtually all municipalities in the Netherlands host a festive arrival of Sinterklaas, private associations and companies always organise these celebrations, funded with sponsorship and with little or no public support (Helsloot 2010). The celebration, therefore, falls outwith the remit of formal cultural policy.

While the invented tradition of Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet is ordinary, its ordinariness is rooted in a different national imaginary than the one that characterizes the Netherlands today. In 1850, the Netherlands was a minor empire with colonies, which had a major stake in slave trade. It was home to the first stock exchange (founded to trade shares of the VOC, or Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie, the prototypical publicly traded multinational corporation) and ostensibly tolerant of religious diversity – particularly different strands of Christianity and Judaism. These defining features of the country were at the time uncritically celebrated, and now conveniently forgotten (Wekker 2016). The Netherlands
in the twenty-first century is however far smaller (for it has far fewer overseas territories), more diverse (for it has seen greater inward migration), and more complex than it was in the nineteenth century.

Kwame Anthony Appiah argues in his book *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (2007), that the complex and diverse societies we now live in, are to a great extent made up of strangers. The ‘strangers’, are ‘they’ who live among ‘us’. Increased diversity has irrevocably eroded the illusion of national unity. Benedict Anderson (1983) describes the nation as an imagined community that connects strangers without them having personal contact. For Anderson, strangers are fellow nationals who are not personal acquaintances. However, for Kwame Anthony Appiah (2007), strangers are those who are part of the *polis* (by virtue of being citizens or authorized residents), but who are not part of the imagined mono-cultural nation (*demos*, the people). While the nation is meant to unite Anderson’s ‘strangers’, it largely fails to give Appiah’s ‘strangers’ an equitable place. The participation of non-citizens or ‘new’ citizens in public debate and the deliberation of (racism and otherwise offensive) symbols of national identity remains nearly impossible. The resulting globalization within (as opposed to between) nation-states is what Ulrich Beck calls ‘cosmopolitanization’, which he defines as ‘internal’ globalization, or globalization *from within* the national societies (Beck 2002, 17 emphasis in original).

The nation and its historical formation through cultural politics rooted in methodological nationalism – that is, ‘the explicit or implicit assumptions about the nation-state being the power container of social processes and the national being the key-order for studying major social, economic and political processes’ (Beck 2002, 21) – cannot readily deal with the criticism of ‘strangers’. Ulrich Beck proposes the need to shift our gaze toward methodological cosmopolitanism to better understand how to deal with the inherent tension that ‘methodological nationalism is about the future implications of a nationally shared past, an imagined past; while methodological cosmopolitanism is about the present implications of a globally shared future, an imagined future’ (Beck 2002, 27).

The paradox of diversity in a *World of Strangers* is that strangers only acquire a legitimate voice once they cease to be strangers. Those who are ‘well-integrated’ are not a problem; primarily because they understand what ‘we’ are about, but also because in understanding ‘us’, they cease to be ‘them’ – or they will at least relegate ‘their own’ perspectives and grievances that clash with ‘our views’ to the background. One of the most common rejections of others’ voices in the debate regarding Zwarte Piet is that they do not have the right to criticize practices that constitute the culture they are not part of (van der Kloor 2008). It is a *Catch-22*: as long as ‘they’ are not *really* Dutch, they lack the authority to criticize Dutch culture; but once ‘they’ are *really* Dutch, they would no longer see a reason to criticize Dutch culture, for they would have internalized it, including its inherent contradictions.

Through various initiatives and interventions under the designation of multiculturalism, significant attempts have been made in the Netherlands and elsewhere to accommodate diversity of the *demos* in the *polis*. While other authors have extensively discussed the particulars of multiculturalism in the Netherlands, I am interested in the notion of power relations in public debate at a more abstract level. In this context, Ghassan Hage argues that in multicultural Australia during the late 1990s, both the rejection and embrace of diversity emanated from a position of power:

> Both the ‘racists’ and the ‘multiculturalists’ shared in the conviction that they were, in one way or another, masters of national space, and that it was up to them to decide who stayed in and who ought to be kept out of that space. (Hage 2000, 17)

Multiculturalism, while granting the ‘other’ a place within an explicitly welcoming context, emerged from a position of power. And that power was by and large retained by the majority that continued to be ‘masters of the national space’: when not aligning with dominant discourses of the national space, the opponent becomes ‘the other’. Thus, Hage argues that no matter the political approach to the legitimate place of ‘strangers’ in the national space, their position was always decided by the dominant white minority. While Hage speaks of people’s physical presence in the *polis*, I expand this question to people’s political presence in the *demos*.

