Out of character: debating Dutchness, narrating citizenship

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How Dutchness became a public problem: from national character to public question

It was right up to the 1950’s that the concept of national character was used in public and intellectual life more or less self-evidently when articulating the kinds of differences that could make Dutchness visible and conceivable (Van Ginkel 1999; Van Heerikhuizen 1985; Aerts & Te Velde 1999). In the decades after, it slowly but surely shifted in meaning and use. It was increasingly associated with an out-dated vision of national distinction that could lead to a wholly suspect racialisation and biologicisation of differences between groups (Van Ginkel 1999). Even though the international and scientific rejection of racial taxonomies was already well under way, it took some time before racial terminology became associated with anachronistic and undesirable ways of speaking about difference publicly. As we have already seen, intellectuals like Van Doorn still routinely spoke about ‘races’ in order grasp the problems and tensions concerning difference, whereas other intellectuals, such as Abram de Swaan, were beginning to articulate difference in an altogether more ‘modern’ way. Politics was not different in this respect (Jones 2007). As is often pointed out, public commemoration of WOII had profound consequences. New generations were beginning to remember the war in new ways (De Haan 2008b). The horrors of the WOII were beginning to be remembered not as the assault on a small and innocent nation, but as the persecution of specific victimised groups – particularly from the 1970’s onward (Van Ginkel 2011) – and ‘race’ became increasingly associated with morally repugnant forms of politics and large-scale violence (Goldberg 2006; Romeyn 2014). In this view, ‘race’ is something that ought to be left behind. It is a horror, painfully remembered but also pointedly rejected.

National character forms an uncomfortable object in relation to these changing speech rules about ‘race’. The discourse of national characters is extensively tied up with natural, somatic differences presumed to be lodged in bodies of national persons (Leerssen 2000). Moreover, the logic of national characterisations prescribes national differences to be differences between entities – character types – that may have a variety of manifestations yet stem from an unchanging constitution. The problem within characterological discourse is where
and how to find traces of evidence within history of something that is itself transhistorical. Notions of racial difference have played a major role in helping people to resolve such questions. Within narratives of Dutchness that focused on a post-war rejection of racism and xenophobia and an embrace of international cooperation and diplomacy in the new Atlantic relationship, the idea that the Dutch nation was essentially delimited by a national character became distinctly anachronistic. However, the demise of a characterological discourse does not entail the demise of nationalism as such. In fact, the post-war period is marked by enthusiastic and dynamic attempt to reinvigorate and further develop the national community (Van Ginkel 2004). These were initiatives set up by religious, intellectual and political elites with the distinct aim to civilise, enlighten and emancipate the uncivilised, uneducated and subjected. Attempts to ‘break through’ stale and rigid party political boundaries was also informative for ideas about a more coherent national union. The lapse of national character into a past that was-once-but-is-no-more was thereby accompanied by new, inventive ways to articulate Dutchness.

**The dwindling self-evidence of national character**

What is it precisely that fades into the background when a characterological discourse becomes out-dated? The concept of national character affords a number of possibilities that need to be explicated in order to better understand what changed when its uses changed and, particularly, its significance for public articulations of Dutchness shifted.

First and foremost, national character, particularly the Dutch ‘volkskarakter’ and ‘volksaard’, calls forth an external referent: a Volk. Itself a highly complex notion (Mol & Van Lieshout 2005 [1989]: 190; Stuurman 2009), volk has the peculiar tendency to be a genealogical and a cultural object. That is, a volk is a people that is born out of each other and a people that lives its biography with each other. Volk may be best understood to be part of the biopolitical governmentality as it was institutionalised in the 18th and 19th centuries (Canguilhem 1989; Foucault 2005 [1966]; 2003). A volk lives and is able to prolong its healthy existence by caring for itself. National character thereby involves an external object – a volk that is in need of care, healing, cultivation, protection and preservation. Such care is not only or primarily deployed through the development of health care institutions and a penal system, but also through the maintenance and cultivation of hearts and minds: education, culture, memory and self-awareness. When dealing with a volk we see both the erection of national health care and the erection of national statues. Take, for instance, the
memorialisation of the Dutch independence of 1813 given definite shape in 1863 through the building of a monument showing Willem I returning to Dutch soil after the defeat of Napoleon. The crucial point here is that a volk is concerned with its perseverance through time and the maintenance of its vitality. The kind of entity that national character refers to is, first and foremost, an entity that has shown itself to persist through the ages (Foucault 2003). Victory in war and control over disease demonstrate precisely what a volk is meant to be: a people that persist against the forces that threaten to extinguish it. A volk proves its existence and right through the very act of persisting.

