Introduction

Every year in mid-November, the Netherlands begins its extended round of Christmas season festivities which, unlike in many countries, peak not on 25 December but on 5 December, or *Sinterklaas* – Saint Nicholas' Eve. In cities and towns across the country and via broadcasts on national television, the Dutch equivalent of Santa Claus makes his arrival (*intocht*), coming not from the North Pole by sleigh but from Spain by boat. He is publicly welcomed by millions of spectators who typically brave inclement weather to watch him disembark from his steamboat, mount his white horse, and begin his procession through the streets. This national ritual captivates not only children and their parents but seemingly much of Dutch society, whose citizens treasure fond memories of the seasonal fun bookended by the local arrival ceremonies and the evening of the fifth, a family occasion when children receive presents from Sinterklaas. Even more beloved than Sinterklaas himself, an austere, almost larger-than-life elderly man dressed more like the Pope than the jolly Santa familiar in English-speaking countries, are the many helpers that make up his entourage: the clownishly boisterous group of men who collectively go by the name of 'Zwarte Piet', Black Piet. And every year, Zwarte Piet grows more controversial than before for the racist and colonial connotations he holds for a substantial minority of people in the Netherlands, once the heart of an overseas empire and now a postcolonial, multicultural society transformed by migration, much of it from former colonies.

Although commonly described as if its contours were age-old, like many European traditions Sinterklaas as celebrated today has only acquired its most recognizable aspects since the mid-nineteenth century, a time when the Netherlands had yet to abolish slavery in its colonies.[1] While Zwarte Piet is officially proclaimed to be a Moor dressed in Renaissance attire, his role and

---

[1] John Helsloot, 'De strijd om Zwarte Piet', in Isabel Hoving, Hester Dibbets, and Marlou Schrover (eds.), *Cultuur en migratie in Nederland: Veranderingen van het alledaagse 1950–2000* (The Hague, 2005), 249–71; John Helsloot, 'Zwarte Piet and Cultural Aphasia in the Netherlands', *Quotidian: Journal for the Study of Everyday Life*, 3 (2012), 1–20; Joy L. Smith, 'The Dutch Carnivalesque: Blackface, Play and Zwarte Piet', *Thamyris/Intersecting*, 27 (2014), 219–38.

1

2   Introduction

Figure I.1 Sinterklaas *intocht* featuring 'Black Piets' (*Zwarte Pieten*),
Amsterdam, November 2014.
Photograph by Bernhard Rieger.

appearance bring forth connotations of slavery and the blackface traditions once
widely found in many Western societies scarred by racial inequality. Black Piet's
die-hard defenders – of which there are millions – deny that he is black because
he is or once was a slave from the West Indies, where the Netherlands ruled
plantation colonies such as Dutch Guiana (now Suriname) and islands in the
Antilles (West Indies) for centuries. Arguments that Piet's blackness comes from
having entered Dutch homes through the chimney to deliver children's presents
are dismissed by critics, many but not all of whom are of Afro-Surinamese or
Antillean origin. For them, the fact that Piet's clothing always remained improb-
ably spotless after the chimneys turned his face and hands black, together with
physical features such as coarse curly hair and exaggeratedly large red lips
(donned by an almost exclusively white band of performers for the occasion) are
clear evidence that the character is a holdover from a racist colonial order.

   In a nation where many still suffer the consequences of discrimination and
cultural misunderstanding today, members of minority groups often feel that
Black Piet's status as Sinterklaas' menial servant and his characteristically

Figure I.2 Protest logo against *Zwarte Piet* posted on YouTube, November 2014. Its wording approximately translates as 'Black Piet doesn't belong, Black Piet shouldn't be, Black Piet is wrong, Black Piet symbol of colonialism'.

childish behaviour render him part of a contemptible heritage of racial stereotypes that should be abandoned. Other Dutch, mainly white, refuse to recognize Zwarte Piet's racist aspects and remain in thrall to a popular holiday icon, ardently rejecting requests even for slight adaptations to his persona let alone the demand that he be cut out of the festivities. While Zwarte Piet generated a low-level degree of controversy off and on for decades, debates and demonstrations surrounding the November *intocht* processions have grown far more vocal and organized since 2011, when several black performance artists were arrested for wearing T-shirts that read 'Zwarte Piet is racisme'. By 2014, there had been inconclusive judicial inquiries, numerous demonstrations and

counter-demonstrations, polarized Facebook campaigns, more arrests, and
Sunny Bergman's critical documentary entitled *Zwart als Roet* (*Black as
Soot*, also released as *Our Colonial Hangover*).[2] Like much else, these attacks
on the tradition and retaliations by its adherents demonstrate that cultures of
empire not only remain alive in Europe; the fight over their meanings and
survival also suggests that there is no end in sight to the halting process of
coming to terms with them.

