Wanting to know everything in a complex world

An interview with Allison Blakely



BY SUZANNE DE GRAAF[1]

In the fall semester of 2007 Professor Allison Blakely visited the Netherlands, a country that he studied extensively for his acclaimed book on racial imagery, Blacks in the Dutch World: The Evolution of Racial Imagery in a Modern Society *(Indiana University Press, 1994). His other work on the black experience in Europe, Russia and the Negro:* Blacks in Russian History and Thought *(Howard University Press, 1986), won the American Book Award in 1988. Professor Blakely published numerous articles in a myriad of national and international journals. Blakely is currently Professor of European and Comparative History and George and Joyce Wein Professor of African-American Studies at Boston University. In 2006 he was elected president of the Phi Beta Kappa Society, and in the spring of 2008 he will be a visiting fellow at Harvard University's W.E.B. Du Bois Institute.*

On the 6th of November, I had the opportunity to attend his seminar "The Other Culture Clash: Is colour prejudice a thing of the past?" at Leiden University. During these two hours, we discussed the evolution of racial imagery in the United States and Europe from early modern times to the present, as well as the increasingly complex questions that surround the formation of identity in a multicultural society. This proved to be a good starting point for the following interview, in which I was able to ask Professor Blakely not only more about these issues, but also about his career, his current research, and—especially interesting for a Dutch MA student like me—his experiences in the Netherlands, which ultimately led to Blacks in the Dutch World. *And so a conversation followed about the appeal of history, the development of a career, the joy of researching new subjects and the challenges of investigating an ever more complex world—all with a slight Dutch flavour.*

How did your interest in history begin?

It began seriously when I was a teenager in Portland, Oregon. I cannot really explain

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it in logical terms, but I trace it back to one experience that I had while riding on a bus in the early 1950s. It was one of these buses with electronic attachments to a cable. Somehow the cable became disconnected, and the bus had to stop. While I was sitting there all of a sudden I started wondering, "Where do I fit in all of this?". As I grew older I became a really passionate reader. I spent a lot of time in the library. It was a good way—from my mother's perspective—to keep me off the streets and stop me from getting into trouble with some of the other boys in my neighbourhood. So I made her happy, and it made me happy when I was not in school to spend a lot of time in the public library. I became very interested in academic subjects and I enjoyed school. When I went to college at the University of Oregon I did not know what I wanted to major in for certain. I thought I wanted to become an engineer, so I began thinking of engineering as my chosen profession. But I discovered there were very few electives in terms of choices of subjects for classes to take in an engineering program. So I became more interested in the liberal arts—history, philosophy, literature, and the life sciences. I wanted to learn a lot about a lot of different things, and when I came to a choice in the advanced years of college I discovered that history seemed to be the *one* formal discipline that included a lot of my interests. So history for me was a way to not make a choice of specialising. By the time I decided to go on to graduate training you had to choose some specialty; I decided I would specialise in Comparative History or something broader than just U.S. history. At that time there was no formal field in comparative history or world history, so because I am an American, and because I had taken almost exclusively American history in my undergraduate training, I decided to specialise in European history.

Because you had not covered that previously?

I had taken one course. I decided deliberately to specialise in a broader kind of historical area. By studying something beyond what I mistakenly thought I would naturally know because I was an American, I would have a more comprehensive kind of competence in terms of understanding history when I got a degree. I thought I could know American history on my own but if I wanted to understand the world, I should specialise in that broader framework and then I would have more at the end. And not only that, I decided to specialise in Russian history because I was very interested in revolution. I was very interested in Russian literature—that was one of the things I had begun to read as a teenager. And I have been very happy with the way it turned out. My doctorate is in modern European history with a specialisation in Russia—but once I had the degree I could finally pursue that dream of doing comparative studies, and that is what I have done with my career. I started with a focus on Russia but I branched out in a way that made me more of a scholar of the history of democracy. Even in Russian history my specialty was the Russian revolutionary movement, but focusing on popular democracy, which that movement was aiming at. I have always been fascinated with that. It was only later in my career that I developed this interest in European dimensions of the African diaspora. And of course that was an outgrowth of my own background, being of black African descent and noticing, as I progressed in my studies, that this was a neglected area of history. So it was some place where I thought I could make a contribution because in the meantime I had gained a number of foreign language competencies

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so I could do formal research in five languages. I could go deeper in trying to piece together some of this history of the African diaspora than a person who had the interest, but didn't have the tools to be able to do primary research.

