Blackface Burlesque

Changing Praxes and Poetics of Blackness in the Dutch Repertoire before Minstrelsy, 1790-1830

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On a winter evening in 1808, the popular Amsterdam theater-café De Ooijevaar billed a scene starring "the Black from *Paul & Virginia*" (Simonsz 94). This opera by Edmond G.F. de Favière had premiered in Amsterdam in 1797 and soon thereafter became a staple of the antislavery repertoire of the Netherlands. In itself an adaptation of Bernadin de Saint Pierre's famous novel, the opera revolves around the pleasures and perils of two young lovers in the bucolic French colony Isle de France. In the scene performed at *De Ooijevaar* the youngsters meet the runaway slave Zabi, who describes to them the horrors of the institution of slavery. When Paul and Virginia offer him a place as their household servant, Zabi is ever so grateful and sings about his joy in a faux-black dialect. According to a lengthy review of the performance, the blacked-up actor playing Zabi appeared in an extremely professional manner: after delivering a flawless adagio, he successfully imitated the loose movements and the comic gestures of "a very cheerful Indian" (Simonsz 89).[1] The management of the theater-café was famous for presenting separate scenes from operas and comedies, alternated with burlesque melodies and duets. By isolating this particular scene, however, they seem to have parked the antislavery disposition of the opera and obscured the emotional framework for reviewing slavery and colonial policies. While various theater halls across the Netherlands continued to stage *Paul & Virginia* in its entirety, thus allowing Zabi to be redeemed in the closing act, the episode in De Ooijevaar negated the black character's agency and reduced the melodrama to a happy-go-lucky farce.

The origins of Dutch blackface performances as a way to ridicule and stereotype Afro-diasporic people are generally situated in the second half of the nineteenth-century, when Anglo-American minstrel troupes such as the "Lantum Ethiopian Serenaders" arrived in the Netherlands in the 1840s (Koning; Groeneboer; Klöters). Scholars seem to presume that minstrel shows entered the Dutch performance culture in an aesthetic and moral vacuum: wearing black make-up had been a common theatrical practice in the Netherlands for hundreds of years, but it was not used to stereotype black people until the mid-nineteenth century (Koning 555). As Zabi's appearance in *De Ooijevaar* suggests, I will argue, this

claim is not entirely valid and disregards some forms of already existing entertainment in which people of color were presented as subservient, forbearing and comic subjects to please white audiences.

Dutch theater-goers had been occasionally confronted with representations of the colonized territories, their subjugated inhabitants, and enslaved Africans since the seventeenth century (Kuruppath; Paasman).[2] Along with an increasing flow of information and visual representations about the overseas colonies, however, theaters in the second half of the eighteenth century theaters increasingly produced, translated, (mostly from French and German) and performed a great variety of dramas, ballets, pantomimes, operas, and expositions that either confirmed or contested imperial fantasies and atrocities.[3] While critical plays disseminated abolitionist and humanitarian sentiments, it seems that new obsessions with people of color generated a string of romanticizing entertainment and exotic ridicule at the same time – often in the very same performances. Although this repertoire provided a unique and lively canvas through which Dutch audiences understood human variety as well as their own white identity, it has been largely neglected by scholars of Dutch colonial culture and history.

This article will explore some of the ways in which blackness was constructed and designed in the theater repertoire preceding the apogee of minstrelsy in the Netherlands, and examine how these modes of representation were invested with power and white supremacy. In doing so, the present article hopes to extend the history of Dutch blackface brutalities, which has been predominantly understood (and rightly so) through mid-nineteenth-century minstrelsy (Groeneboer; Klöters) and its manifest legacies in the contested Black Pete figure in the yearly children's celebration of Saint Nicholas (Koning; Smith). In his standard work *Love and Theft*, Eric Lott contends that minstrelsy as a genre emerged from a "nearly insupportable fascination and a self-protective derision with respect to black people and their cultural practices" (7). White spectators, including Dutch, could watch a jumble of songs, dances and burlesque skits based on a paramount investment with black physicality and the aspiration that slavery was amusing and self-evident (ibidem; Koning; Groeneboer). While the racist politics of these shows differed substantially from those of the earlier repertoire, this article will argue that the impersonations of nonwhite people in Dutch performance culture around 1800 capitalized on the very same delusions, fears and fantasies, and in many ways anticipated the stock minstrel characters of the mid-nineteenth century.

In the sections to follow I will first briefly discuss the theory and praxes of stage blackface in the Netherlands of 1800 in relation to (changing) social attitudes towards blackness. A closer analysis of three Dutch productions – *The Negro Slaves* (1796), *Robinson Crusoe* (1806), and *Paul & Virginia* (1797) – in the next two sections will enable me to connect my observations about blacking-up in the first part to other "minstrelizing" discursive and performative strategies that produced notions of racial difference, innate servility, and white supremacy. Thus I will look at recurring tropes, character types, linguistic variations, and bodily engagements on stage. Throughout this article, I will connect my own findings to some excellent studies that have mapped the historical and fictional imaginings of race and stereotypes in visual culture of the Netherlands, as well as scholarly work about the constructions of nonwhite persona in Anglo-American theater.