Heated discussions among the Dutch about what their nation's most promi-
nent holiday festivities mean and whether they should be changed in a multi-
cultural society have become as ritualized as the tradition now under severe
attack. Through Zwarte Piet, festival organizers, the media, activists, and the
general public perform yet another scene from the postcolonial drama of
Europe after Empire, a story that has long outlasted formal decolonization.
Having conceded the most treasured parts of its empire in the East Indies when
Indonesia's independence was finally recognized in 1949 and agreed to
Suriname's in 1975, decades later the Kingdom of the Netherlands still includes
six small Antillean islands as part of its overall territory. Angry challenges to
and strident defences of Zwarte Piet make the Netherlands one of a number of
Western European nations that have experienced mass migration from their
overseas dependencies and ex-colonies but have yet to work through their
colonial histories, either with respect to their past empires' effects on far-
away lands or their consequences at home in the early twenty-first century.
Their extended domestic decolonization processes remain as incomplete as
their grappling with postcolonialism's consequences in the form of multicul-
tural societies and conflicted imperial memories.

Decolonization was never merely a chronologically and politically con-
tained 'transfer of power' from rule by Europeans to independence as new
Asian, African, and Caribbean nations after 1945. It had a pre-history stretch-
ing back though decades of rising contestation and lacked tidy closure when
some flags were lowered and others raised at staged independence ceremonies.
Just as important, it involved (ex-) colonizers and the (ex-) colonized alike at

---

[2] 'Betrogers tegen racisme opgepakt', *Het Parool* (Amsterdam), 14 November 2011; 'Een
T-shirt is niet bedreigend', *AD/De Dordtenaar* (Dordrecht), 19 November 2011; Patrick
Meershoek, 'Zwarte Piet verpest voor velen het feest', *Het Parool*, 15 November 2011;
Hassan Bahara, 'Kijk maar naar zijn dommige gedrag; is Zwarte Piet racisme?', *De Groene
Amsterdammer*, 28 November 2012; Eberhard van der Laan, 'Zwarte Piet maakt problemen en
lost ze op', *nrc.next* (Amsterdam), 1 November 2013; 'Koloniale kater doet imago van
Nederland weinig goed', *Het Parool*, 15 November 2014; 'Dit is het resultaat van effectief
beleid', *nrc.next*, 17 November 2014; 'Een gezellige dag met een zwart rondje', *De Volkskrant*
(Amsterdam), 17 November 2014; Patrick Meershoek, 'Amsterdam liet zien hoe het wel
moet', *Het Parool*, 17 November 2014; www.facebook.com/Zwartepietniet, accessed
17 November 2014. Sunny Bergman's *Zwart als Roet* (alternatively, *Our Colonial
Hangover*) can be viewed on www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVahza47h7c, accessed
15 January 2015.

every turn, whether the actors in question were situated in the empire, in Europe, or having undertaken journeys bridging metropolitan and colonial worlds. Not only were former colonies remade as a result of the path to decolonization: so too was Western Europe, both nationally as well as on local and international levels, which needed to decolonize itself.[3]

New times invited not only new politics but also new ways of thinking about identities – national, group, and individual – and their place in the world. While the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o called on Africans to embark upon 'decolonising the mind' and their literary genres, Congolese nationalist Thomas Kanza described the 'mental decolonization' that gradually took root among the Congolese in the last years before they achieved formal independence from Belgium. The same could not be said for Belgians wedded to the colonial power structure that had transformed their nation from one of the smallest in Europe, geographically surrounded by far more powerful German and French states, into *la plus grande Belgique*, 'Greater Belgium'. Among Belgian policymakers together with army officers and colonial officials long based in Central Africa, Kanza observed the 'total absence of any mental decolonization' whatsoever even after Congo's independence at the end of June 1960.[4] As will be examined further in this book, prominent Belgians' failure to adapt their thinking and behaviour to a new order did much to sow the seeds of the neocolonial tragedies that afflicted the Congolese, some immediately following their nominal decolonization, others long afterwards.