A second, important aspect of national character is tied up with the notion of character, which is both deeply personal while also shared across time and space. Like volk, the very idea that people, let alone a people, are defined by their character is part of a complex history in which a variety of notions about morality, personal worth, honour, drama, fate and, not in the least, difference amalgamate (Leerssen 2006). Most important here is the idea that people are differently disposed. They are deemed to have different sets of dispositions, endowments, habits, customs, moods, and affects. Leerssen, in particular, has shown how such characterological types were developed in Europe over a long period of time, stretching to well before the 19th century formation of nation-states. These types can only be understood if we take note of the contrasting ways in which types become to be distinguished: “they are effeminate” also means “we are not”. The emergence of a characterological discourse thus depends on the formation of a European cultural sphere in which such differences could become relevant, imagined and solidified (Leerssen 2000; see in particular Ockerse 1788).

Moreover, the logic of character prescribes moral significance to national community as it ties the biography and conduct of each to the fate of the nation. When one’s personal honour is at stake, one’s national reputation is immediately involved as well.

Finally, a discourse of national characters suggests there is a particular kind of knowledge about the nation and a particular kind of authoritative voice able to communicate that knowledge. National characters can best be discerned by those who have a long view of history – as it is something that persists through history – and a broad view of the world – as it is something that differs across space. Only certain people are in the position to acquire, develop and communicate such knowledge. These people have something that other people may not possess in equal measure: historical expertise and oversight. Characterological discourse posits that within the vast cultural complexity of national difference there are persistent entities that remain essentially unchanged and unaffected by historical
contingencies. Character is something that is preserved and stored. This also means that there are specific sites in the world where evidence of character can be found: in the somatic constitution of certain exemplary persons; in the earth; in the old fisher villages; in the skull; in books; in art; in songs; in ancient ritual forms; etc. Such sites harbour evidence of what the national might be. In order to extract such evidence, one will need the expertise and ability to decipher, read, dissect and order such evidence. The capacity to analyse, understand and communicate is not given democratically but is only acquired after a long and arduous process of learning, study and training (see Eickhoff et al. 2000). The specific knowledge and skills needed to gain expertise may vary widely, but the importance of historical oversight recurs again and again: the historian, the archaeologist, the ethnologist, the linguist, the mythologist, the social scientist, the erudite intellectual knows or, at least, has some grasp of where to find traces of nationhood. Through oversight, across time and space, certain learned persons may enact their expertise in discerning and communicating what makes nations different and what has constituted their distinct ways of being. The role and rhetoric of oversight is hardly beholden to historians, but we may safely say that historiography has been keenly involved in building up the kind of oversight needed to speak with authority about national characters. Not surprisingly, it was mainly professional historians who succeeded in gaining oversight vis-à-vis their publics when national history curricula were set up. At what may have been the high point of characterological discourse in the Dutch context, historians such as Jan Romein and Johan Huizinga published extensive and careful expositions of Dutch, national history and Dutch, national character (see for instance Geyl 1925; Stibbe 1939; Romein 1942). Even Ruth Benedict explained to American G.I.’s how to understand the culture and personality of the Dutch (Van Ginkel 1992). Sociologists and ethnologists were also deeply invested in these debates (Van Heerikhuizen 1985; Van Ginkel 1999; Van Ginkel & Henkes 1999). For all their disagreements and disputes, these experts all partook in rhetoric of oversight that gives authority to those who speak with the most expansive historical and cultural breath.

