

# **Unpacking cultural logics: A Rhetorical Listening Analysis of the public Black Pete debate in Flanders.**

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# **Unpacking cultural logics: A Rhetorical Listening Analysis of the public Black Pete debate in Flanders.**

In Flanders and the Netherlands, a controversy arises each year over ‘Black Pete’, a blackface character that is one of the traditional figures of the children’s festival of Saint Nicholas. Through a rhetorical listening analysis of mainstream print media sources in Flanders, this article aims to understand the conflicting positions and unproductive stances haunting the public Black Pete debate. Our study explores how analysing these positions by unpacking the cultural logics behind it can be used to get past unproductive stances and move towards accountability, critique, and change. Our findings illustrate that many positions in the debate remain within an unproductive stance and leave no room for productive debate and/or action. A rhetorical listening analysis is relevant, because it contributes to an understanding of the public Black Pete debate as a topical case to inform a broader discussion on (de)colonization and anti-racism today.

**Keywords:** Rhetorical listening; cultural logics; (un)productive stances; Black Pete (*Zwarte Piet*); public debate; newspaper articles; myth

**Word count:** 7080 words

## **Introduction**

For several years now in Flanders and the Netherlands, a controversy arises around one of the traditional figures of the children’s festival of Saint Nicholas, celebrated on December 6<sup>th</sup>. Saint Nicholas (*Sinterklaas*), a holy man who travels the country on horseback to deliver gifts to all well-behaved children during the night of December 5<sup>th</sup>, is accompanied by Black Pete (*Zwarte Piet*), who carries a bag of gifts and goes down chimneys to deliver the presents and it is the soot of the chimney that allegedly causes Black Pete to be ‘black’. Tradition suggests that Saint Nicholas arrives mid-November by steamboat from Spain with his white horse and his helpers, the Black Petes. Both Saint Nicholas and his Black Petes are fictional figures (Coenders and Chauvin 2017; D’hondt 2020; Helsloot 2012; Hilhorst and Hermes 2015; Van Der Pijl and Goulordava 2014; Dikmans 2020). Re-enactments of meet-and-greets

with Saint Nicholas are part of the festive build up. Indeed, as they arrive, Saint Nicholas and his Black Petes visit schools, restaurants, shopping malls, offices, hospitals, and many private homes. Much attention to detail is paid to the appropriate attire (D'hondt 2020; Muysken 2016). Saint Nicholas, played by an older white man, is dressed like a Roman Catholic bishop. The Black Petes on the other hand, usually played by male and female Dutch and Belgian adults in blackface, are dressed like seventeenth-century pages in costumes of a lace collar, velour jacket, colourful knickers, tights, and a feathered cap. They are mainly characterized by their blackened face, their frizzy-haired wig, their luscious red mouths, and their golden earrings. During the arrival of Saint Nicholas and the many meet-and-greets, the Black Petes wave and frolic for the crowds (D'hondt 2020; Coenders and Chauvin 2017; Helsloot 2012; Hilhorst and Hermes 2015; Van Der Pijl and Goulordava 2014; Wekker 2016). Pete's blackface, the Black Pete figure, and more generally, the festival of Saint Nicholas are increasingly contested by opponents of the figure with the result that many supporters strongly advocate to stick to the tradition.

## **Debate**

The contested blackface figure 'Black Pete' has become an annual focus of dispute and brings about discussions of race, colonization, and the historical enslavement of Africans (Coenders and Chauvin 2017; Helsloot 2012; Hilhorst and Hermes 2015; Mesman, Janssen, and Van Rosmalen 2016; Rodenberg and Wagenaar 2016; Van Der Pijl and Goulordava 2014; Vliet 2019; D'hondt 2020). The past few years have seen an uprise of emotions and heated public debate and, while Black Pete has been frequently criticized for at least the past 50 years because of his caricatural representation, such critique only gained massive media attention in recent years (Helsloot 2005; 2013; Hilhorst and Hermes 2015; Coenders and Chauvin 2017; Chauvin, Coenders, and Koren 2018; D'hondt 2020; Vliet 2019; Wekker 2016). The blackface figure was even condemned by the United Nations and drew heightened attention in the international press (Chauvin, Coenders, and Koren 2018; Van Der Pijl and Goulordava 2014; D'hondt 2020). The main opponents of the Black Pete figure urge to adapt its representation, or even abolish it, so that it no longer propagates discriminating stereotypes which could have a negative influence on children both white and of Sub-Saharan or other origins (Zienkowski 2016; Coenders and Chauvin 2017; Hilhorst and Hermes 2015; Mesman, Janssen, and Van Rosmalen 2016; Rodenberg and Wagenaar 2016).