While multiculturalism in its different forms and variations (including those propagated by Will Kymlicka and Bhikhu Parekh) has done much to make societies more welcoming and open (Stevenson
the mechanisms to ensure the recognition of a multiplicity of voices in their own right and not simply as a *porte-parole* of the minority they belong to, remain insufficiently effective. In trying to accommodate ‘strangers’ in the dominant culture, cultural policy debates are rooted in methodological nationalism. Attempts to accommodate ‘strangers’ relies on their ability to find a place in the multicultural fabric of the country. The question remains: How do we deal with disagreement about what it means to *become* Dutch in this context, and what implications does this have on political debate?

**Disagreement: between Aphasia and *le Différend***

Debates on *Zwarte Piet* have been on-going in the Netherlands since the 1960s, intensifying in the 1980s among black Dutch people (Wekker 2016). These debates did not become a major political issue until 2008, even if many Dutch people did not think there is an issue at all (Helsloot 2009, 80). In 2014, a Dutch-American journalist asked Mark Rutte if he thinks *Zwarte Piet* is racism:

> I simply do not agree. This is an old children’s tradition (*Sinterklaas* and *Zwarte Piet*). It is not ‘Green Pete’ or ‘Brown Pete’; it is ‘Black Pete,’ so I cannot change that. This is an old tradition, and I can only say that my friends in the Dutch Antilles, well they are very happy when they have Sinterklaas because they don’t have to paint their faces, and when I’m playing Black Pete, for days I’m trying to get off ... the stuff [greasepaint] on my face. (Rutte, cited in van der Pijl and Goulordava 2014, 265)

Rutte’s response epitomizes what Gloria Wekker refers to as White Innocence, which at once ‘contains not-knowing, but also not wanting to know’ (Wekker 2016, 17). Philomena Essed and Isabel Hoving are more forceful in their criticism of this kind of a stance, which is characteristic of the Dutch inability to see its own racism, calling it ‘*smug ignorance*: (aggressively) rejecting the possibility to know’ (2014b, 24, emphasis in original). Rutte’s statement – made at the 2014 International Nuclear Security Summit (in The Hague) – generated divisive reactions, both in the Netherlands and beyond. Because of public statements of this kind in international contexts, the debate about the racist connotations of *Zwarte Piet* became a major international concern.

The United Nations’ contributions to the debate have only strengthened the sentiment of the shrinking majority of Dutch people who feel their cultural identity is under attack:

> Citizens seeking to peacefully protest against such portrayals have been denied authorization to conduct such protests at a meaningful time and place and have been subjected to violent attacks and other forms of intimidation, which have not been adequately investigated. (CERD 2015, 4)

However, disagreement is a fundamental characteristic of democratic processes and a key element in cosmopolitan thought. Appiah (2007, 66) cites three kinds of disagreement that can create tensions across groups of people. In order to illustrate this, I have categorized the different kinds of arguments for and against the unaltered continuation of the figure of *Zwarte Piet*. Table 1 shows that the *Zwarte Piet* debate encompasses all three kinds of disagreement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kind of Disagreement</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>‘we can fail to share a vocabulary of evaluation’; which means that what some will call <em>Zwarte Piet</em> racism; others will call an innocent tradition. Or, some will argue that <em>Zwarte Piet</em> is black because he descended through the chimney to deliver presents, as a result of which he is covered with soot, while others see the invented tradition in the era of legal slavery as a remnant of then-commonplace racial hierarchy. This category of disagreement resembles, but does not equate to, the incommensurability of idiolects in Jean-François Lyotard’s (1988) notion of <em>le différend</em>, which I develop further below.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second</td>
<td>‘we can give the same vocabulary different interpretations’ which means that while most people will agree that <em>Sinterklaas</em>, including <em>Zwarte Piet</em> is intended as a children’s celebration, the historical and political interpretations of this celebration will differ. At the same time, it means that some people may argue that racism exists, but mainly in other countries such as the U.S.A. or South Africa (Essed and Hoving 2014a; Wekker 2016) – similar assumptions prevail in France (see Stoler 2011) and elsewhere.</td>
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<td>Third</td>
<td>‘we can give the same values different weights’; which means that different parties may agree that racism and tradition are important, but there may be disagreement about which value or issue takes precedence over the other (van der Pijl and Goulordava 2014; Wekker 2016).</td>
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</table>
The framing of disagreement would suggest there are two sides to the debate. While it is helpful to frame the issue as being between two opposing groups, this is also misleading – as it perpetuates the illusion of straightforward binary oppositions. First, the debate is not simply between two groups. There are nuances in the debate that cluster different people, well beyond a dualistic divide. Second, the groups of people who cluster together are not homogeneous. Some black Dutch people take no offense to the image of *Zwarte Piet* and many white Dutch people across social classes think his image should be reconsidered.