Blacking-up around 1800

In her book *Performing Blackness on English Stages (1500-1800)*, Virginia Mason Vaughan has charted how blackface as a theatrical pattern carried a recognizable set of meanings that repeated, expanded and modified over time. In medieval Europe, blacking-up was a performance practice to discriminate good from evil, for example for religious, comic and moral purposes.[4] When imperial ambitions grew, however, skin color became an important racial signifier and blacking-up developed into a device to elicit empathy, as well as to ridicule and oppress the colonized other (Vaughan; Ndiaye; Hartman; Worrall). There were myriad ways to blacken an actor's countenance. Until well into the eighteenth century, British actors used velvet or leather masks to blacken their faces. A memo of the Theater Society in Haarlem (1785-1817) indicates that comparable masks were worn until the late-eighteenth-century Netherlands: impersonations of colored characters required "a black cap made of crepe paper, which was held together with a pearl necklace and had holes in it for the eyes and mouth" (Noord-Hollands Archief 3163.624).[5] Obviously, Vaughan notes, such vizards limited the actor's scope of emotional facial expressions and were exclusively used for non-speaking roles and dancers (10).

For lead characters, other methods were used.[6] In his *Theoretical Lessons in Gesticulation* (1827), the Dutch painter and drama theorist Johannes Jelgerhuis devoted an entire chapter to theatrical make-up. He made a list of the diverse colors that could be used to cover the face of an actor, such as white chalk, carbon black, Van Dyke brown, umber, Persian red/brown, ochre, vermilion, and regular red. Jelgerhuis also provided detailed descriptions of the material basis of theatrical make-up, and explained the do's-and-don'ts. For example, he noted that

carbon black make-up is in many cases too garish on white skin and he suggests using Persian red instead, sometimes mixed with umber (181). Theater theorists across Europe devoted much time to present characters they had designated into varying colored racial categories (Worrall 39). Leman Thomas Rede's frequently used *Road to the Stage* (1827) had a whole section on "How to Color the Face for the Representation of Moors, Negroes &c." (38-39). Rede discusses the color tinges used for different racialized identities. Actors impersonating "Moorish" and Indian characters should use Spanish brown, while performers playing Afro-diasporic people,

> should cover the face, neck, and hands with a thin coat of pomatum, or what is better, though more disagreeable, of lard; then a burn a cork to power, wet it with beer (which will fix the colouring matter), apply it with a hare's-foot, or a cloth. Wearing black gloves is unnatural, for the colour is too intense to represent the skin, and negroes invariably cover themselves with light clothing. Arms of black silk, […] have a very bad effect; armings dyed in a strong infusion of Spanish annatto look much more natural, for a negro's arms, it will be observed, are generally lighter than his countenance.

I have found no indications of Dutch performers using burnt cork in the decades around 1800. Usually, they put on plain black or brown pomatums (creamy stage make-up) and wore, like Rede suggested, colored "armings" to approximate the skin color of Afro-diasporic people – who were alternatingly referred to as "Blacks," "Negroes," "Moors," "Indians," or "Ethiopians" (Schreuder 14; Meijer 56). In his diaries, the respected Dutch author Adriaan van der Willigen recounts how he dressed up like a "Negro" to surprise his guests at a party in Haarlem in 1794: "I wore those very delicate stockings which they also use in the playhouse to represent naked skin, and I covered my face with a black pomatum, as well as my hair, which I had burnt with frizzy curls" (ed. Van der Heijden & Sanders 221).

Impersonating a black man, Van der Willigen recited a sentimental scene from his recently published abolitionist drama *Selico* (1794). In the context of antislavery sentiments, black make-up was employed to achieve a convincing representation of enslaved Africans and to elicit sympathy with the audience. As Heather S. Nathans has shown in *Slavery and Sentiment on the American Stage (1787-1861)*, however, the spectators' underlying awareness of the actor's true white identity sometimes obstructed the possibility of evoking antislavery

sentiments (61). If Van der Willigen had no distinct comic intentions, at the very least he intended to amuse the party guests when he decided to do the Selico impersonation. According to his notes, the performance was received with great enthusiasm. It seems only fair to ask whether he was cheered because his act was moving and convincing or because it was hilarious. Indeed, scholars have listed numerous examples of blackface performances that produced effects contrary to the probable purposes of the plays, and tended to make people laugh more than cry (Worrall 35; Nathans). Was black make-up simply not alluring on stage, or were Afro-diasporic subjects difficult to sympathize with altogether?

To make it even more complicated, the anonymous Dutch author of the play *Stedman* (1806) insisted that his mixed-race character Cery, a Surinamese slave and mistress to the European title character Stedman, would be rendered as a white and blonde girl (2).[7] It is possible that the author responded to recurring critiques about the ambivalent reactions to blackface characters as well as to the objections made by actors. For example, an early nineteenth-century theater critic suggests that some actresses did not want to perform in blackface, "because [they] preferred not to make [themselves] hideous like that" (*Kritisch Lampje* 185). As I have argued elsewhere, this "Westernization" of Cery might have also served as a foil to justify an otherwise provocative and still rather unrealistic "interracial" marriage between an enslaved woman of color and a white European officer (Adams 162).