Others find the idea of any change in the tradition not only unnecessary but also unacceptable. In response to the intensified media attention, they strive to preserve the blackface figure in the Saint Nicholas festivities. Indeed, defenders of this tradition claim that Black Pete is an innocent character and argue that there is no relation between Black Pete and a stereotype of a black person (Helsloot 2012; Mesman, Janssen, and Van Rosmalen 2016; Chauvin, Coenders, and Koren 2018; Zienkowski 2016). From this perspective, the Saint Nicholas celebration is defended because of its assumed long history. However, although the roots of the Saint Nicholas celebration indeed go back a long way, the tradition has changed many times and the character now known as Black Pete is a relatively modern invention dating from 1850, when the figure was introduced in a children's book titled 'St. Nicholas and his servant' (Mesman, Janssen, and Van Rosmalen 2016; Boer, Koops, and Pieper 2014; D'hondt 2020; Van Der Pijl and Goulordava 2014; Dikmans 2020; Helsloot 2012; Wekker 2016).

Research into the Black Pete tradition is still emerging and within the Flemish context, especially, little research has been published (Vliet 2019). Within the Netherlands, Hilhorst and Hermes (2015) analysed statements posted on the pro-Pete Pietitie Facebook page. They conclude that the pro-Petes' statements are built on a sense of Dutch suffering and further argue that this sense of suffering creates a Dutch we-ness that denies any other group the ability to suffer. Wekker (2016) describes the passionate responses to criticism of Black Pete as a defenisiveness of the cherished Dutch self-image as tolerant, pluralistic, and just, and, moreover, as a denial of the Dutch cultural archive and, thus, its own colonial heritage and the power and privileges afforded to Dutch whites as a result. In this study, we focus on the Black Pete debate in Flanders by exploring how rhetorical listening promotes a better understanding of this public debate by not just debunking the claims about Black Pete but also critically analysing the cultural logics within which these claims function (Ratcliffe 2019).

## **Rhetorical Listening**

Conflicting positions and claims in the public debate come with much emotion and related emotional arguments. Understanding the internal dynamics that drive these contested public debates is a complex endeavour (Smyth 2002). According to Ratcliffe (Ratcliffe 2005; 2019), when we encounter competing or conflicting claims about a topic, a normal reaction is to immediately retreat in an unproductive stance. The controversy around Black Pete is

especially interesting because it contains not just one but several unproductive stances such as denial ('Black Pete is black due to the chimney and not because he is of African descent'), defensiveness ('Black Pete is a beloved tradition and, therefore, not racist'), or a guilt/blame logic ('The adults make 'Black Pete' racist whereas the children don't see the problem'). Due to the growing awareness of our culturally diverse and often contesting value systems, scholars have argued for the development of a new rhetoric that has discussion and exchange of ideas as its goal rather than skilful verbal persuasion (Young, Becker, and Pike 1970). We introduce the framework of 'rhetorical listening' as a methodological tactic or tool to explore how analysing conflicting positions in the public debate can be used to get past aforementioned unproductive stances and move towards recognition, critique, and accountability (Glenn 2018; Glenn and Ratcliffe 2011; Ratcliffe 1999; 2005; 2019).

For example, scholars have recently argued that myth-building is one of the strategies for diffusing criticisms towards Black Pete and is frequently deployed in journalistic discourse regarding this debate (Vliet 2019; Chauvin, Coenders, and Koren 2018; D'hondt 2020). According to the current Flemish mythology, children are told that Black Pete's blackface is due not to genetics but to Pete getting covered in soot which has rubbed off as he climbs down the chimney to deliver the children's presents (Chauvin et al., 2018; Hilhorst and Hermes, 2015; Mesman et al., 2016; Rodenberg and Wagenaar, 2016; Van Der Pijl and Goulordava, 2014; Wekker, 2016). Indeed, the narrative of the Chimney Pete (i.e. generally white Petes with sooty smudges) is used to refute accusations of racism (Chauvin, Coenders, and Koren 2018). Such 'tradition-internal' arguments for deracializing Black Pete counter more 'contextualizing' critiques (D'hondt 2020) and lay out what others have described as 'cultural aphasia' (Helsloot 2012) and a 'Dutch habitus' preventing racism in the Black Pete figure from being seen by ignoring, denying, or being unaware of its own historical roots (Van Der Pijl and Goulordava 2014). Indeed, these scholars have also noticed the peculiar insistence on the genealogy of Black Pete with a purely internal account of the myth (D'hondt 2020). We argue that such myth-building or mythmaking can be seen as an unproductive stance (denial/ ignorance).