Table 1. Disagreement about arguments for and against the unaltered use of Zwarte Piet.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ways of disagreeing (Appiah 2007)</th>
<th>Arguments to keep Zwarte Piet’s current appearance</th>
<th>Arguments to change Zwarte Piet’s current appearance</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) We fail to share a vocabulary of evaluation</td>
<td>It is ‘our’ tradition and culture (Wekker 2016, 148–150) We do not perceive it to be discriminatory (cited in Helsloot 2009, 81)</td>
<td>Zwarte Piet is racism (Gario 2012)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>It is an innocent children’s celebration (Helsloot 2012, 7; Wekker 2016, 150–152) ‘They’ want to get rid of ‘our’ culture (Rita Verdonk in Helsloot [2012], 13) Recognizing the issue of racism, but Zwarte Piet is black because of the chimney, so there is no link with slavery or racism</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Outright refusal to see Zwarte Piet as racism (Wekker 2016, 153, 154)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) We give the same vocabulary different interpretations</td>
<td>Zwarte Piet is no longer a helper, but equal to Sinterklaas (Helsloot 2012, 7) Black Dutch citizens (from Suriname and the Antilles) participate in the celebrations, ergo Zwarte Piet cannot be racism (Oostindie en Balkenhol in Helsloot [2012], 7, Wekker [2016], 156, 157) ‘Dutch Exceptionalism’: The history of race in the Netherlands is different from other countries (such as the U.S.A.) and generally, the Netherlands is a ‘colour blind’ country (Özdil 2014, 50) Zwarte Piet is actually a Moor, and thus ‘Moroccan’ and thus his blackness does not amount to racism (Wekker 2016, 154) If there is a relation between Zwarte Piet and Ruprecht, Grampus, or Wodan’s Helpers, the former has no relation to slavery and thus not to racism (Wekker 2016, 155)</td>
<td>Two non-Dutch artists (Annette Krauss and Petra Bauer, see above) co-interrogate the practice of Zwarte Piet in twenty-first-century Netherlands. Their documentary challenges notions of ‘tradition’ and ‘racism’ by addressing the taboo of racism the country (Helsloot 2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) We give the same values different weights</td>
<td>Other places (i.e. the U.S.A.) are far more racist than the Netherlands (Tharoor 2014)</td>
<td>‘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”’. (Quinsy Gario in Helsloot 2012, 8)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Tradition is more important than being ‘politically correct’ (e.g. GeenStijl) Foreigners (such as artists Krauss and Bauer) have no say in Dutch matters like Zwarte Piet (Wekker 2016, 152)</td>
<td>Need for respectful dialog between all parties involved (Shepherd et al. 2013; CERD 2015)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: The author.
The disagreement on values (‘Is Zwarte Piet acceptable?’) does not arise from the fact that those disagreeing are ‘strangers’; it is because people as a whole disagree on things. Such disagreement is, as Jean-François Lyotard argues, a basic constituent of language. The issue with language lies in the fact that le différend (as distinct from what is merely différent) is a case of conflict between (at least) two parties, that cannot be resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments (Lyotard 1988; xi). Le différend is a tension that cannot be resolved. Disagreement about Zwarte Piet is not rooted in the absence of a ‘discourse to regulate’ disagreement (Lyotard 1988, xii), for the notions of ‘tradition’ or ‘racism’ are known to all parties. Much like the Dutch disagree on a range of things, strangers do too. This raises the question of how to debate sensitive issues in diverse societies.