Whereas human difference was predicated on climatic, religious, and cultural understandings of variation until the 1770s (embodied in dress, class, custom, language, and level of civilization), Roxann Wheeler has demonstrated in her book *The Complexion of Race* that the closing decades of the century marked an increasing emphasis on skin color and physical appearance as the hallmarks of essential and graded racial difference (145). Albeit with varying intentions, systematic efforts were made by anatomists and physiologists across Europe to find parameters to categorize, and subsequently classify, the overwhelming diversity in nature. For a growing number of scientists, not only whiteness but also the large and shapely skull of Europeans equaled intellectual and moral superiority (Wheeler; Blakely; Meijer; Sens). Such polygenetic conceptions of race started to gain importance in the late-eighteenth-century Netherlands as well, and resulted into dehumanizing representations in literature, science and visual culture in which Afro-diasporic people were increasingly imagined as an infantile and servile race (Pieterse 30; Blakely). In an age of burgeoning racism and increasing debates about the (il)legitimacy of the slave trade, the dominant

poetics of representing the Other in the theater was in relation to his/her inherent subordination and servitude. The ambivalent ways in which Cery's identity is shaped, I suggest, are symptomatic of new suppositions about an innate inferiority connected to blackness as opposed to a privileged white identity – and, subsequently, the increasing fear of miscegenation. If her subordinate status as a slave could be counterbalanced through marriage, her skin color had to be synthetically bleached to overcome essential difference.

While a thorough study of blackface practices in Dutch (early) modern theater and its relation to contemporary debates on race is urgently needed, the tentative evidence presented above seems to indicate that Dutch authors, playwrights and actors in the closing decades of the eighteenth century combined the technicalities and aesthetics of stage make-up with an engagement in sophisticated social assumptions and desires of race to determine a character's "racial type". Tawny and black make-up had metonymic properties, signifying both moral behavior and social stratification. Blacking-up was for a long time widely accepted as a legitimate technique to evoke antislavery sentiments, yet it lost its immunity for criticism along the way (Worrall 35). Actors and audiences alike started to express objections because blackface made plots unrealistic and produced hideous or clownish looks. While the underlying consciousness of a white actor's true racial identity hampered processes of compassion, it was of course the premise of success in burlesque entertainment rampant from the 1840s onwards. As hybrid cases such as Zabi's appearance in *De Ooijevaar* or Van der Willegen's impersonation of Selico at the Haarlem party show, the black(ened) body engendered emotions of pain and pleasure alike. In other words, the decades around 1800 mark a turning point in the poetics of theatrical blackface. Combined with the representational strategies and tropes I will discuss below, black stage make-up seems to have been used in ways that preface minstrelizing representations of Afro-diasporic people.

"A negro needs little to enjoy his life"

In the first place, blackface minstrelsy meant to (re)assure white audiences that people of color were having a good time on the plantation and were in fact happy about their servile position. In her standard work *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman has influentially termed this trope the "cultivation of contented subjection," or the simulation of willful submission and the emphasis on the innocent pleasures of the colonized subject (49). The reflection of agency and "orchestrated amusement", whether they appeared in minstrelsy or melodrama, forcefully dissolved any possible form of resistance (Hartman 52). In the preface

to his sentimental melodrama *The Negro Slaves* [*Die Negersklaven*] of 1796, August von Kotzebue encourages his audience to sympathize with enslaved Africans and claims that his labor would be rewarded only if "the tears of the spectators mix with those of the author" (*DN* 3). Despite its unambiguous abolitionist disposition, the melodrama does not only valorize European superiority by the constellation of a white savior, it also generically lapses into musical plantation enjoyments and stereotypes of Afro-diasporic characters in ways that effectively anticipate black minstrel entertainment.

In the Netherlands, the German author Kotzebue was one of the most popular playwrights of the time: no less than 304 of his plays were performed in Dutch (Groot 45). *The Negro Slaves* was immediately adapted to the Dutch stage by P.G. Witsen Geysbeek [*De negers*] and it was performed multiple times in playhouses across the country (Amsterdam, The Hague, Groningen, Leeuwarden, Middelburg). The play revolves around a fraternal conflict between the cruel English planter John and his philanthropic brother William. During his visit in the British colony of Jamaica, William sincerely commiserates with the barbarously treated Zameo, Ada, Truro, Lilli and many other enslaved on John's sugar plantation. In order to "reward the slaves with at least one cheerful day," William urges his brother to let them have a little party. The moment John agrees, stage directions indicate that "we hear the emerging sound of kettle drums, cymbals and other negro instruments" (stage directions italicized in original). A few seconds later a "choir of male and female Negroes" enters the stage and starts to sing (*DN* 86):

> Welcome joy to every breast!
> Welcome to the heart oppressed!
> Live today,
> Dance and play,
> Thought and care be far away.
>
> Shall tomorrow's slavish toil
> Present joy and freedom spoil?
> Live today,
> Dance and play,
> Thought and care be far away.[8]

As this plantation melody suggests, the enslaved seemed able to temporarily forget their pain and sorrows at William's festivity. In reality, this scene verges the

mode of a romantic pastoral that depicted bonds of domination as enchanting relationships of paternalistic dependency and slave labor as "merely another extension of black's capacity for song and dance" (Hartman 53). Lilli, a young woman from Loango (north of the Congo estuary), enthusiastically encourages her "brothers and sisters" to come and dance with her, and "she grabs a negro by the arm": "Come, compatriot of Kongo! Dance with me" (*DN* 88). A lively tableau follows: "The drum sounds, male and female Negroes dance their favorite dance, the Calenda, clapping their hands to the rhythm of the music".[9] Dressed in ragged clothes, made up with facial blacking, holding "kettle drums, cymbals and other negro instruments", and performing the "favorite dance of the Negroes", white actors heedlessly appropriated what they presumed was "black" culture. A watercolor drawing by the famous Amsterdam stage designer François Joseph Pfeiffer shows black characters with exactly these "typical" features: darkened skin, ragged waistcloths and holding a tambourine as if it were an essential or natural property.