## **Methodology**

To explore the cultural logics within the public debate regarding Black Pete in the Flemish context, we set up a qualitative study using rhetorical listening as a methodological

framework. Data were collected through a systematic key word search in mainstream print media sources in Flanders that are available online and on paper. More specifically, the four most read quality newspapers and popular newspapers were searched. The aim was to develop an online database to store the collected data. Therefore, the search was limited to the online content of the sources.

The key terms used were ‘Black Pete’ (or ‘*Zwarte Piet*’), ‘Soot Pete’ (or ‘*Roetpiet*’), and ‘Sooty Pete’ (or ‘*Roetveegpiet*’). Data collection covered three cycles of five months (between September – January) from 2017 to 2020, resulting in an extended data set of 383 newspaper articles. All the newspaper articles that mentioned one of the key terms were included in the study and were descriptively coded (e.g. key terms, ‘who speaks’, relevance). Based on the reading and descriptive coding of the articles, we identified 358 newspaper articles for the interpretive analysis of this study.

The interpretive analysis is aimed at understanding the internal dynamics of conflicting positions. Therefore, we need to ask in what *terms* the debate is being held, what *meaning* we attribute to these terms, and what the *consequences* are of framing the debate in these terms. In that vein, it is important to unpack the claims inherent in the debate, and more specifically, the cultural logics within which these claims function (Ratcliffe 2005; 2019). This study is thus not concerned with disclosing the different conflicting positions within the public Black Pete debate in the Flemish context, but rather aims to explore how rhetorical listening can be used as a tactic or a tool to develop better understanding of contested public debates such as the Black Pete debate and, as such, to understand and move beyond unproductive stances.

A rhetorical listening analysis consists of three steps. First, the textual *claims* must be determined. Next, the researcher examines the dominant *tropes* inherent in these claims. When defining the term trope, we follow Ratcliffe’s assumption that ‘all language is inherently figurative’ (2005, p. 111) (i.e. a term always signifies something other than the term itself), believing, thus, that all ‘words’ or terms function as tropes that signify a certain meaning and take on a different meaning across different spaces and times (Ratcliffe 2005; 2019). Therefore, to understand how the claims within the Black Pete debate function, it is important to not just analyse the trope and the textual claims but also the *cultural logics* from within which the tropes and its associated claims function (Ratcliffe 2019; 2005). Thus, in the third and final step, the textual claims and corresponding tropes are interpreted by unpacking the cultural logics within which tropes and claims are being produced and received in the

debate. Put simply, a cultural logic is a way of reasoning, a belief system, or an ideology that people share through discourse and that changes over time and place (Ratcliffe 2005; 2019). They influence the meaning of words functioning as tropes. Indeed, the claim ‘The figure of Black Pete is important for our children’ signifies one way when articulated or heard within a conservative cultural logic from a defender of the Black Pete’s blackface and a very different way when articulated or heard within an inclusive cultural logic from an opponent of the ‘black’ Black Pete. Cultural logics associated around a trope provide us with (cultural) scripts of attitudes and actions that people perceive as normal. Indeed, these socially constructed ways of thinking and acting become embodied in all of us (though differently) via our cultural socialization and, once embodied, (un)consciously inform our own attitude and actions (Ratcliffe 2005; 2019). Within this final step, we’ve selected the three dominant tropes in the dataset based on the density and frequency of the tropes, for indeed, these tropes indicate the prevailing discourse in the public Black Pete debate.

## **Discussion of Findings**

We identified three dominant tropes in the newspaper articles, with the Black Pete debate conceptualized in terms of a) myth, b) tradition and cultural heritage, and c) children. Below, we describe how each of these tropes is rhetorically constructed by unpacking the cultural logics within which the tropes and claims are produced and received in the Black Pete debate.