So when we say that the self-evidence of national character is dwindling in the post-war period, we mean to say that a very particular way of conceiving Dutchness is falling apart only to be entangled once again in new ways. With the rise of new problems and concerns surrounding national boundaries, Dutchness becomes articulated quite differently from the way it was conceived in characterological discourse. Most striking in this development is the way in which Dutchness itself becomes the public’s problem and, thereby, a public problem and a national question. Nationalism was, of course, always already at stake in public and
political discourses about all kinds of issues, but with the demise of national character we see Dutchness itself, quite reflexively, becoming a problem in its own right. National difference and how to deal with it became a concern in need of the public’s judgment. When this happened, in the course of the 1970’s and 80’s, it did so in the context of discussions about race, racism and concerns over racist politics. Anxieties and worries over what to do with racial difference were, so to say, impetus and occasion out of which Dutchness would become articulated as a public problem and a national question: who do we think we are? In the remainder of this chapter I will consider some crucial aspects of how race and racism were implicated in the articulation of Dutchness as a public problem. The thoroughly unresolved confrontation with race was to become of crucial importance in the succeeding period. Yet, before we can delve into these discussions, it is helpful to provide some historical contrast and, at once, analyse the interplay between a concept of nationhood, the persona in the act of speaking and the prospects of one’s public. For this purpose, I will discuss in some detail the essay by Johan Huizinga On The Dutch Mentality.

The style of the lecture: Huizinga’s satisfaction

On the Dutch mentality (1982 [1935]) is, for present purposes, a particularly interesting text, because it stands at the end of a historical development. Huizinga’s lecture can be seen as the peak and, looking back, the beginning of a massive shift in characterological discourses on Dutchness. The eminent cultural scholar is highly aware of the caution with which a character sketch may be performed. In his famous diagnosis of the burgherly mentality of the Dutch, Huizinga already carefully qualifies how specific political affects – moderation, humility, satisfaction, prudence, toleration – associated with a part – Holland and the patriotic urbanites – come to stand symbolically for the whole. Huizinga does not rush to a straightforwardly essentialist description of the Dutch person-cum-people through characterisations that are always at risk of becoming superficial clichés (cf. Leerssen 2000). He takes great effort in establishing the histori-cultural conditions leading into his present possibility to speak about the mental constituents of national culture. Huizinga’s lecture is characterology in its most reflexive mode as he precedes his exposé of national virtues with a history of a gradual and haphazard unification of a people. Only in hindsight does Dutch burgherlyness appear inevitable. With Huizinga, the Dutch character is not given a primordial point of origin, but is presented as the more or less understandable and discernible effect of a jumble of more or less associated processes. Interestingly, all of these generative processes have to do with the formation of territorial and
imperial sovereignty. The particular way in which Dutch sovereignty emerged, is presented as the context in which a particular mental character finds application and justification. It is the express intention of the essay to plea for a continuation of the mental tendencies subsumed under the category of the burgher and to combat the processes undermining its continuity: rationalisation of public life and massification of culture. One reads in Huizinga’s diagnosis the cultural pessimism of the time: an ever more rationalised state politics is driving the masses into the hands of extremist political movement that actively seek an aufhebung of the contemporary contradictions.

This means that Huizinga’s essay is explicitly articulated in critique of popularity: ‘It is one of the strangest aberrations of the current era to argue that evil becomes good if it is commonly desired by many.’ (1982 [1935]: 298) (#12). Although his lecture has the didactic intention of communicating insight into Dutch nationhood to a yet-to-be-enlightened public, Huizinga places the need for such lecturing in the context of a cultural crisis that forms the main substance of his essay: the all-too-simplistic goal of popular sovereignty – exemplified by the introduction of the popular vote – fails to produce a popular will and, instead, delivers ever smaller divisions between entrenched parliamentary factions. Thereby, indignation over democratic intransigence reaches ever higher pitch and polarisation of political differences comes to make prudent government of Dutch society an impossibility. According to Huizinga, the stalemate of a fractured corporatism provides opportunities for extremist political movements to offer up fantasies of national re-unification, freeing the people to undertake heroic national action, often in direct analogy to the ‘heroic’ breakthrough of parliamentary passivity in Germany. Huizinga’s analysis of Dutch affects is meant to counter precisely this development. Instead of heroic extremism and popular unification, he seeks to offer his public a vision of national unity that finds in burgherly moderation the dispositional core of national community. It is precisely because Huizinga speaks against the presumed sovereignty of the popular and warns for its irrational, fragmentary and violent consequences that his lecture can be employed in a comparison between different styles of national typification. His discourse is still firmly characterological.