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha reminds us that the ideological construction of the racial Other depends centrally on the concept of "fixity". The stereotype, he argues, "is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated" (Bhabha 66). *The Negro Slaves* attests to this kind of ambivalence: an innate African sense of rhythm seems to be generally accepted as fact, but at the same time the play constantly seeks to prove this "predilection". From the very beginning of the play, for example, Lilli's presence on stage is a cordial and lively rendezvous with music and happiness in general. In the first act, she tries to cheer up her friend Ada, who is mourning the loss of her husband Zameo, and convinces her to start dancing and stop worrying (3). As Lilli narrates of Congo and Loango, she claims that her "people are ever cheerful; and live in the moment […]." Moreover, they "are excellent mummers and know how to imitate several animals; they are always enlivened whenever they hear music, and dancing never fatigues them" (*DN* 34-35). Lilli's description is a desirable and romantic conception of Africa, and at the same time a nervous defense of it. *The Negro Slaves* seems to broadcast what Toni Morrison famously called "an invented Africa" (8), that was constructed around false interpretation, delusion, and simplification.

Central to (the representation of) plantation amusement was the reflection of agency and the simulation of self-directedness, even though these festivities were always induced by the white master (Hartman 54). Indeed, the enslaved men and

women in Kotzebue's melodrama are directed to celebrate by John and William – albeit in very different ways: whereas John commands his overseer "to go get them with the whip, and make them dance" (*DN* 83), William's approach seems more encouraging as he says, "Enjoy yourselves, children! And celebrate this day" (*DN* 84). William's well-intended paternalism works as a repressive device that arrested enslaved people in the early stages of education and childhood. Their easy-to-please and happy-go-lucky mentality supported the conventional depiction of black people as infantile and artless. As Truro explains to William at some point: "A negro needs little to enjoy his life: give him a glass of pure brandy, and he will labor for weeks without complaining!" (*DN* 49). He recalls how his former master, John and William's father, allowed his slaves to make merry after a whole day of labor: "Our old master would sit down in the middle of the circle and refresh us with all kinds of drinks; and he loved for us to scream cheerfully while we danced and clapped our hands to the rhythm of the music" (*DN* 49).[10]

To be sure, *The Negro Slaves* contained explicit slave violence and very convincing antislavery sentiments, and it is instructive to remind ourselves that this will definitely have had its effects on the middle-class audiences (Köhler; Adams). Yet these romanticized scenes of revelry and recreation played out on stage mitigated the burden of slavery and magnified the allegedly celebratory dimensions of servitude. Importantly, these displays of "genuine Negro fun" (Lott 140) were received very enthusiastically by the Dutch audiences. While no extensive reviews of the Dutch productions of *The Negro Slaves* were published, let alone that its radical antislavery tone was mentioned, newspapers did invariably focus on the staged plantation amusements. According to theater announcements, the melodrama was "always performed with great satisfaction" (*Groninger Courant* 42, 1799). Newspapers reported "a specially created Pas de Deux with Tambourines" (*Groninger Courant* 38, 1799) and promoted the "choral singing, *characteristic* of the Negroes" (*Leeuwarder Courant* 26, 1798, my emphasis). Also, several theater halls scheduled an additional ballet-pantomime spectacle with all the enslaved characters to conclude the performance – the *Amsterdamsche Courant* announced this as a "closing celebration among African friends" (62, 1798), facilitating the improper notion of black togetherness and community (Hartman).

Although little is known about the performances of either the entire melodrama or these "side events," we can assume that *The Negro Slaves* developed into a permit for stereotyping exploitations of Afro-diasporic people and their harmed bodies. The "Africanist personae" produced on stage were sites on and through

which collective fantasies regarding Africa(ns) could be mediated (Morrison 17). They marked a reckless investment in and appropriation of "black" culture. As Eric Lott emphasizes, blackface was the most visual strategy to appropriate black peoples' alleged identity, but not the only one (41). It seems that melodrama as a genre allowed white audiences to enjoy the pains as well as the pleasures of enslaved people, and disseminated racist ideologies by the aesthetization of plantation amusement and the constant (re)activation of stereotypes such as the essential musical temper of African people, their easy-to-please mentality and their natural subordination.