### ***The Myth***

In the public Black Pete debate, we identified a trope that approached the Saint Nicholas and Black Pete celebration in terms of myth, story, and fiction. The trope ‘myth’ overall is most noticeable in the newspaper articles. Indeed, a lot of articles are, sometimes implicitly or indirectly, about Saint Nicholas and Black Pete as mythical, magical, or fictional figures. They address and/or use different strategies to propagate or enhance the belief in the mythology such as re-enactments, letters and drawings for Saint Nicholas and refer to Saint Nicholas and Black Pete as a story that can be told or written. Table 1 presents an overview of the different cultural logics haunting the usage of the trope ‘myth’. The five most dominant cultural logics regarding the trope ‘myth’ were selected to discuss based on the density and frequency of the cultural logic.

**Table 1:** Overview of cultural logics corresponding the trope ‘myth’

Cultural logics
1. Tradition-internal logic
2. Colour-blind logic
3. Race and racism logic
4. Flexible myth logic
5. Fixed myth logic
6. Historical-religious logic (regarding Saint Nicholas)
7. Historical-(de)colonial logic (regarding Black Pete)
8. Innocence children logic
9. Non-innocence children
10. Pedagogical/didactical logic
11. Anti-pedagogical/didactical logic
12. Inclusivity logic
13. Identity and identification logic
14. Fun logic
15. Credibility logic

The **tradition-internal logic** is one of the most visible cultural logics regarding the trope ‘myth’ at play in this public debate. Whereas the provenance of Saint Nicholas is explained in the newspaper articles with a historical narrative as bishop of Myra (i.e. **historical-religious logic**), the genealogy of Black Pete is solely based on an internal account of the myth. Indeed, children are told that Black Pete’s blackface is due to Pete getting covered in soot which has rubbed off as he climbs down the chimney to deliver the children’s presents. Altering Black Pete to Chimney Pete (“*Schoorsteenpiet*”) or Sooty Pete (“*Roetveegpiet*”) is generally considered a step in the right direction. However, defenders of the ‘traditional’ Black Pete use these ‘tradition-internal’ arguments as an explanation for Black Pete’s blackface, but, paradoxically, at the same time dismiss Chimney Pete or Sooty Pete as valid alternatives and give preference to the ‘black’ Black Pete. Indeed, the tradition-internal logic is deployed both by proponents and opponents of this fictional figure. Moreover, the tradition-internal logic is frequently linked to the **colour-blind logic**, another quite evident cultural logic in the public Black Pete debate, when it is specifically argued that Black Pete’s blackness is due to Pete getting covered in soot and not to genetics. This cultural



logic is again used both by the proponents and the opponents of the 'black' Petes. Furthermore, it is contended that Black Pete can't have anything to do with race or skin colour since it's a fictional figure and, thus, 'not real'. The figure's racist representation is, hence, not only denied but disassociated from race itself.

Others do recognize Black Pete's caricatural representation and are in favour of adjustments and modifications to the figure so that it no longer propagates discriminating stereotypes. Textual claims such as '*that a black-skinned clown is a racist caricature that ridicules people of colour*' ("Oproep om Zwarte Piet te bannen", 2019, p. 16) or '*of course Black Pete has to do with unemployment rates if you are conditioned to approach dark-skinned people as some sort of caricatured fairy tale figure from an early age*' ("Onbewuste vooroordelen verdwijnen niet vanzelf", 2019, p. 30) indicate the **race and racism logic** apparent in the newspaper articles. Such articles do consider this fictional Black Pete figure to be linked with race, skin colour, and racism, and often also apply the **historical-(de)colonial logic** by referring to slavery and colonialism. However, most of these articles advocate for the Chimney Pete and, hereby, further deracialize Black Pete. Indeed, even when the relation between Black Pete and a stereotype of a black person is acknowledged, this ahistorical narrative of the Chimney Pete and the tradition-internal logic is deployed and used to refute accusations of racism. Only very rarely, newspapers address the illogicality inherent in these tradition-internal arguments and consider the alternative Petes to be just a first step towards change. For example, in one article, it is argued that '*Chimney Pete or Sooty Pete doesn't make sense*' since '*his clothes are spotlessly clean*' ("Dit weekend hebben de bezoekers", 2019, p. 3).