The centre-piece of Huizinga’s essay is its attempt to re-appropriate and rekindle burgherlyness after it has been widely and repeatedly discarded as petit-bourgeois parochialism (see also Aerts 2002). This attempt is placed against the threat of nationalist extremism:
Thus remains [the political option of] the catastrophe (Cheers in the distance). The nationalist parties, with their rising influence, are prepared to bring the task to completion and chase away the state parties, tarred and feathered. Will it come to this? And if so, will they give us reason to be grateful? We don’t know. We can’t be sure if they will prove capable of erecting a better construction on the rubbles of Dutch parliamentarianism. Results elsewhere do not provide sufficient reassurance. (Huizinga 1982 [1935]: 312) (#13)

It is from this conjecture that Huizinga presents an alternative vision of national commonality, one in which unification does not imply the heroic imposition of a national will:

Many would abandon all too readily our cultural heritage [geestelijk erfdeel] of reverence for divergent opinion. […] Most states in Europe have formed out of the principle of dominion. There are only a few that obtain their existence and being from a struggle for freedom. One of them is the Netherlands. Freedom, however narrowly interpreted, has been the yeast of our nation. (1982 [1935]: 314) (#14)

Huizinga’s characterology enacts a particular style of national typification. The object of typification is the mental disposition at the heart of national culture. This not only means that the object is to be found and followed historically as it endures through time, but also that the historian is occupied with the particular task of giving back to his public what they are at risk of forgetting. The expert gives what the public lacks. In this way, the didactic relationship between lecturer and public becomes part of the very process of cultural preservation that is the object of characterological analysis. The nation is that which endures, that which proves to have the power to resist the attrition of time. A national character becomes known in relation to a test of force:

in this context of never foreseen, as if elicited through a series of miracles and maintained state of the United Provinces has the Dutch people [volk] affirmed its form and its nature, tested its reason and its right of being. (Huizinga 1982 [1935]: 284) (#15)

The Dutch nation proves its worthiness as nation in this test of serendipity: it is maintained and affirmed against the force of obliteration. The true test of nationhood is its redemption despite all odds. Huizinga performs here what Foucault has argued to be the biopolitical logic of nationalism: the nation is that which proves capable to defend itself against the continuous onslaught of force (Foucault 2003). Huizinga’s critique of popular sovereignty finds its reason in the challenge to Dutch society’s perseverance. The lecture reminds its public of its proper mental virtues, while at the same time equipping it with the evaluative norms to identify nationalist movements as false prophets of national heroism. The
virtue of burgherly moderation, found to have withstood the tests of the past, is at once the proper style of critique to be directed at contemporary extremists. In Huizinga’s critique only the lived experience of calm satisfaction will allow the Dutch to escape the dialectics of intensifying parliamentary discord: ‘However despicable it may sound to those who feel fire and courage, as nation and state we just are, in a certain sense, satisfied, and it is our national duty to remain so.’ (293). (#16) Against the heated emotionality of nationalist extremism Huizinga’s public is reminded of its deep burgherly affect: to be satisfied.

The relationship between the concept of nationhood – a mental character of burgherlyness – and the persona who articulates it – in the role of the reassuring historian – allows for a consistency between style and content. Huizinga’s essay performs what its argument seeks to recognise in the past, thereby demonstrating that the mentality of the burgher has persisted to this day. In the historian’s narration of Dutchness history comes to teach its public affective moderation and reverence for moral differences: ‘History may sometimes teach other peoples pride and glory, for us the lesson is, if one understands is properly, only humility.’ (286). (#17)