The mere fact that most Dutch do not see Zwarte Piet as racism (for it certainly is not only racism), John Helsloot argues, is a sign of aphasia (2012, 6). He builds on the work of Ann Laura Stoler, who argues that public debates about the legacy of colonial relations are not only a case of collective amnesia, ‘white innocence’ (Wekker 2016), or ‘smug ignorance’ (Essed and Hoving 2014b) but also aphasia. This concept ‘describes a difficulty retrieving both conceptual and lexical vocabularies and, most important, a difficulty comprehending what is spoken’ (Stoler 2011, 125). Disagreement in this context is rooted in le différend, but this incommensurability of perspectives is in fact created by aphasia, and not simply a given (Stoler 2011, 154). This most explicitly occurs when discussing the origin of Zwarte Piet’s blackness: if one holds on to the belief that he is black because of the chimney’s soot, there is no need to confront racism or slavery. Zwarte Piet, after all is not black but merely dirty. This means that some people do not acknowledge the ground on which the appearance of Zwarte Piet is contested. Similarly, those who see his appearance as a racist trope, may simply be unable to accept the explanation that his face is black from soot. As argued when discussing multiculturalism above, the central challenge of dealing with disagreement in diverse societies is how to deal with power.

Cosmopolitanism does not mean that we all need to agree; on the contrary. It simply means that we need to find a way to discuss how and why we disagree beyond framing the debate as an issue between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Yet Lyotard’s différend points out that there are many instances where disagreement does not result from the lack of a shared vocabulary, but the incommensurability of disparate vocabularies. In such a case, a cosmopolitan approach to cultural policy becomes a more complex but necessary possibility. It requires a commitment to accommodate a variety of both standpoints and worldviews, which is increasingly imperative given the resurgence of exclusionary identity politics (particularly through Brexit in the U.K. and the election of Donald Trump in the U.S.A., but also elsewhere).

**Cosmopolitan cultural policy**

Cultural policy, as a branch of public policy, delineates what governments decide to do or not to do (Dye 2008). In this capacity, policy defines the extent and ways in which states engage in cultural life. Rather than confining the scope of cultural policy discussed here to explicit texts and interventions, it comprises both what is or isn’t done and how that balance is negotiated through electoral politics and public debate. At face value, its aims have been to ensure access to and excellence of cultural life. On a meta-level, the aim of cultural policy has been to create and reinforce congruence between nationhood and statehood, where the (imagined) unity of the former serves to legitimize the power of the latter. Yet, this overlap is not a given, as it is constructed and reinforced by symbols (such as flags and currencies) and shared stories (through historical events and figures).

The purpose of this construction of a shared sense of belonging is to reinforce the idea of a shared political (and thus public) sphere (McGuigan 1996). The artificial conjunction of nation and state builds on the assumption of difference from neighbouring states; as Ulrich Beck argues, ‘nationalism denies the otherness of others internally, while producing and reifying it externally’ (2004, 437), where the cultural policy is the prime mechanism to reify this. The limitations of multicultural policies are rooted in the methodologically nationalist basis of cultural policy. Cultural policy, here used as the public deliberation of identity and meaning in the public sphere, not merely the policy framework for public support for
the arts (McGuigan 1996, 1), has served to both create and strengthen an imagined community (the nation) in order to legitimize the power of the governmental apparatus (the state).

Changing demographics, through migration, postcolonial struggle, and globalized labor markets have created a public sphere defined by diversity. Despite attempts to accommodate the latter, cultural policy has not confronted the decreased congruence between nation and state. Instead, the approaches that are currently dominant are in direct opposition. On the one hand, there is the multicultural approach, which accommodates diversity within the nation-state. While well-intended, it seemingly downplays most people’s need for some form of national belonging and exacerbates the fear vis-à-vis strangers (as a result of which neo-nationalist reactionary politics have emerged since the 1990s (Stoler 2011, 140). In doing so, it alienates the dominant majority, even if they are still politically dominant (e.g. Appadurai 2006), and it has introduced reactionary extremist ideas to the political mainstream (Akkerman, de Lange, and Rooduijn 2016). On the other hand, neo-nationalism propagates the reclamation of national identity and proposes assimilation of ‘strangers’ to become ‘full’ members of the nation-state. This often includes denouncing their heritage, faith, and history; reiterating the production of ‘strangers’. In order to be accepted, minorities need to adopt the codes and customs of the majority. This, in turn, alienates ethnic and religious minorities in spite of their increasing political power.