As evident from the expounding of the above culture logics, our rhetorical listening analysis shows that the **fixed myth logic** and the **flexible myth logic** are also present when using the trope 'myth'. Indeed, on the one hand, the myth is presented in newspaper articles as something that hasn't changed and, moreover, can't change (i.e. fixed myth logic). Black Pete defenders claim that the myth as '*a tradition that has lasted for many years*' ("Zwarte Piet komt uit schoorsteen niet uit Afrika, 2018, p.5) is part of our culture and cultural heritage and, therefore, strive to preserve the blackface figure in the Saint Nicholas festivities. It is argued that making adjustments to the fictional figure is '*not protecting*' our traditions and our culture. According to the fixed myth logic, any change in the myth is not only unnecessary but also unacceptable. However, on the other hand, the myth is presented in newspaper articles as something that has changed and, therefore, can change again according

to time and place (i.e. flexible myth logic). Indeed, to keep up with the times, Chimney Pete or Sooty Pete are suggested as modern alternatives to the ‘traditional’ Black Pete.

Noteworthy, and quite paradoxically, we identified examples of people arguing that the myth of Saint Nicholas has changed over time and place, for example the role and appearance of Saint Nicholas (cf. the cross on the mitre) or the role of Black Pete (cf. from bogeyman to children’s friend), but, at the same time refuse modifications to the current appearance of the ‘blackface’ Black Pete figure. Both the flexible myth logic and the fixed myth logic can apparently be deployed at the same time.

### *Tradition and Cultural Heritage*

While the first trope mainly focused on Saint Nicholas and Black Pete as (part of) a myth and, thus, as fictional figures, this trope deals with the Saint Nicholas celebration as a tradition and cultural heritage. Interestingly, a lot of cultural logics haunting this trope are connected and/or intersecting with the cultural logics inherent in the trope ‘myth’. Table 2 presents an overview of the different cultural logics visible when using the trope ‘tradition and cultural heritage’.

The three most dominant cultural logics were selected to discuss.

**Table 2:** Overview of cultural logics corresponding the trope ‘tradition and cultural heritage’

Cultural logics
1. Static logic
2. Dynamic logic
3. Local logic
4. Identity and integration logic
5. As furious coincidence logic
6. As tangible logic
7. Hurtful logic
8. Protective logic
9. Emancipation children

We identified the **static logic** and the **dynamic logic** as the two most dominant cultural logics regarding the trope ‘tradition and cultural heritage’. Often, these two cultural logics are presented as opposites. Indeed, you either believe traditions, culture, and cultural heritage are immutable and, thus, cannot change (i.e. static logic) or you believe they are

changeable (i.e. dynamic logic). As for the static logic, the most apparent one of these opposites in the newspaper articles, it is argued that modifications or changes to the ‘traditional’ Black Pete are not only undesirable, but even unacceptable, for indeed, only the slightest adjustment to Black Pete and/or Saint Nicholas ruins the whole tradition. To strengthen aforementioned arguments, textual claims such as ‘*century-old tradition*’ (“Laat elk geloof zijn feesten behouden”, 2017, p. 12) or ‘*long standing tradition*’ (“Zwarte Piet komt uit schoorsteen niet uit Afrika”, 2018, p.5) and references to the ‘blackface’ Black Petes as ‘*traditional*’ (“Roetpiet in de stad”, 2017, p. 4), ‘*classical*’ (“Gent en Leuven wijzen Zwarte Piet de deur”, 2019, p. 5), or ‘*real*’ (“Mooiste compliment”, 2018, p. 19) are used. Interestingly, newspaper articles that perpetuate this static logic regarding the trope ‘tradition and cultural heritage’ regularly use the mere claim ‘*It’s tradition*’ (“Beter in rol van Sint-Maarten”, 2017, p. 16) or, rather, ‘*It’s an innocent tradition*’ (“Makkers staakt uw wild geraas”, 2019, p. 23) to dismiss all critique of Black Pete.