The simulation of forbearing servants

One of the most significant episodes of "contented subjection" appears in René C. G. de Pixérécourt's stage adaptation of *Robinson Crusoe* (1805). The Dutch translation by Cornelis van de Vyver (1806) was performed multiple times in the Amsterdam City Theater, and in various other theater halls across the country.[11] The story of the shipwrecked Robinson who survived on a desolate Caribbean island with the native Friday [Vrijdag] penetrated the popular imagination of the Dutch audiences as soon as Daniel Defoe published his original novel in 1719 (Staverman 44). Friday, who is "very attached to Robinson," opens the melodrama with the following lines (6-7):

> There, two loafs of barley bread and a small bottle of rum, which Robinson has asked me to bring him as he returns from hunting. Oh! I perform whatever he demands. He is such a good master! He has rescued Friday from the Cannibals that wanted to devour him. Now, I do not own myself anymore; Friday is savage indeed, but also beholden. Friday belongs to Robinson only, whom he adores with his whole heart, and he would sacrifice all, yes all his blood, until the very last drop, for his generous master. […] I am with Robinson for *(He counts on his fingers)* twelve months, and I am so happy, cheerful and ever more contented.[12]

Friday seems unable of critically reviewing his servile position. Instead, he is comfortable with and even grateful for being a servant to the white castaway Robinson – Friday's "second father" (7). The relationship between Robinson and Friday has received much scholarly attention (Hulme; Islam; Sudan). For Syed Manzoorul Islam, Robinson does not only imperiously claim the island by "obstinately digging his heels in but, predictably enough, installs himself as a master with a slave of his own" (3). Although Friday is never called a "slave," the melodrama too clearly presents him as such. When Robinson eventually returns from hunting, stage directions indicate that "Friday runs towards him, falls on his

knees, kisses the earth, takes [Robinson's] foot and places it on his own head, as a token of his loyalty" (*RC* 8).[13] Enacted on stage, this event literally embodies black willfulness and subjugation guised as genuine complacency. It advances a colonial order which depended on mutual affection and paternal protection rather than subjugation and inequality. Such benign representations, as Hartman puts it, "transformed relations of violence and domination into those of affinity" (88). No sooner does Friday criticize colonial brutality than he enthuses that he has "such a benevolent master!" and that he does not want to be free; he is "very happy, cheerful and ever more contented" (*RC* 6-7).

The colonized subject in Pixérécourt's *Robinson Crusoe* also definitely engendered comic relief. In the original French version, Christopher Smith explains, Friday's linguistic limitations were "the cue for a good deal of dumb show" and served a comic purpose (136). European theater conventionally racialized characters by means of language and presented linguistic distortion as a congenital feature of people of color. As André Belo argued in his thought-provoking essay "Language as a Second Skin", incorrect language immediately "indicates the presence of a black figure, regardless of its physical appearance on stage, all the more so when one reads it on the page, away from the performance and the bodily representation" (16). Although Friday in Van de Vyver's play is still able to produce well-turned sentences, his language is childish and restricted. He refers to himself in third person and needs his fingers as a mnemonic device to count to twelve. Moreover, Friday keeps referring to Robinson's fire weapon as "the Thunder," even though his master repeatedly corrects him: "did I not tell you it is called a rifle?" (*RC* 10).

Throughout the melodrama, Friday is presented as a wild Carib with distinct European features and perspectives: "savage indeed, but also beholden". His character is constructed around ambivalence and exemplifies Bhabha's notion of colonial mimicry, or "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (86). Whereas Friday's unholy fear for "the Thunder" initially serves as a metaphor for his social and cultural deprivation, it comes to embody the Other's propensity for the imitation of the colonizer as soon as he learns to use Robinson's rifle in a combat against the hostile "Cannibals" in the fifth scene. The gunshot, however, frightens Friday so that he falls on the ground yelling that he has died. Only as Robinson assures him that he is not, Friday "touches himself as he rises from the ground" and realizes that "It is true! ….. Here are my head, my arms, legs, oh! I am so glad that I am alive […]" (*RC* 21).[14]

Friday, Zabi and early blackface burlesque

Although Friday is a Carib and therefore "not black: [but] tawny yellowish, or lightly burnt by the sun" (*RC* 4), it is not difficult to imagine that Friday's subjugation was a veiled reference to black Atlantic slavery (Hulme 205; Wheeler 86).[15] Not only was slavery almost exclusively connected to Afro-diasporic people, the first illustrations accompanying the novel depicted Friday with distinct sub-Sahara features. The reception in Dutch popular culture equally concedes Friday's relatedness to Atlantic slavery. In 1833, for example, the Dutch writer-duo Jan Willem de Crane and Wopke Eekhoff published a successful youth book in which they merged the adventures of the shipwrecked European, here the Frisian Thomas Havinga, with the story of Zabi, whose "heart is right and true, even though [he has] a black skin" (17). Naturally, the Dutch audiences knew Zabi as the enslaved African from Edmond G.F. de Favière's *Paul & Virginia*, which was still being performed in the early 1830s.[16]

As Roxann Wheeler has argued in relation to Defoe's novel, we are to read Friday as a "pleasing mixture" of Carib and European people (78). He is "not quite" the same as his white master, but he is also distinguished from the other inhabitants of the island – who are frankly dehumanized and figured through inaccessible grunting, peculiar musical instruments and weaponry, typical customs and "ridiculous gestures" (*RC* 120). As much as this "pleasing mixture" engendered comic and darling sketches on stage, Friday's enigmatic position made him deeply dependent on his colonizer. Robinson's mentorship produced "knowledge as of a form social control" which induced his servant to remain under his protectorate (Bhabha 87). Thus the fabrication of Friday is a reflexive scrutiny of the white European self. As Gayatri C. Spivak (1985), Toni Morrison (1992), and Rosemarie Buikema (2017), among others, have pointed out, the colonized character tends to be an instrument to codify and invigorate white identities and mentalities. Consequently, s/he is fixed as an only "partial" or incomplete presence (Bhabha 86). Friday's characterization, although simulated otherwise, is an essential negation of will and ambiguous at best. He appears as a harmless bootlicker who desires to mirror himself with his master – culminating in the final act as he leaves his biological father Iglou on the island and joins Robinson to England. Friday's readiness to please his white master and the ways in which he *almost but not quite* resembles him in language and culture, anticipated the mid-century stock caricatures of the contented and naïve black servant.