What the exemplar of Huizinga’s essay demonstrates, is that any intervention in a discussion over nationhood and historical expertise will have to deal with the question of public authority: how is it possible that one person – an expert – has specialised, non-democratic knowledge about national history that she is able to authoritatively present to a public who is presumed to be the very nation whose historical existence is thereby disclosed? Huizinga navigates this problem by, first of all, fiercely critiquing any argument of popularity and popular imagination: Dutchness is not what the public may think it is. Secondly, the possibility of moderation and reassured satisfaction is attained by presenting Dutchness as a serendipitously enduring character of a people who have formed a political alliance in pursuit of freedom. That is, it exists even if the heirs of that history have not yet recognised it as such. Huizinga’s role as historian is merely to point out the burgherlyness that is already part of people’s affective constitution. He is there to recall it. It is precisely this style that falls apart when characterological discourses become less self-evident and other forms of discussing nationhood emerge out of this predicament.

**The crisis of identity**

With the demise of characterological discourse came talk of ‘national identity’ (see Leerssen 1990; Frijhoff 1992; Van Ginkel 1999). Discussion about national difference and distinction were thereby continued in slightly different terms: from
karakter to identiteit. Yet, the shift in terms is indicative of more than conversational propriety. It signals the creation of new kind of problem (Laeyendecker 1974). The interventions of S. W. Couwenberg of the early 80’s allow us to understand what changed with the increasing use of ‘national identity’ in public discourse, precisely because he seeks to hold onto some notion of characterological difference. Together with a number of other intellectuals Couwenberg tried, quite self-consciously, to salvage national characterisation (see in particular Couwenberg 1981). Therefore, his writing and positioning offers crucial insight into what ‘national identity’ adds and subtracts to the emerging contention over Dutchness.

In a special issue of Civis Mundi, a journal devoted to cultivating citizenship among the educated public with regard to national and international political issues, S. W. Couwenberg notes how Dutch nationhood had already for long time lacked a clear, cultural expression, which he relates to the fact that the Dutch were severed from their cultural fellows when Flanders seceded from the empire in 1830. In his introductory essay to De Nederlandse Natie, he quotes Seton-Watson (1981: 9):

‘The formation of the Dutch nation is a case of the division in two of a community which, with an economy and a culture as advanced as any in Europe, was growing into a single modern nation; but religious division, foreign military power and new economic opportunities in distant seas pulled and kept the two halves apart, making one into a nation and leaving the other in uncertain status.’ Hugh Seton-Watson, *Nations and States*, (1977)

All the contributors to this edited volume agree that Dutchness is not a widely and strongly cultivated identity. In the light of recent developments – a global economic crisis, a bureaucratised welfare state, depillarisation, dwindling burgherly culture, European integration, and last but not least the advent of a multiracial society – they try to assess how Dutch nationhood will or should change. Couwenberg himself presents a clear idea why such reflection is needed:

We feel obliged to draw attention to this specifically Dutch problematic, without much hope by the way. Experience teaches us that it is characteristic of the Netherlands to underestimate the significance of the national factor and related problems and to show little interest in the matter. Consequently, the Dutch have made some grave errors of judgment. Coming to mind in the post-war era are, for example, the unfortunate way in which the Dutch have reacted to Indonesian nationalism; furthermore, the errors of judgments with regard to European integration, again by a lack of regard for the reality and vitality of the national dimension in human existence. (Couwenberg 1981: 25) (#18)

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A similar risk looms over the issue of racial diversification. Here too a rather stubborn disregard for the integrity of nationhood and the strenuous process of national integration can create problems:

In recent decades, the exclusivist small-Dutch orientation is increasingly confronted with a new challenge, the consequences of which have not been sufficiently dealt with in public opinion and government policy, namely the development of the Netherlands into a multiracial society. This development has certain problematic aspects with which the large cities are particularly confronted. Only recently have people taken notice and has some discussion about the issue started. The issue is no longer taboo. However, in these discussion there has hardly been any attention given to a rather obvious question for a people [volk] that has developed, in the course of centuries, a distinct [eigen] identity, namely the question how that distinct [eigen] identity is related to the growing multiracial dimension of our society and how it can and should develop within that multiracial framework. Here, issues of legality come to the fore. Vague legal notions, such as moral decency, public order, the legal convictions existing among the Dutch people, etc., have up to now been framed and interpreted on the grounds of the Dutch political culture and tradition. As our society takes on a more multiracial character the question emerges to what extent one will take into account the other morals and attitudes when interpreting those vague legal notions. Should we on the basis of multiracial tolerance, for instance, recognise certain deviant customs of the Islamic faith and way of life, like discrimination of women, polygamy [veelwijferij], and the like? (Couwenberg 1981: 11-12) (#19)