As for the dynamic logic in the newspaper articles, it is argued that traditions and cultural heritage do change according to time and place and, therefore, modifications and changes to the ‘traditional’ Black Pete are acceptable. Indeed, the Saint Nicholas tradition is not as old as people perceive it to be and, moreover, has changed considerably over the years (i.e. over time). In addition, the Saint Nicholas celebration is told and celebrated differently depending on the place (i.e. over place). Modifications to the ‘traditional’ Petes are thus not only acceptable, but even desired within this logic. Indeed, today’s changing social norms and sensitivities call for a change from the ‘blackface’ figure Black Pete to a more neutral fictional figure. It is contended that Black Pete should be stripped of its stereotypical characteristics that can be perceived as offensive by people of Sub-Saharan origin and others, preferably without discarding the Saint Nicholas celebration. Moreover, such a change is considered crucial in order to strive for an inclusive society. Generally, Chimney Pete or Sooty Pete are proposed as alternative Petes in the newspaper articles. To refer to the ‘modern’ Saint Nicholas tradition with these alternative Black Petes, terms such as ‘*acceptable*’ (“Piet rellen in Nederland iedereen braaf in België”, 2018, p. 3), ‘*neutral*’ (“Colruyt gaat voor neutrale Piet”, 2018, p. 19), and ‘*more inclusive*’ (“We mogen best trots zijn”, 2018, p. 33) are used.

The **identity and integration logic**, mainly linked to the static logic, is another noticeable cultural logic haunting the usage of the trope ‘tradition and cultural heritage’. Within this logic, Black Pete is perceived as unchangeable for it is part of our Flemish culture

and identity. To strengthen such arguments, Black Pete is referred to in newspaper articles as a tradition that is ‘*ours*’ (“Dries Van Langenhove als Zwarte Piet”, 2018, p. 10) or ‘*from here*’ (“Een snelwegblokkade”, 2017, p. 9). Moreover, the adaptation of the ‘black’ Black Pete figure to Chimney Pete is often seen as the loss of a part of this identity. Black Pete is, therefore, heavily defended in newspaper articles due to the fear of losing one’s identity even more and, accordingly, any (further) alteration to this traditional figure is considered an attack on the Flemish identity. It is argued that the tradition needs to be ‘protected’ in order to protect the beloved own identity (i.e. the **protective logic**). Indeed, several newspapers claim that ‘*Black Pete represents a cultural war*’ (“Sinterklaas”, 2018, p. 7). Notably, the perceived enemies in this symbolic war over Black Pete are, on the one hand, ‘*the politically correct elite*’ (“Wantrouwen is wat ons bindt”, 2017, p. 36) or ‘*the activist minority*’ (“Mensen van goede wil”, 2017, p. 38), and, on the other hand, ‘*the foreigners*’ (“Een snelwegblokkade”, 2017, p. 9), ‘*the migrants*’ (Als Michel dat VN-pact tekent”, 2018, p. 14), or ‘*the refugees*’ (“Sinterklaas helpt inburgering”, 2018, p. 4) and, hence, people who are seen as non-Flemish (or non-Dutch). In this latter case, the Saint Nicholas celebration is linked to integration and the integration process. Indeed, quite interesting to note within this identity and integration logic is that the struggle over the preservation of the Black Pete tradition often ‘*becomes more of a territorial battle*’ (“Van Sinterklaas een feest voor alle kinderen”, 2018, p. 11). Newcomers are allowed to get acquainted with our traditions, and sometimes even obliged, but they are not permitted to help determine what Flemish culture and identity is or could be. In this way, this cultural logic also reveals something about the inclusiveness, or rather, exclusiveness within a society.

### ***Children***

The trope ‘children’ is the third dominant trope in the public debate. Table 3 presents an overview of the different cultural logics evident when using the trope ‘children’. We’ve selected the six most visible cultural logics to discuss in this analysis.

**Table 3:** Overview of cultural logics corresponding the trope ‘children’

Cultural logics
1. Happy logic
2. Innocent or non-racist logic
3. Careless logic
4. Non-aware or colour-blind logic
5. Becoming aware or awareness logic
6. Resistant to change logic
7. Children’s festivity logic
8. Moral or moral dilemma logic
9. Fun and game logic
10. In need of being protected logic
11. More materialistic logic

One of the most dominant cultural logics in the public Black Pete debate regarding the trope ‘children’ is the **happy logic**. Indeed, in the newspaper articles children are seen as content with the Saint Nicholas celebration. Contradictory, this cultural logic is deployed by both the proponents and the opponents of the Black Pete figure. Indeed, on the one hand, supporters of this contested fictional figure argue that the children are happy with the traditional Black Petes and, therefore, the figure should not change. Moreover, the happiness of children needs to be protected at all costs (i.e. by not modifying the Black Petes) argument suggests that the children would not be happy, or even, would be miserable with alternative Petes. Often, the claim ‘*It’s for the happiness of the children*’ (“Roetpiet in de stad”, 2017, p. 4) is given to denounce all criticisms on the ‘black’ Black Pete figure. On the other hand, opponents of this figure state that children will be happy with whatsoever and, thus, that the modified Petes won’t ruin the Saint Nicholas festivities for them.