In *Paul & Virginia* too, black characters are presented as gullible and fundamentally forbearing. After running away from his cruel master Dorval, Zabi

is found in the woods by the young couple Paul and Virginia. Moved by his misery, they "invite" him to become their second house servant: "Come, unfortunate man! Come with us: you will help Domingo; from now on you will lack for nothing" (9).[17] Zabi is grateful to have met "such generous whites" and ecstatically sings of his contentment in a simple faux-black dialect – unlike Friday, he is *not* able to produce grammatical sentences. Domingo himself rarely speaks, unless to express affection for his benevolent masters. Even if the melodrama conventionally transmits an abolitionist model of slavery, the romantic prospect of protection by compassionate masters ultimately annuls the possibility of redress and (re)establishes the notion of blacks' inherent subordination and suitability for bondage.

As Eric Lott argued, early minstrel shows emerged as entr'acts, dances and solo songs in legitimate repertoire; it "remained an art of brief burlesque and comic relief throughout much of the 1830s" and only became a fully-fledged genre in the decades to follow (Lott 76). Although blackface minstrelsy developed as a distinct American genre in the specific social, cultural and economic context of the Antebellum United States (Lott; Jones), it seems that Dutch theater poetics of the early nineteenth century had created a fertile ground for the appropriation of blackness in very similar ways. Like *The Negro Slaves*, Favière's melodrama was replete with sentimental and racialized musical intermezzos by the famous French composer Rodolphe Kreutzer, including a "choir of negroes" in the sixth scene. Moreover, and as noted in the introduction, Zabi's song was performed in isolation from the rest of the melodrama in the theater-café *De Ooijevaar*, which was famous for showing short burlesque skits and musical entertainment. When deciding to bill "the Black from *Paul & Virginie*" (Simonsz 89) the management presumably aimed to provide vaudeville entertainment rather than sentimental commitment. The performer in "the role of the black negro slave" is explicitly called a "comic actor" in Simonsz's review of that night (89). Interestingly, Simonsz also alludes to the minstrelizing ironic distance demarcated between the blacked-up actor and his persona: his praise particularly goes to the performer's ability to successful *imitate* the "movements and gestures, *representing* those of a very cheerful Indian" (89, my emphasis). In Hartman's words, blackface in the frame of melodrama was "a masquerade no less than in minstrelsy" (28).

Whereas most large theaters in the Netherlands catered for white middle-class audiences, (Ruitenbeek 504), theater-cafés such as *De Ooijevaar* attracted people from all walks of life. In his review, Simonsz attests that the auditorium presented "a mixture of all orders, Burgers, Farmers, lower and higher classes". Yet he was

surprised to see, "besides these usual spectators, a large number of Blacks and Moors; it appeared that all Black servants from Amsterdam had gathered there" (93).[18] Little is known about the presence of Afro-diasporic people in the Netherlands, but the fact that they appeared in (at least some) white cultural spaces testifies of the increasing number of people of color the larger Dutch cities of 1800 (Haarnack, Hondius & Kolfin). Although it is difficult to retrieve these peoples' experiences, Esther Schreuder assumes that they would have been confronted with racism in the white public sphere (238).[19] This seems not at all surprising, given that popular representations of blackness had helped to crystallize racist ideologies and stereotypes since the late eighteenth-century.

With the arrival of the "Lantum Ethopian Serenaders" in the late 1840s, the Dutch audiences were confronted with American minstrelsy for the first time.[20] As Elisabeth Koning has recently mapped out, these serenaders were received with great enthusiasm. Newspapers invariably praised how Dryce, Laurain, Adwin, Morly and Steiner, "acted as if they came from the interiors of Africa" (*Utrechtsche provinciale en stads-courant* qtd. in Koning 556). They were scheduled in large theater halls and smaller playhouses across the country, and (twice) even at the royal court in The Hague. Their standard performance consisted of two parts, in which the blacked-up actors "sang the cherished songs of the Negroes and imitated their dances" (*Nieuwe Rotterdamsche courant* 191, 1847). Among the many songs, the Dutch apparently even had their favorites: the harmonious refrain of *Mary Blanc* moved every single spectator, and the comic *Buffalo girls* made them roar with laughter. The same newspaper encouraged "all devotees of cheerfulness to go visit these *darkies*" (ibidem, italics in original). As Koning points out, a key element in these blackface performances was the anti-emancipatory humor, which was realized through a combination of dandy costumes, funny gestures and linguistic distortion. Although these "darkies" may wish to resemble their white counterparts, they will never fully succeed (Koning 563). They are, to quote Bhabha again, "*almost the same but not quite*" (86).