A number of elements are significant for making sense of what to do about Dutchness: racial diversification, urban problems, a ruptured taboo on debate, and the integrative significance of national identity. In search of foothold, Couwenberg points out the burgherly core of Dutch nationhood:

When we add this all up, I am inclined to state that the Dutch people [volk] still has a hard burgherly core. Yet, this core is being undermined and corroded by all kinds of non- and anti-burgherly forces and trends which from the perspective of the traditional burgherly culture can be branded as a degradation of that culture. These trends have already made people – and this is particularly true for the intellectual top tier – embarrassed for their burgherlyness. ‘Burgherly’ has become an often used term of abuse. The embarrassment for what we, at the core, still are, is part of the identity crisis in which the Dutch nation finds itself in 1980. (Couwenberg 1981: 23) (#20)

As Couwenberg himself notes elsewhere (1987), his argument and those of others in the volume can be seen as living in two discursive universes at once. On the one hand, a number of authors present analyses of cultural patterns, often encapsulated by abstract terms – pragmatism, moralism, commercialism, Protestantism, consensus politics, burgherly culture. To a large extent, they follow the conventions of cultural sociology and historiography which not long thereafter became severely discredited, often reifying culture into an idealistic causal force which could be applied to nation-states as a whole. Their analysis, in fact, explicitly built on the characterological discourses of the preceding era (see for instance Chorus 1964). Moreover, the role of the intellectual is to oversee, locate and communicate the
integrative, moral basis on which the nation-state creates social order and continuity. These analyses serve to locate long lasting and recurring aspects of the nation’s being, often followed by the conclusion that some form of rapid social change – individualisation, globalisation, Marxism, consumerism, racial diversity, modernisation – has more recently led to the demise of such patterns, calling the integrity of the nation’s being into question. In this genre of analysis, nationhood, national identity and nation character tends to be used in overlapping ways.

On the other hand, however, various authors, Couwenberg among them, present a subjectivist assessment of Dutch nationhood. In such analysis, what matters most is not to directly present the author’s oversights into the core pattern of national life, but to assess the national consciousness taking shape in public and political attitudes, expressions and legal codifications. Far from making a definitive turn to constructivism – no one is mobilising Anderson just yet, Renan is still the preferred reference – authors are concerned with national awareness at various levels of Dutch society.

Waxing and waning between these perspectives – from the author’s insight into the nation’s core to an assessment of the public’s awareness and back – allows for interesting discursive capacities. Crucially, it allows for the capacity to both assess national awareness as weak, disregarding, relativistic, and nonchalant, while at one and the same time suggesting that a coherent, national core of patterned, traditional life still exists. Thus, it becomes possible to lament the carelessness with which the Dutch have always tended to treat their national similarity, which does and does not exist at the same time. For Couwenberg, this carelessness is directly related to the idea that Dutch people tend to focus on state boundaries, whereas cultural boundaries – which would cut across those statist ones – are neglected. A more vigorous experience of nationhood would be possible, if only the Dutch would appreciate their lasting cultural commonalities more and choose to promote those cultural practices that constitute their core.

The restorative constructivism of Couwenberg’s positioning involves three steps: a first, objectifying moment in which certain moral dispositions are deemed typically and traditionally part of a nation’s being, above all burgherlyness; a second, subjectivist moment in which the dwindling awareness of the nation’s core constitution is lamented upon; and finally, a constructivist moment in which reinvigoration of national awareness is promoted. The move towards the third step is, interestingly, hampered by an embarrassment, a collectively enforced taboo on the expression of a collective ethos. This embarrassment can even be presented as part of the nation’s core ethos as it can be deemed eminently burgherly to moderate and rationalise one’s nationalistic feelings. Yet, Couwenberg and others routinely
note that the Dutch distinguish themselves in a strongly cultivated apprehension towards nationalism, thereby both affirming that the Dutch can be singled out and lamenting that they do too little to make themselves visible.