The above cultural logic is often linked to the **careless logic**, for indeed, it is argued that children don’t mind the colour of the Black Petes. Again, this cultural logic is utilized by both proponents and opponents. The proponents of ‘black’ Black Pete claim that children are not concerned with the appearance of Black Pete and, simply, just want to be happy during these Saint Nicholas festivities, whereas the opponents of this figure confirm that they are not concerned with the skin colour of Black Pete and, that he, therefore, might as well have a different colour. However, remarkably, even when it is claimed that children won’t mind if Black Pete changes colour, the newspaper articles still hold on to the tradition-internal logic

of the trope ‘myth’ by rejecting the Colour Petes (i.e. blue, pink, or green Petes) and advocating for the Chimney Petes or Sooty Petes.

Furthermore, we have identified cultural logics used primarily by the defenders of the traditional Black Pete, such as the **innocent or non-racist logic** and the **non-aware or colour-blind logic**. In the innocent or non-racist logic, children are seen as innocent little creatures with good intentions. Indeed, it is argued that they mean well and, thus, cannot be racist. Moreover, supporters of the Black Pete figure claim that we have to protect the innocence of the children by protecting the myth as it is. As for the non-aware or colour-blind logic, it is believed that children are unaware of the racist characteristics of the traditional Black Pete and, since children don’t notice the supposed connection between the myth and race, slavery, or colonialism, it is argued that Black Pete is not racist. So once again, this cultural logic can be connected with the tradition-internal logic regarding the trope ‘myth’, for indeed, children don’t perceive Black Pete as a real black person, but, instead, believe in the fictional story of this myth (i.e. Black Pete is black due to the chimney).

However, at a certain point in time, children discover the fictional nature of these figures. This ‘*disenchantment*’ (“Dag Sinterklaasje”, 2017, p. 10) is often delayed as long as possible by the adults in their life and, therefore, much importance is attached to the disguise and appearance of Saint Nicholas and Black Pete. Otherwise children will discover that the Saint Nicholas they celebrate is fake. Remarkably, even when children discover Pete’s fictional nature, nothing is said about his provenance and it is argued that the festivities are still ‘fun’ for children. In the newspaper articles, we have identified these claims as the **becoming aware or awareness logic**, a cultural logic most often used by the proponents of the traditional Black Pete. Conversely, however, this cultural logic is also regularly used in a different way in the public debate by the opponents of the figure who argue that children do perceive the Black Pete figure as a real black person and, hence, can sense it is a racist caricature. They therefore strive for the adaptation of the Black Pete figure in order to make the Saint Nicholas celebration more ‘*child-friendly*’ (“Ook in de jaren 80 was er al kritiek”, 2017, p. 17).

Interestingly, and similar to the ‘*It’s tradition*’ (“Beter in rol van Sint-Maarten”, 2017, p. 16) or ‘*It’s an innocent tradition*’ (“Makkers staakt uw wild geraas”, 2019, p. 23) claims regarding the trope ‘tradition and cultural heritage’, newspaper articles often use the mere claim ‘*It’s a children’s festivity*’ (“Zwarte Piet komt uit schoorsteen niet uit Afrika, 2018, p.5) to reject all counterarguments. This claim was so frequently used that we identified it as **the**

**children's festivity logic.** Again, on the one hand, it is used by the supporters of the Black Pete figure to quash all further criticism of the Saint Nicholas celebration. Apparently, it overrules all other arguments. On the other hand, however, the claim is also used by the opponents of 'black' Black Pete in favour of modifying the contested figure to make it an inclusive children's festivity.

## **Conclusion**

Our findings indicate that many of the conflicting positions in the Black Pete debate draw on specific tropes, with the tropes of 'myth', 'tradition and cultural heritage', and 'children' being the most dominant in our data. While some newspaper articles clearly aligned with one of these tropes, we identified many examples where different tropes and, hence, different cultural logics were at play. Our rhetorical listening analysis illustrated that the conflicting positions in the public debate, simply put, for or against Pete in blackface, often encompass competing and contradictory cultural logics, such as the flexible myth logic vs. the fixed myth logic (see trope 'myth'), the static logic vs. the dynamic logic (see trope 'tradition and cultural heritage'), or the non-aware or colour-blind logic vs. the becoming aware or awareness logic (see trope 'children'). However, the tropes and the cultural logics inherent in these tropes also frequently intersected which created complex, often paradoxical, understandings of the internal dynamics of the conflicting positions in the debate. As such, many positions remain within an unproductive stance and leave no room for critique, accountability, and change.