What made you study so many languages? Did you study them out of interest, or did you need them for your research?
Initially I started with Russian in high school because I wanted to read Russian literature in the original. And then I discovered I enjoyed learning the languages so I added German (at least the reading knowledge). For my doctoral degree [at the University of California, Berkeley] I had to be able to conduct research in at least two foreign languages, and then in the course of the actual research I wanted to pursue, I had to learn French and Dutch because of my chosen areas to explore.

Was there a specific event that triggered your interest in the history of the Netherlands?
There was a specific event. I was actually in the Netherlands conducting research in Russian history at the International Institute for Social History (IISG) in Amsterdam. I was looking at archives that were not yet officially open containing the original documents from one of the Russian revolutionary parties, the socialist revolutionaries. I made a couple of visits to the Netherlands to explore those materials just in summer research trips. And I happened to be in the Netherlands in the mid-nineteen-seventies, when Surinam became independent [in 1975]. And what triggered my interest in actually *studying* Dutch history was experiencing a certain amount of racism after the sudden increase in the black population in the Netherlands itself. I had no warning that there would be this kind of experience because I had found the Netherlands so different from the United States up until that point. But then all of a sudden, because I began to speak a little Dutch in the shops and on the street, I began to be treated as if I was a Surinamer. And to my surprise, that was not very pleasant in those days. And that was such a surprise that I wanted to know: what were the historical reasons that something like this could occur in the Netherlands, which had a reputation for tolerance?

That's very interesting! Originally we wanted to ask you if you had found any differences between the Dutch self-image of tolerance and your own research. Now it turns out you did not even have to do research, because you experienced it yourself...
That's right, it was not about reading other people's accounts. But I had the positive image also from my own experience because I had been treated so well during those first visits in the mid-1970s. I just thought this place that had sheltered the American Pilgrims and Jews from Iberia, that had sheltered Huguenot refugees from persecution in France, and was a major place to give asylum to people suffering various late-twentieth-century kinds of turmoil in their own countries, was a safe haven. Then I was brought down to earth by this realisation that even here you could have these changes in public attitudes. I think it was mainly because of the sudden appearance of the new population in the late 1970s, which put a certain pressure on housing, or maybe the job market. It is not clear to me whether it was really competition for jobs or just the perception of competition. Maybe the percep-

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tion is more important than the reality. I think there was a perception among the Dutch population that there was this unwanted sudden influx of outsiders who looked and acted differently. Maybe this was just too much of a shock to take without some kind of backlash. I did not really understand it because I had just assumed that these kinds of things were not there at all. I just thought this was such a wonderful, peaceful, civil society. Don't get me wrong, I still recognised that the Dutch laws and the Dutch social system were some of the most advanced and inclusive in the world. I still realised that, but I was just surprised at what I perceived as nevertheless the presence of some of the same kinds of negative attitudes that I was so familiar with in other societies. The Netherlands, France and Scandinavia had a reputation that for being places that especially African-Americans, musicians and just ordinary people, had often found to be a relief from the racism they routinely experienced.