By moving in this way from an objective, national character to a subjectively squandered awareness it becomes possible to make a constructivist appeal without any loss of historical necessity: we need to do something about our national image. Couwenberg and others are not promoting the construction of a newly invented image of Dutchness out of a particular political, intellectual or moral persuasion, but are merely pleading for the restoration of what they, in their objectivist moment, have discovered was there all along. The need to do something, however, stems not from the objectivist assertion of national character, but from the subjectivist moment of a national identity crisis. It is precisely because nationhood is not limited to a historically persisting, national character, but also involves a lively awareness of national identity that Dutchness can become the object of public concern and public policy. The problem-at-hand is not so much the demise of a national character, but rather the crisis of national identity. The problem is not that we lack erudite and exceptionally skilled people capable of communicating what the national character actually is, but the fact that there are popular impediments against the spread and cultivation of awareness among the population, namely a broadly cultivated embarrassment that is deemed typical of the Dutch. National identity, then, indicates the extent to which a population is engaged in cultivating awareness. It is the public’s problem and, indeed, a public problem. Whereas a national character may be in demise insofar as it is deemed to be badly preserved, a national identity is in crisis as the public doesn’t seem capable of imagining it persuasively. So with the rise of national identity talk, we are dealing with a new kind of problematisation: the question of coherent and persuasive imagination, the problem of cultivating awareness and overcoming impediments to wholehearted self-expression.

Race and racism are at the heart of the emerging identity crisis. This is already evident from the reactions to Couwenberg’s positionings. His public intervention came under considerable critique (Van Ginkel 1999). It was argued that Couwenberg not only justified latent and rising racism under the guise of promoting national identity, but actively spurred it on by giving authoritative voice to nationalist particularism. Yet, such interventions almost inevitably affirm the very impediments to successful imaginations that Couwenberg deemed to be at the heart of the identity crisis. It once and again highlights the carelessness with which the Dutch maintain their distinctiveness [eigenheid]. Indeed, Couwenberg resolutely distinguished himself from racism:
From all kinds of statements we can conclude that racism in this sense revives with the growing ethnic dimension of our society. In so far as this is the case, it is contrary to our liberal-democratic order and needs to be forcefully contested. The struggle against racism loses credibility, however, and becomes dubious when for political reasons all kinds of statements, which have nothing to do with it, are branded as racism. This pertains, for instance, to efforts to establish a more restrictive immigration policy with the aim to constrain population growth. (Couwenberg 1987: 150) (#21)

Racism is deemed completely out of order. If the Dutch are to become more aware of who they are, it is always already understood that this ought not to include racism. Dutchness is post-racist or it isn’t at all. Yet, according to Couwenberg this also meant that it was crucial to know what was and what was not racist. A responsible approach to the crisis of national identity would demand both the resolute rejection of racism as well as the cultivation of national awareness. So, on the one hand accusations of racism ought to be avoided as it tended to impede the cultivation of national identity, while on the other hand the rejection of racism formed an integral part of that national identity. It seems race forms a highly ambiguous object in trying to articulate a problematic of Dutchness. Even if Couwenberg seeks to retain a role for national character, his focus is on the problem of awareness and identification. Race is ambiguous here not because it lingers under the guise of character, but precisely because it impedes the successful imagination of Dutchness as it is eminently Dutch to reject racism.