Decolonization involved not just relinquishing formal control over territory but also coming to terms with the loss of the colonial order that had benefitted many Europeans and grappling with colonialism's far-reaching implications. 'For the former colony, decolonization is a dialogue with the colonial past, and not a simple dismantling of colonial habits and modes of life', Arjun Appadurai has argued. This was equally true for former colonizing countries, where no aspect of the process proved at all simple.[5] As the Zwarte Piet saga still being played out in the Netherlands shows, to this day discussions about the colonial and racial underpinnings of European culture are often entered into reluctantly, if at all, and could take more than a generation to develop significant momentum. Europe's transition from the colonial to the postcolonial era has involved considerable time lags between formal endings of empires and the process of reckoning with their implications and legacies. A Europe that is postcolonial in

[3] Robert J.C. Young, 'The Postcolonial Condition', in Dan Stone (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Postwar European History* (Oxford, 2012), 605.
[4] Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Nairobi, 1986); Thomas Kanza, *Conflict in the Congo: The Rise and Fall of Lumumba* (Harmondsworth, 1972), 41, 220.
[5] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, 1996), 89.

a literal, temporal sense needs to be distinguished from a Europe that has
examined this past in depth and 'undo[ne] the ideological heritage of coloni-
alism', as postcolonial theory insists it must.[6] This tortuous aftermath of empire
is far from over, with celebrations of empire still competing with denunciations
and wilful oblivion.[7] On countless occasions, returns to the past bear stronger
resemblance to dialogues of the deaf than to meaningful efforts to arrive at
informed understandings either of history or of different groups' relationships
to it. And for much of the time, silence prevails over dialogue in any form.

* * *

Europe after Empire explores central aspects of the extended histories and
present-day ramifications of decolonization with an emphasis on its metro-
politan dimensions, taking on board the two largest European imperial
powers, Britain and France, together with three smaller counterparts, the
Netherlands, Belgium, and Portugal. Its scope spans the larger decolonization
processes examined in Part I that lay the ground for Part II, which explores the
histories of inward and return migration from former empires that have been
responsible to a considerable degree for these nations' current ethnic and
cultural diversity. Just as 'English society understood race through colonial-
ism and its effects', as Sandhya Shukla notes, the same was true elsewhere in
Europe where minority groups of colonial origins settled.[8] More than any
other factor, their presence gave colonial history and its lasting impact new
forms of visibility in postcolonial times, as metropolitan societies grappled
with the implications of diversity and minorities demanded recognition for an
overseas past that belonged not simply to them but to the nation at large.[9]
'Politically, socially and intellectually, the anti-colonial fight against inequal-
ity, against racism, against cultural hierarchy, has been fought within Europe
in the postcolonial era by the subaltern subjects of the developing world who
had migrated there', Robert Young summarizes.[10] Taken together, changes
spanning the political to the demographic and cultural since 1945 have
influenced how former empires have been remembered and forgotten in
Europe, a topic that Part III examines.

As such, this project takes its place within an interdisciplinary scholarship
that has emerged since the early 1990s and is commonly termed the 'new

[6] Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Malden, MA, 2001), 65;
   Young, 'Postcolonial Condition'.
[7] Bill Schwarz, 'Actually Existing Postcolonialism', *Radical Philosophy*, 104 (2000), 17.
[8] Sandhya Shukla, *India Abroad: Diasporic Cultures of Postwar America and England*
   (Princeton, 2003), 62.
[9] Gert Oostindie, *Postcolonial Netherlands: Sixty-Five Years of Forgetting, Commemorating,
   Silencing* (Amsterdam, 2011), 160.
[10] Young, 'Postcolonial Condition', 607.

imperial history'.[11] Historians and academics in related disciplines, particu-
larly literary studies and anthropology, rejected conventional approaches to the
study of European countries that largely ignored their imperial histories. By
and large, empire had long been abandoned to methodologically traditional
academics interested mainly in political, military, and economic questions and
whose geographies of analysis were centred on overseas arenas in combination
with the decision-making corridors of power in London, Paris, The Hague,
Brussels, and Lisbon. Researchers engaged in the 'new imperial history' or
'imperial turn', by contrast, have united 'home' and 'away' into a single
conceptual category and insisted upon moving beyond a restricted, nation-
bound approach to modern Western Europe.[12] Imperialism and the cultures and
visions that grew from it did not solely pertain to the realm of high politics, nor
were they contained on far-off continents or limited to the minority of
Europeans who lived and worked in the colonies. Empires had deeply influ-
enced everyday society and culture across Britain (the example that has
received by far the most scholarly attention), the French 'hexagon' (as
France has often been called on account of its approximate shape when seen
on maps of Europe), and their neighbours with colonies of their own. European
nations and their overseas possessions were indivisible, with cultures, prac-
tices, material objects, and ideas travelling in multiple directions, their traces
scattered throughout European popular and elite cultures, consumer goods,
literature, religious life, political formations, and ideological terrains. People
were equally mobile, including not simply Europeans who travelled outwards
but the small numbers of Asians, Africans, West Indians, and others who made