According to Ratcliffe (2005, 2019), cultural logics provide us with (cultural) scripts of attitudes and actions that people perceive as normal. Not only are we socialized into specific logics, we also embody and perform them in specific ways. In the Black Pete debate, for example, we could expect that from a specific cultural logic, one will advocate for the perseverance or the abolishment of the 'black' Pete figure. Our findings, however, demonstrated the complexity of and contradictions in such scripts of thinking and acting due to overlapping and intersecting cultural logics, even across tropes (cf. *supra*), and, due to the use of the same cultural logics by both the proponents of Black Pete as well as its opponents, even if with quite opposite intentions. In our analysis, we identified several examples where the same cultural logic was used by, on the one hand, the proponents of the figure who strive to preserve the 'traditional' Black Pete, and, on the other hand, by the opponents of the 'blackface' Pete who advocate to modify this fictional figure.

Our findings further illustrate that the mediatized debate regarding Saint Nicholas and Black Pete strongly adheres to the dominant cultural logic, that is, the tradition-internal logic, specifically regarding the trope ‘myth’ but also across the various tropes, for indeed, the genealogy of Black Pete is attributed in newspaper articles mainly to an internal account of the tradition. Moreover, we identified multiple examples where this tradition-internal logic was supplemented by the colour-blind cultural logic or, rather, the ‘*pretending to be colour-blind*’-logic. Indeed, in many cases, defenders of the figure specifically argue that Black Pete can’t be racist since its blackness is due to the chimney and not to genetics. The figure’s racist representation is, thus, not only denied but blatantly disassociated from race itself by arguing that Saint Nicholas and Black Pete are fictional figures and, thus, ‘not real’. Black skin is, hence, perceived as something non-authentic.

The tradition-internal and colour-blind logic, thus, mostly reinforce the status quo. As such, our rhetorical listening analysis suggest that the conflicting positions in the Black Pete debate exploit the strategy of myth-building or mythmaking for diffusing criticisms towards Black Pete. This is consistent with previous findings (Vliet 2019; D’hondt 2020; Chauvin, Coenders, and Koren 2018) and primarily demonstrates the unproductive stance of denial of and/or ignorance towards one’s own historical context and towards one’s own colonial heritage and the power differentials and privileges that result from it. It is precisely for this reason that the rhetorical analysis of the Black Pete debate is important. It addresses the unproductive stances towards Flanders’ colonial past in relation to racialization and structural racism today. Interestingly, other fictional figures are emerging that go beyond the narrative of the Chimney Pete or Sooty Pete, such as Saint Mauritius, a black man as Saint Nicholas, or Queen Nikkolah from Alkebu-lan, a black woman as Saint Nicholas. Such examples indicate that the strategy of myth-building or mythmaking can also be used productively.

This article has aimed to contribute to the discussion about the Black Pete debate by examining how rhetorical listening can be used as a tactic and methodological lens to generate a more complex understanding of the internal dynamics in the contested Black Pete debate in Flanders. Our rhetorical listening analysis revealed the complexity of conflicting but also overlapping and intersecting cultural logics and, by extension, the corresponding (cultural) scripts of actions and attitudes, for the same cultural logics are regularly used by both supporters and opponents of Black Pete, though with quite opposite intentions. By exploring in what *terms* the public debate is being held and what *meaning* we attribute to these terms, our findings illustrated that many positions in the debate remain within an unproductive



stance and leave no room for productive debate and/or action. As such, it remains necessary to critically assess how these cultural logics form us and how and who they (do not) serve. The rhetorical listening analysis of the public Black Pete debate is relevant, because it not only offers an innovative methodological framework to generate more complex understandings of conflicting positions and unproductive stances in contested debates, but it also provides a deeper insight into the public Black Pete debate in Flanders as a topical case to inform a broader discussion on (de)colonization and anti-racism today.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interest**

The Author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest.

### **Data Availability Statement**

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [A.D.C.], upon reasonable request.

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