Then in the early 1850s, audiences went crazy about the Dutch stage adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's infamous abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Koning 562).[21] Today, both the novel and the numerous dramatic adaptations are criticized as key texts of romanticized slavery and minstrelizing stereotypes (Lott; Hartman; Sharma). Stereotypes included the carefree happy-go-lucky in the character of Sam, the "dark mammy" in the character of Mammy and the "pickaninny" stereotype of black children in the character of Topsy (Sharma 51). And Uncle Tom was not undisputed himself: in his essay "Everybody's Protest

Novel," James Baldwin referred to Uncle Tom as the illiterate and long-suffering slave, who was "phenomenally forbearing" (17).

Dutch (theater) historians rightly claim that the epitome of blackface ridicule in the Netherlands started from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, and that it is still exhibited today in the figure of Black Pete. As I hope to have demonstrated, however, several of the components for blackface stereotyping were already present in the earlier Dutch repertoire. That is not to say that productions such as *Selico, The Negro Slaves* or *Paul & Virginia* were direct predecessors of blackface minstrelsy – this would be impossible as, again, minstrelsy emerged in very specific circumstances (Jones; Lott). What it does mean, I propose, is that Dutch audiences were not unfamiliar with some of the tropes, aesthetics and politics of the Anglo-American genre that enters Dutch performance culture in the 1840s and 1850s. Melodrama and ballets performed in the opening decades of the nineteenth-century Netherlands were unmistakably embroidered with minstrel fare: the keen efforts to resemble Afro-diasporic people by wearing skin colored stockings, putting on tawny make-up and even imitating frizzy hair; the nearly obsessive investment with "black culture"; the simulation of agency and willful subjection; the *almost the same but not quite* contented servants; the use of musical amusements as a core rhetoric to illuminate the celebratory dimensions of slavery and servitude; and in some cases even the demarcation of generic ironic distance.

If the racializing practices of the pre-minstrel repertoire are not brutal in the candid ways of mid-century blackface ridicule, at the very least they were essentializing and fixated difference and subordination in very similar ways. Almost without exception, Africanist characters were presented in terms of their servility, naïveté, and physical aptitude.[22] Blackface impersonations developed into a disgraceful appropriation and a controlling submission of black people at the turn of the century. Hartman's central argument that pleasure and entertainment are significant sites for the (re)production of racialized (as well as gendered) subjection, seems valid for Dutch performance culture of the early nineteenth century.

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[1] Original quote in Simonsz: "een zeer verheugden Indiaan" (89). Unless stated otherwise, all translations to English are my own. The term "Indian" here does not correlate with an American ethnicity. From the eighteenth century onwards, it was a rather unambiguous marker of human variety, "Otherness," and subordination altogether. An important note on language in general: many of the historical sources used in this article contain problematic and offensive terms, phrases and ideas. I am aware that by citing them, I reproduce them. I hope to provide a critical context in which these citations can be read for purposes contrary to those for which they were initially used. I would like to thank Gurminder K. Bhambra, Jeff Bowersox and the anonymous reviewer of this article for their generous feedback on earlier versions. This publication was made possible with the financial support of the Research Foundation of Flanders – FWO.

[2] One of the oldest Dutch plays referring to slavery is G.A. Bredero's *Moortje* (1613), in which Ritsart denounces it as an inhumane practice and a blasphemous villainy, but later offers his lover a black servant (Moris) as a gift. As Bert Paasman noted, it is also one of the earliest contestations of how slavery was rejected from the perspective of Christianity and humanity, but accepted in terms of self-interest (116). In *Staging Asia*, Manjusha Kuruppath has studied the function of seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century theatre in shaping the Dutch imagination of Asia (one the plays she examines is Joost van den Vondel's famous tragedy *Zungchin* from 1667).

[3] As will become clear throughout this article, many popular plays in the Netherlands of 1800 are translations from French and German, for which the Dutch audiences around 1800 seem to have had a distinct predilection (Ruitenbeek 502; Groot). I am greatly indebted to Anna de Haas, who offered me a repertoire list of the Amsterdam City Theater in a searchable Word-document some years ago.

[4] The rich farce culture and chambers of rhetoric of the early modern Low Countries also engaged with black stage make-up, for comic or moral purposes. In the *Seven Works of Clemency* [*Zeven Spelen van die Wercken der Bermhertichеyd*], for example, blackness is associated with unsightliness and immorality. I thank Youri Desplenter and Dirk Coigneau for their help in this matter.

[5] The Noord-Hollands Archief in Haarlem holds all the memo's, costume designs, resolutions of the Theater Society of Haarlem, Leerzaam Vermaak. See https://www.archieven.nl/.

[6] From the mid-seventeenth-century onwards, the Amsterdam City Theater started to occasionally cast black boys ("Morianen") for non-speaking servant roles or for mere "decorative" purposes (Albach 389). The first black actor playing a leading part in Amsterdam was the African-American performer Ira Aldridge in 1855, on his European tour in the role of Othello. Until that time, and long after, white performers blacked-up their countenance to race their characters.

[7] This play was a translation of the play *Die Sklavinn in Zurinam* (1805), which was in itself a stage adaption of John Gabriel Stedman's *A Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (1796).

[8] To retain the adjusted rhyme scheme, I here quoted the song from the English translation of the play (Anonymous 48). The content of the song does not differ from the German original, nor from the Dutch version.

[9] The "Calenda" was a popular slave dance on the Caribbean islands. Médéric Louis-Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry (1796) described the Calenda as an "animated, metrical and graceful" dance in which one pair of dancers (or more) advances to the centre of a circle and begins to dance as a couple. The "dance is based on a single step in which the performer advances successively each foot, then several times tapping heel and toe […]. One sees evolutions and turns around the partner, who also turns and moves with the lady... The lady holds the ends of a handkerchief which she waves" (Moreau qtd. in Gerstin 7-8).