---

[11] Of especial importance in galvanizing subsequent work was Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick
      Cooper, 'Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda', in Ann Laura Stoler
      and Frederick Cooper (eds.), *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*
      (Berkeley, 1997), 1–56. Scholars concerned with Britain and its empire have been the most
      prolific to date. Within this profusion of work, see Stephen Howe (ed.), *The New Imperial
      Histories Reader* (London, 2010); Kathleen Wilson (ed.), *A New Imperial History: Culture,
      Identity, and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660–1840* (Cambridge, 2004); Catherine
      Hall (ed.), *Cultures of Empire: A Reader: Colonizers in Britain and the Empire in the Nineteenth
      and Twentieth Centuries* (Manchester, 2000); Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose (eds.), *At Home
      with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World* (Cambridge, 2006); Andrew
      Thompson (ed.), *Britain's Experience of Empire in the Twentieth Century, Oxford History of the
      British Empire Companion Series* (Oxford, 2012). John M. MacKenzie has played a particularly
      important role in generating new approaches to British imperial culture by launching and
      overseeing the 'Studies in Imperialism' series of monographs and edited collections published
      by Manchester University Press (a series now edited by Andrew Thompson). Two of its many
      titles include John M. MacKenzie (ed.), *Imperialism and Popular Culture* (Manchester, 1986),
      and John M. MacKenzie (ed.), *European Empires and the People: Popular Responses to
      Imperialism in France, Britain, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and Italy* (Manchester,
      2011), the latter being a promising example of Britain now being placed in comparative
      perspective.
[12] Antoinette Burton (ed.), *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and through the Nation*
      (Durham, 2003).

their way to Europe's capital cities, port communities, universities, and other sites of early colonial settlement. Empire's everyday, mundane presence at home was the most prominent sign of Europe's deep global entanglements, some imperial, others not. Metropolitan/colonial divides were thereby dissolved in a growing body of academic work, despite the ongoing doubts of some historians about empires' place at the heart of European life and European identities, both personal and national.

Many authors working within this field looked towards postcolonial, feminist, and literary theory and critical approaches to race, power relations, and cultural hybridity, drawing inspiration from scholars like Edward Said and Robert Young along with interpretations penned during the decolonization era by Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi, and other authors whose arguments have since become canonical.[13] Other scholars situated within established lines of research and interpretation remained sceptical, however, and at times were openly resistant (if not outright hostile) to innovative studies and modes of analysis that they condemned as empirically deficient, underhistoricized, obtuse, and laden with academic jargon, or simply ignored these new approaches altogether.[14]

Despite the inevitable presence of detractors, since its inception the 'imperial turn' has inspired a growing number of scholars, myself included. Many of its pioneering figures now play leading academic roles in universities in the United States, Britain, and in other scholarly communities in the English-speaking world and (albeit to a much lesser extent) on continental Europe. Since the 1990s, the field has acquired favoured themes and habits of interpretation of its own. If its proponents have indeed succeeded (and some would deny that they have) in gaining a high level of recognition for their struggle to rethink European national histories and present-day circumstances with reference to imperial 'exteriors', the chronological and geographical scope of their work nevertheless remains decidedly uneven.

---

[13] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978); Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, 1993); Young, *Postcolonialism*; Barbara Bush, *Imperialism and Postcolonialism* (London, 2014); Dane Kennedy, 'Imperial History and Post-Colonial Theory', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 24:3 (1996), 345–63; Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, translated by Charles Lam Markmann (New York, 1967; original French edition published Paris, 1952); Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, translated by Constance Farrington (London, 1990; original French edition published Paris, 1961); Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, translated by Howard Greenfeld (Boston, 1991; original French edition published Paris, 1957); Albert Memmi, *Decolonization and the Decolonized*, translated by Robert Bononno (Minneapolis, 2006; original French edition published Paris, 2004).

[14] See Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (Oxford, 2004); Bernard Porter, 'Further Thoughts on Imperial Absent-Mindedness', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 36:1 (2008), 101–17; John M. MacKenzie, '"Comfort" and Conviction: A Response to Bernard Porter', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 36:4 (2008), 659–68.