You mentioned that around this time, you were starting to speak some Dutch. Did you encounter these negative new attitudes when talking to people, or just walking on the streets?
In a way, I think both. In the shops I was looked at more suspiciously than before. I was accustomed to that at home but not in the Netherlands. And then when I started to speak Dutch, little did I know that would make it worse! I should have spoken English and then I suppose there would have been a sigh of relief from the shopkeeper and I could have perhaps experienced my earlier kind of reception. But I was not yet sophisticated enough to realise that. The other way that I experienced it in public without verbal communication was in the public transport. The seat next to me would always be the last one to be occupied, if at all. I felt that this had changed. I felt there was more apprehensiveness from the Dutch. Still, if I had to put my reception and my experience in the Netherlands on a scale of one to ten, it was still somewhere around a seven. But it *had* been a ten, and I didn't understand why. And then, after all, I was a historian and so it just tweaked my curiosity. I asked myself: "Is there a reason for this? Is there something that I can identify that might be useful, that could help people to understand better that we have got to learn how to get along?" It was probably pretty naïve in itself, but that was my motivation.

Do you still feel that your research can contribute something to the way people interact with each other?
I am less confident now than I was before that I can contribute something that will be useful. I have a sense that it has all become much more complex now, with this new element of the clash between Islam and the West. I think my concerns have been somewhat overshadowed in some ways, and it is more complex because part of the Islamic population is also black. In France for example, they estimated that about thirty percent of those youths in the *banlieux*, the people at the heart of the disturbance, were black as well as Muslim. And then there were blacks living in these poor areas who where *not* Muslim as well. So it is a very complex kind of social dynamic that I had not bargained on when I started doing this kind of research over twenty years ago. I never realised how complicated it could get. So I am also not certain at how helpful the products of my investigation will be or how much attention they will be given, because so many people have their attention

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riveted on violence and other kinds of more conspicuous clashes. What I'm talking about may just be a little bit too subtle and too academic. Or it could be that, with things swirling at such a pace, people just do not have time to even think about these issues so much as simply responding to crises. I hope I am not being too pessimistic... I am still not pessimistic enough to just stop what I am doing and try to take Voltaire's advice and just go tend my own garden, stick my head in the ground.

You could also be researching for the sake of knowledge.
There are certain kinds of intellectual activity that I enjoy just because I enjoy it. I enjoy translation of certain kinds of materials, poetry, for example. I enjoy trying to write a little poetry. I enjoy trying to write music and to play a little bit. So I do those kinds of things just because I enjoy it. Most of my more academic kinds of efforts have been pragmatically motivated. I started out thinking—and again, perhaps naïvely—that a lot of what is wrong with the world is a lack of understanding, both in terms of race relations and in terms of other kinds of societal problems. I thought that all *I* had to do was become a good teacher, and perhaps influence the next generation of leaders in society. I thought that everything could become better with education and understanding. Yet the longer I have lived and the longer I have taught, the less optimistic I am that people learn from history. And it's not because we *can't* learn from history. What I have learned is that we *don't*. It is not that the history does not teach us useful lessons that might be applied beneficially. It is because the will is not there among key elements of society to put into practice the lessons we have learned from history. If you look at what is taking place at this moment for example in the Middle East, it is not for lack of knowledge—at least not for the lack of knowledge being out there about what could be done to improve things. It is the lack of will by those who are in power, who are in positions to actually enact policies, to bring about what is desirable. So what I have learned is that the critical points of intervention into world affairs—to the extent that human beings can influence world affairs—are often not under the control of those with the knowledge and with the values that I would prefer. And so that has given me a whole different perspective on how effective anything I teach can be in influencing the way of the world.

Coming to your book Blacks in the Dutch World. *What kind of effect do you think that raising awareness about racial imagery will have? Will it be beneficial in some way?*
My hope has always been that there are enough people of good will out there who, even if they might be unconscious racists, might be influenced enough to be brought into an awareness that might do some good. But of course this is the kind of hope that you can never actually confirm whether it has been realised or not. It will often happen out there without feedback. One encouraging thing is that I have seen an increase in the number of people actually engaging in related research of their own, which tells me that at least my efforts have been reinforced, projected further, by the energy of others. And sometimes into areas that I would not have tried to explore. So that is one of the kinds of things I think that university professors hope for; but you can never really plan on it. So I guess that is the brightest kind of result that I have ever achieved. But I am continually reminded how unhap-

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py a story I have gotten myself into. There are so few happy endings along the trails that I try to follow and in the different aspects of this research.