The Zwarte Piet debate in the Netherlands has unveiled that ‘minoritized’ citizens, with full authorized membership of the state and its democratic structures, are systematically excluded from some political debates, yet ostensibly welcomed as political agents in society. While ‘they’ can speak, ‘they’ should not challenge ‘our’ culture. In this context, the largely informal (because unwritten and not state-sanctioned) policies governing the celebration of Sinterklaas, mean that ‘strangers’ who feel hurt by the appearance of Zwarte Piet are unable to express this. For their very critique of Zwarte Piet undermines their recognition as full political subjects, even if they are fully authorized citizens or residents. The methodological nationalism that drives cultural policy and identity politics cannot help transcend the opposition of ‘us’ vs. ‘them’. Therefore, I argue cultural policy needs rethinking through methodological cosmopolitanism.

Cosmopolitanism, in the way I use the term here, is a political philosophy of social justice. It provides a framework to think of fellow humans as those with whom we are sharing and negotiation our terms of identity. I follow Appiah’s definition of cosmopolitanism by means of two intertwined meanings of the word. The first one builds on ‘the idea that we have obligations to others, obligations that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kind, or even the more formal ties of a shared citizenship’. The second is that we take seriously the value not just of human life but of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance (2007, xiii).

I follow Seyla Benhabib in her contention that ‘a cosmopolitan theory of justice cannot be restricted to schemes of just distribution on a global scale, but must also incorporate a vision of just membership’ (Benhabib 2004, 3, emphasis in original). While the balance of rights between ‘aliens, residents, and citizens’ (as Benhabib’s book title suggests) is a key concern of political theory and should feature more prominently in cultural policy debates, here, my concern is more narrow. The issue I am addressing is that of different levels of membership among citizens and ‘authorised’ residents within the demos – and the lack of a proper political voice some of these ‘legitimate’ members of the polis have, in the Zwarte Piet debate and, mutatis mutandis, more generally.

Thus, the challenge is: how to transgress the methodologically nationalist meta-narrative of cultural policy in a way that would help respect and value strangers’ ideas into public debate? The fact that the ‘imagined’ communities (Anderson 1983) in which we virtually live extend well beyond the territorial borders of countries (Appadurai 1996, 2006), extends this issue. Benhabib proposes a ‘metanorm’ that presupposes two principles in response to this:

Universal respect means that we recognize the rights of all beings capable of speech and action to be participants in the moral conversation; the principle of egalitarian reciprocity, interpreted within the confines of discourse ethics, stipulates that in discourses each should have the same rights to various speech acts, to initiate new topics, and to ask for justification of the presuppositions of the conversations. (Benhabib 2004, 13, emphasis in original)
Benhabib’s ‘metanorm’ provides a foundational basis on which we can have conversations among all in habitations of the *demos*, including ‘strangers’. Practically, this would help to maintain national identity and affiliation, but also to construct a cosmopolitan foundation. This would allow national ‘traditions’ to continue in due dialog with the ideas and cultures of strangers. I do not propagate cultural relativism, but grounded cosmopolitanism, where the focus is not on opposing ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ but to explore the ways in which ‘we’ can better recognize and deal with the fact of living together.

In spite of cosmopolitanism’s universalist ambitions, Thomas Pogge (1992) argues that it does not undermine the possibility and importance of local affiliations. David Held (2010, 15) points out that it is rather a way to setting limits to what such local affiliations can mean and do. Thus, cosmopolitanism calls for a politics of pluralism and ethics that builds on the idea that ‘no local loyalty can ever justify that each human being has responsibilities to every other’ (Appiah 2007, xiv, emphasis added). To put this into practice, policies need to embody these ideas.

However, Appiah reminds us that ‘the real challenge to cosmopolitanism isn’t the belief that other people don’t matter at all; it’s the belief that they don’t matter very much’ (2007, 153). This translates to a dismissal of their opinions and grievances as less important: after all, the Dutch could argue it is ‘our’ tradition in ‘our’ country; ‘strangers’ may like it or not, but their opinion can never force us to change what ‘we’ think or do. Cosmopolitanism, in this context, thus, means creating a global framework for thinking and action in relation to all other humans – as well as our planetary environment (Stevenson 2003; Duxbury, Kangas, and De Beukelaer 2017; Hage 2017). This serves to create an equitable debate over the grievances of different individuals and groups across societies.

Ulrich Beck points out that ‘it is impossible to imagine a viable, realistic cosmopolitanism outside the context in which universalism, relativism, nationalism, and ethnicism are dominant strategies’ (2004, 438). He clarifies that:

As for nationalism, a realistic cosmopolitan will take its continuing existence as a given but will work to develop cosmopolitan variations on the nation-state, national society, and patriotism. Without the stability that comes with national organization and feeling, cosmopolitanism can lose itself in an idealist neverland. (Beck 2004, 432)

I follow Beck in pointing out that cosmopolitanism – at least in practice – needs political units smaller than the world as a whole. But such an approach should rest on a moral cosmopolitanism that is truly global in scope. The approach to cultural policy that I propose here is organized at state level, but thereby builds on a methodologically cosmopolitan approach to expression, belonging, and justice.