Historical research informed by these approaches on Britain and its former empire, for example, most commonly concentrates on the rise, consolidation, and heyday of imperial power between the eighteenth and early twentieth centuries. Far less work has been done to explore imperial declines and falls since the 1930s and particularly after 1945, and while the decolonization era and its aftermath now receive more attention than in the mid-2000s an imbalance nonetheless continues.[15] If Europe was 'literally the creation of the Third World' via the colonialism that long defined it, as the French Martinican-born revolutionary thinker Frantz Fanon memorably phrased it in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), much remains to be done to arrive at a full understanding of how Europe was *re-created* once its territorial expanse receded.[16] This re-creation was the product of innumerable changes occurring in the colonies, back in Europe, and via accelerating flows of peoples, practices, and ideas between them, processes not confined to (ex-) metropolitan and (ex-) colonial interactions but deeply shaped by wider global transformations. Not least were the effects of the Second World War and later the Cold War as Western Europe confronted a changed world order dominated by the United States and the Soviet Union that saw colonies come under new forms of governance and influence. More recently, the 'war on terror' since 2001 and its role in enhancing the Western demonization of Islam and Muslims have influenced both how late European imperialism and decolonization have been remembered internationally together with European reactions to the millions of Muslims now living in their midst, most of whom are descended from formerly colonized peoples.[17]

Among most scholars and much of the general public, post-1945 European history remains far more likely to be viewed through the lens of the post-war rather than as involving a series of radical transitions from the colonial to the postcolonial, even though it was both – and much more – at the same time.[18] Most national histories have operated along similar lines. As Benjamin Stora has written, France possessed a 'historical consciousness saturated by the weight of the Second World War, and soon dissolved by the cult of the new

---

[15] Signs of change began with Stuart Ward (ed.), *British Culture and the End of Empire* (Manchester, 2001), and have continued with Wendy Webster, *Englishness and Empire 1939–1965* (Oxford, 2005), Bill Schwarz, *Memories of Empire, Vol. 1: The White Man's World* (Oxford, 2011), Jordanna Bailkin, *The Afterlife of Empire* (Berkeley, 2012).

[16] Fanon, *Wretched*, 81.

[17] Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present* (Oxford, 2004), 13; Marina Lazreg, *Torture and the Twilight of Empire: From Algiers to Baghdad* (Princeton, 2008), especially ch. 11.

[18] Tony Judt's *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (London, 2005) counts as one valuable and influential study that pays passing attention to decolonization overseas and its European effects, yet these topics nonetheless remain marginal by comparison with other themes. More representative are Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (London, 1998); Dan Stone, *Goodbye to All That?: The Story of Europe since 1945* (Oxford, 2014).

and of the "modernity"' that ensued.[19] The same was true of Belgium and the Netherlands, which together with France shared the burden of having been 'the losers of 1940', as Pieter Lagrou notes, undergoing traumatic years of Nazi occupation followed by painful roads to recovery.[20] Coping with the problematic legacies of wartime resistance and collaboration came together with economic, political, and social reconstruction as societies struggled towards new democratic futures as part of the emergent Western bloc. While Britain never suffered German occupation and emerged on the winning side along with the United States, it too lived in the war's shadow, and all four of these nations' late imperial and decolonization histories were at least to some extent shaped by wartime experiences and their later repercussions. Portugal offers a distinct history as an imperial nation not comparably marked by the Second World War, having remained officially neutral throughout, and serves as an important reminder of the diversity of national experiences within the broader European (and even Western European) framework. In Portugal, it was 1974 rather than 1945 that became the defining watershed when the *Estado Novo* dictatorship in power since the 1920s finally was toppled in revolution – a revolution that was a direct consequence of over a decade of wars fought to hold on to its colonies in Africa.

Portugal's ultimately unsuccessful attempt to swim against the tide of Western European democracy and decolonization provides one of the clearest instances of mutually-influencing interconnectedness of a metropole and its colonies up to and beyond the dissolution of former empires. Others include the fall of France's Fourth Republic in 1958, a crisis provoked by the turmoil of the Algerian War being waged across the Mediterranean but whose effects reverberated throughout the hexagon itself. Countless examples abound across Western Europe, not simply encompassing political structures but regularly extending throughout domestic life. European-American relations; the role of European monarchies in national cultures; economic and societal modernization dependent on ethnic minority migrant workers, many of colonial and postcolonial origins; consumerism, affluence, and poverty; welfare state ideologies and structures; European youth cultures and emergent multicultures; new visions of national identity: all, and much else besides, were densely entangled with the histories of overseas colonies and ultimately ex-colonies and peoples, not evolving in isolation from them.

Europe after Empire benefits from the profusion of excellent analyses of these and other topics that have emerged to date, including studies penned by historians as well as scholars working within literary, cultural, and film studies

---

[19] Benjamin Stora, *La gangrène et l'oubli: La mémoire de la guerre d'Algérie* (Paris, 1991), 255.
[20] Pieter Lagrou, *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation: Patriotic Memory and National Recovery in Western Europe, 1945–1965* (Cambridge, 2000), 26.