Can you give some examples of what scholars elaborating on your research are working on?
One current example in the Netherlands that immediately comes to mind is Esther Schreuder, who a few years ago completed a master's thesis at the University of Amsterdam in art history. She says she was initially inspired by my book *Blacks in the Dutch World* and is at the moment hard at work on a major exhibit on Africans in Dutch and Flemish art, to be mounted next summer at the *Nieuwe Kerk* in Amsterdam.

A recent example of some influence from my book *Russia and the Negro: Blacks in Russian History and Thought* can be seen in an anthology on Russian literature by several authors who are mostly unknown to me; yet a number of them cite my book in their chapters.[2]

Several times in your research you have written about the Dutch Santa Claus tradition, in which Saint Nick (Sinterklaas) *is accompanied by a black figure whom the Dutch call "Black Pete"* (Zwarte Piet). *As you note in your book, this figure has been highly controversial for years.*[3] *Recently, Dutch television has consciously tried to alter the image of Pete as a black man by introducing Petes who are blue, orange, lilac or shocking pink, explaining to the children that this happened when Pete sailed through a rainbow. Nowadays, there are also more St. Nicholas figures made out of brown chocolate and Pete figures made out of white chocolate. What do you think about these developments?*
It is very complicated and obviously associated with this whole broader identity question. It strikes me that the *Sinterklaas* tradition is very closely associated with traditional Dutch culture. And I suppose the ideal would be to come up with some resolution that would still allow a certain amount of distinctive character to this tradition, but at the same time remove its offensive character. That's why I thought the solution I came up with in an unpublished, rejected essay, was not a bad one. And that is to have *Zwarte Piet* be *zwart* but not in the old negative, highly derogatory stereotypical forms. Have *Sinterklaas* and *Zwarte Piet* as companions, and have them as a symbol of national unity, rather than one being a saint and the other being a devil that hauls bad children away. This has been a more complex question since I wrote that essay because now increasingly the issue of Islam and the Muslim community has surfaced. The question is, if it is going to be a unified Netherlands how do you prioritise the white saint and the black companion, leaving out the other groups? So perhaps there might be some way of honouring the multicultural nature of twenty-first century Dutch society without totally renouncing what was bicultural and now could be multicultural.

You have mentioned the complexity one encounters when asking questions about racial identity in Europe. Did this complexity make it harder to research black history in a European context than it would have been in an African-American context?
What I have always found about research in the Netherlands is accessibility to

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sources that I think is actually freer than what I find at home. It may be in part because there had not been this kind of research before when I was working on the topic between 1982 and 1993. If only I could come up with the right questions to ask I could find sources that were not viewed as in any way questionable by the bibliographers or the establishment if you will. I was able to find a lot because I had done enough initial investigation to know where to look for sources, and because I found a considerable amount of assistance from people who knew about this kind of source material but did not want to deal with it themselves. In the United States I could not have found very much about this kind of subject matter; there is that kind of distance.

I can also imagine that it was not the kind of topic that was researched at the time.
Well, not at all! That's why it was waiting there for me. It was a sensitive subject for Dutch scholars—and I found the same thing in France. I don't think they would have wanted to be the ones to write about this. Maybe now that is more possible than before because now you have a society that is more multicultural and so there is a greater interest in these kinds of subjects as legitimate scholarly subjects. But they were not thought of as important earlier within the established academic circles in Europe. And the people who would logically have pursued this kind of research of course would be people of predominantly black African descent from the former colonies; but very few of them were highly educated. Very few of them had doctoral degrees or were in a position to do this. And if they did have such credentials and if they wanted to advance in the profession they might have been very hesitant to pursue subject areas that might be considered embarrassing.