A methodologically cosmopolitan cultural policy would not be a panacea for the disagreements and conflicts that arise from diversity; and neither should it be. Disagreement between people exists, irrespective of the degree of cultural, ethnic, or religious diversity of that society. What a methodologically cosmopolitan cultural policy could help advance is a society where all voices count; and no one becomes the excluded ‘other’ because of their disagreement with dominant discourses and authorized readings of heritage and history. In order to get to this stage, we need to build further respect for those who see things differently (Appiah 2007, 145, 146). This means not simply allowing ‘strangers’ to think differently, but respecting them in having different values and thoughts.

Cosmopolitan cultural policy would phrase and approach policy debates through methodological cosmopolitanism, as opposed to methodological nationalism, to foster greater awareness of global connections and empathy with strangers. Within a national context, the simplest, yet most far-reaching, action would be to focus more on similarity and less on difference in thinking and framing identity within the state – as well as between states.

**Conclusions: beyond Zwarte Piet?**

The effectiveness of cosmopolitan cultural policy is predicated on the idea that we could live together through what humans have in common, rather than through what sets us apart. Even so, it would not eliminate disagreement or even difference: ‘cosmopolitans suppose that all cultures have enough overlap in their vocabulary of values to begin a conversation. But they don’t suppose, like some universalists,
that we could all come to agreement if only we had the same vocabulary’ (Appiah 2007, 57). Indeed, a cosmopolitan cultural policy does not have the purpose to create a homogenous cultural practice, but is meant to create a context in which we can get mutually acquainted.

This essay is not simply about Zwarte Piet. It is about the need to find ways to negotiate citizenship, belonging, and justice in a world where many of our friends, colleagues, neighbors, and fellow citizens are now ‘strangers’ (as Appiah argues). We should not get rid of any sense of national identity or pride, but we can no longer pretend to be internally homogenous, or simply tolerate ‘strangers’, because ‘a realistic cosmopolitanism would include … an affirmation of the other as both different and the same’ (Beck 2004, 439). We need cultural policy – as public debate about belonging – to come to terms with the remnants of the past that taint relations today.

National governments (and particularly those controlled by reactionary nationalists) are unlikely to fully embrace cosmopolitan cultural policies and should not be forced to do so. For, indeed, ‘you can’t have any respect for human diversity and expect everyone to become cosmopolitan’ (Appiah 2007, xviii). Nonetheless, thinking about culture and belonging based on a cosmopolitan ethics is an imperative in the age of diversity, not only normatively through political philosophy (e.g. Appiah) and empirically through sociology (e.g. Beck), but also through the pragmatics of public policy. Given the lack of attention to translating normative and evaluative cosmopolitan ideas into policy, this article attempts to provide a starting point for further debate, rather than a prescriptive explanation of how to implement a methodologically cosmopolitan cultural policy.

Notes

1. This letter should be read both in the context of the influx of refugees into Europe (particularly following the ongoing war in Syria, but also the rise of insurgenacies and famine across the Sahel) and the Dutch general election of 15 March 2017.

2. ‘We voelen een groeiend ongemak wanneer mensen onze vrijheid misbruiken om hier de boel te verstieren, terwijl ze juist naar ons land zijn gekomen voor die vrijheid. Mensen die zich niet willen aanpassen, afgeven op onze gewoontes en onze waarden afwijzen. Die homo’s lastigvallen, vrouwen in korte rokjes uitjouwen of gewone Nederlanders uitmaken voor racisten. Ik begrijp heel goed dat mensen denken: als je ons land zo fundamenteel afwijst, heb ik liever dat je weggaat. Dat gevoel heb ik namelijk ook. Doe normaal of ga weg.’


4. Neo-nationalism is connected to the rise of the ‘new right’ as a political movement across Europe that challenges both supra-national European Union politics and intra-national tensions between different perspectives on migration and diversity (see e.g. Gingrich 2006; Gingrich and Banks 2006).

5. Because they would become ‘like us’ and therefore ‘act normally’, as Mark Rutte articulates in his 2017 letter – see Introduction.

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