[10] Original quote in *De negers*: "Hoe dikwyls hebben wy s'avonds, na volbrachten arbeid, op deze plaats gezongen en gesprongen! Dan zat de oude heer in 't midden van den kring, verkwikte ons met allerlei dranken, en hadt het gaanre dat wy lustig schreeuwden, als de ketteltrommel klonk, en wy by den dans de maat wakker in de handen sloegen. […] de neger behoeft zo weinig tot vreugde: geef hem een glas onvervalschten rum, zo arbeidt hy weeken lang zonder morren" (49).

[11] This article focuses particularly on the Dutch melodrama and does not attempt to offer a comparative with the original French version, nor with Defoe's novel. In her recent article, Lotte Jensen compares Van de Vyver's melodrama with the anonymous play *Robinson Crusoe op zyn eiland* (1790).

[12] Original quote in *Robinson Crusoe*: "Zie daar twee garstenkoeken en een klein fleschjen rum, die Robinson mij gelastte voor zijn middagmaal hier te brengen; wanneer hij van de jagt terug koomt. & Ik moet nauwkeurig alles doen wat hij beveelt. Het is zulk een goede meester! hij heeft den armen Vrydag van de Cannibaalen verlost, die hem wilden opëeten. Ook behoor ik niet meer aan mij zelven; Vrydag is wel wild, maar echter ekentelijk. Vrydag behoort nu alleen aan Robinson, bemint hem met al zijn hart en zou al, al zijn bloed, tot den laatsten droppel, voor zijnen, edelmoedigen meester geeven. […] Ik tel nu reeds – (Hij telt op zijne vingers) twaalf maanden bij Robinson, en ben zeer blijde, vrolijk en steeds meer te vreden" (67).

[13] Original quote in *Robinson Crusoe*: "*Vrydag hem ziende, gaat naar hem toe, valt op zijne knieën, kuscht de aarde, neemt een zijner voeten, zet dien op zijn hoofd, ten teken van getrouwheid*."

[14] Original quote in *Robinson Crusoe*: "Het is waar! ….. Daar is mijn hoofd, mijne armen, beenen, ô! Des te beter, ik ben regt blijde dat ik leve […]" (21).

[15] This quote also signals an enduring climatic understanding of race until the early nineteenth century. See also Roxann Wheeler's *The Complexion of Race*.

[16] I have traced Dutch performances in Leeuwarden (4 February 1832), Vlissingen (26 December 1832), and Breda (4 January 1834), but the melodrama was also performed in French and German until the late 1830s.

[17] Original quote in *Paul & Virginia*: "Kom, ongelukkig man! kom, ga met ons: gy zult Domingo helpen; u zal voortaan niets ontbreken" (9).

[18] Original quote in Simonsz: "dan vinden wij een mengsel van allerlei standen, Burgers, Boeren, meer en mindere klasse van den burgerstand, […]; den avond, welke ik aldaar doorgebragt hebbe, was de Zaal, behalve met de overige gewoone aanschouwers, nog bovendien met een groot aantal Zwarten en Mooren voorzien, zoo dat het scheen dat alle de Zwarte dienstboden uit geheel Amsterdam aldaar voor dien avond beurs hielden" (93-94).

[19] Schreuder does not explain how racism in these contexts took shape exactly. As studies on the presence of black people in the early nineteenth-century British metropoles show, white responses to Afro-diasporic people ranged from social discrimination resulting into beggary to blatant racist comments (Bressey; Gretchen). In relation to Simonsz's account of the event in *De Ooijevaar*, many questions arise about the implications of the social stratification and experiences of black people in Amsterdam: Did the anti-slavery politics of these plays and the uses of blackness to try to evoke sympathy mitigate the effects of the crass stereotypes? Did black audiences find humor in these burlesques, even if understood differently from white audiences? Were black servants welcome in other (theater) venues or was *De Ooijevaar* an exception?

[20] Koning claims that the "Lantum Ethiopean Serenaders" were British minstrels. This is not correct; they were American (Lott). The troupe first traveled to Great Britain, were they were immensely popular and were even plagiarized by other performers who also copied their band name. The "Ethiopean Serenaders" performed in the Netherlands in the Spring and Summer of 1847, and in the German states in the Autumn. At least some of them (Dryce for sure) came back to the Netherlands in the Summer of 1849.

[21] The version performed in the Netherlands was a translation of a French vaudeville production (1854). It was titled *De negerhut van Oom Tom. Drama in acht bedrijven van Dumanoir en* Dennery, *naar het Fransch door Cornelissen en Beems* (Koning 562).

[22] I should note here that in some critical dramas, characters of color actively protested against their enslavement. Examples are *Monzongo, or the royal slave* (Nicolaas Simon van Winter 1774), *The white and the black* (Johannes Kisselius after A.G.P. le Brun 1789), *Adonis, or the loyal negro* (anonymous after L.F.G. Béraud & A.J.N. de Rosny 1798), and *Kraspoekol, or slavery* (Dirk van Hogendorp 1800). However, their agency is denied and black resistance or anger was always represented in terms of bestiality and primitiveness.