Do you feel your findings and those of your colleagues who have researched the history of blacks in the European diaspora have challenged prevailing views among historians?
Yes, absolutely so. I think the main achievement in that regard is the extent to which we have revealed the actual presence, and at times significance, of blacks in European societies. I have found that once this presence and significance is known, other scholars in various disciplines have become attracted to the subject area. There are literally countless works with interests related to mine that have been published over the past several years.[4]

What are you working on now?
What I am trying to do is to look at the respective histories of blacks in different European societies and do a comparative overview of those narratives. There is more of a history in, let's say, England, France or The Netherlands than there is in the rest, but I want to do a comparative overview of all of those histories, coming down from the Middle Ages to now and see what that history is. Then I want to see how those respective histories are converging with the present in which you have a larger actual black population in Europe than ever before. And the kind of negative stereotypes that I was sharing with you today, and that can be found in my books, illustrate how history can clash with the present. Even the controversial nature of *Zwarte Piet* now is a case of history clashing with the present. But you can also see

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a similar kind of clash in terms of other aspects of the social interaction of Europeans with these groups that were formerly part of their empires—but not actually people you had to live with at home. You could live with them in the colonies, where you dominated them, but now, living with them at home, sometimes in the same neighbourhoods, in the same jobs, without the hierarchical earlier structure, that is an interesting kind of dynamic to try to sort out: how are the histories melding with the present?

Do you think that the results of this research will yield new viewpoints that could also be useful for African history or African-American history?
I'm counting on it! You could look at my frame of exploration as sort of circum-Atlantic. We are talking about the African-American-European exchange, because that is what has been going on in terms of this African diaspora history and my interest in the European dimensions of it. And so I think there should be an audience in all these different parts of the world that should be interested in what I have to say. Especially with the new interest now in the new immigration to Europe, only a small part of which is this black population.

Notes

1 Suzanne de Graaf is an MA student at Leiden University, where she is specialising in the history of migration. She is currently writing her thesis about Dutch perceptions of people from the Dutch East Indies who visited the Netherlands during their leaves-of-absence, and how inhabitants of the colony saw the metropolitan Dutch, between 1920 and 1940. Suzanne did her BA in history at Humboldt University in Berlin and she is broadly interested in the history of cultural exchange.
2 C.T. Nepomnyashchy, et al., eds. *Under the Sky of My Africa: Alexander Pushkin and Blackness* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2006).
3 The figure of *Zwarte Piet* has always had a somewhat ambiguous role. Descended from a devil hauled through the streets by St. Nicholas on horseback on 5 December, he has evolved into a black- or brown-skinned man who acts as a servant to St. Nicholas and is both a clown and a bogeyman to children. His ambiguity also shows in the way he is depicted: he carries both a sack full of sweets and toys to reward obedient children with, and a bundle of birch twigs to punish disobedient ones. *Zwarte Piet* is also said to put especially disobedient children into his sack and take them to Spain, were he and St. Nicholas reside during the year. The bogeyman aspect has been softened over the decades, but *Zwarte Piet* still shares traits that have been used to stereotype blacks, both in appearance and in behaviour: he has thick, black, curly hair, full red lips, brown skin and he wears big golden earrings; he is dressed in the attire of a sixteenth-century page; he is a servant more than a companion; and often acts clownish and childlike. For more information on the Dutch St. Nicholas tradition, see Allison Blakely, *Blacks in the Dutch World: The Evolution of Racial Imagery in a Modern Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 39-49.
4 For fairly recent examples, see: David Dabydeen, John Gilmore and Cecily Jones, eds. *The Oxford Companion to Black British History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Peter Martin and Christine Alonzo, eds. *Zwischen Charleston und Stechschritt: Schwarze im Nationalsozialismus* (Hamburg: Dolling und Galitz Verlag, 2004); Tyler Stovall. *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996); and Maxim Matusevich, ed. *Africa in Russia, Russia in Africa: Three Centuries of Encounters* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 2006).

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