The anxieties of a post-racist imaginary
As we have already encountered in the interventions by Van Doorn at the very beginning of this study, issues of difference and citizenship emerging in the 1970’s were intensively concerned with the question of race and racism. The confrontation with race and racism would eventually shape the debate over Dutchness in quite peculiar ways. In the face of racial difference Dutchness tends to appear as post-racist. Dutchness is or, at the very least, ought to be beyond racism. Racism thereby becomes a residual problem, something that may still linger but can and ought to be purged from the national community. In different ways, it is imagined to be the very constitutive outside of what it means to be Dutch. However, this also creates the context for new kinds of problems associated with Dutchness and new ways of making sense of those problems. As we’ve just seen in relation to Couwenberg, it creates the problem of anxiety over if and how Dutchness ought to be imagined. How and when do we know that such imagination does not entail a racism that ought never to be part of the endeavour to begin with?
Let’s look at an instructive example in which already much of the emerging problematic can be found. In the introduction to one of the first systemic investigations of racist discrimination in the Netherlands anthropologist Frank Bovenkerk summarises the complex nature of such a research project:

There is certainly proof that it occurs, but to what extent is it a matter of a fixed and engrained pattern? The American history professor John M. Allswang, who teaches in Leiden for some time now, said in an interview [...] that the issue of ‘race’ in the Netherlands apparently raises few problems and that tolerance certainly has something to do with this. Yet, he also has the feeling that there is a ‘well intentioned conspiracy of silence’ hanging over the issue and that the unwillingness to confront matters, may mask problems. It seems like he articulates precisely how many Dutch people relate to racial discrimination at this moment. The ‘tolerant’ past is forever behind us and people have yet to find a fitting definition for the new situation. Well, the pieces of research that now follow serve to unrelentingly bring the truth about racial discrimination to the surface. (Bovenkerk 1979: 21) (#22)

In this quote we encounter the many concerns that are folded into the question of racism at the end of the 1970’s. It raises questions about the reliability of images, good intentions and questionable consequences, outsiders looking in, the past and the present, truth coming to the surface, and a willingness to confront that truth. Racism exists here as a yet to be confronted fact of discrimination taking place behind the façade of an all-too-well-intended image of tolerance. Bringing racism to light, asserting its facticity, will deface the national image, while no one seems to know as of yet how to re-arrange that image. The facts coming to the surface are part of a larger exercise in which a break with the past, or at least a certain memory of that past, is being executed and a problematic present is confronted. Establishing the occurrence of racial discrimination in the Netherlands is directly linked to the question whether the Netherlands is really what the Dutch imagine it to be: a tolerant, open and welcoming place.

The confrontation with racism turns out to be a test for the integrity of the national façade. What is Dutch and what is racist ought to exclude each other, which makes the occurrence of hidden, unacknowledged racism highly provocative: despite what everyone says, it still happens. A post-racist imaginary, in which true Dutchness is always already deemed to be without racists blemishes, presents an anxious, pressing problem: what if that image is precisely what is hiding racism from sight? Is the national image an accomplice to its own taboo? As such, racism and image stand in a specific relation to each other. The image may cloak racism, bare it from sight, keep it in silence, deny its existence and ban it from society. Racism is that which the image cannot be. Conversely, this means that the image is threatened by racism. If racism does, in fact, occur behind the façade, the image is compromised and will need to be re-constituted…but how?
The national image ought to survive the test of racism’s facticity. The point of this test is not to pull racism back into the national image and affirm its place in Dutch society. Quite the opposite, the critical attention to the persistence of racism emerging at the end of the 1970’s seeks to finally expel the residue of racism hiding behind kind words and superficial ideals. The aim is to live up to the national image of a post-racist people. The task at hand is to seek out where and how racism is hiding.

If the subsequent debates taking place throughout the 1980’s make anything clear, it is that this task is far from straight-forward. A whole host of categories, policy measures, commitments, juridical arrangements and public interventions emerged in relation to what is, at that time, still routinely called the multi-racial society (see for instance Couwenberg 1981; Zahn 1989). None of these efforts led to a well ordered space of possibilities in which it is evidently clear how the already established ideal of a post-racist society is to be realised. At the heart of the contention is what post-racism might actually be. Post-racism is the unequivocal benchmark of any legitimate position being taken publicly, yet there is no straightforward repertoire at hand to enact this position.

A constitutional attempt to recognise race
One of the most noteworthy attempts to deal with race came in the form of a new constitution, donning a new first article dealing explicitly with racial difference. It forms one attempt to enact what post-racism might be. Yet, it already shows the complexities of performing such a position and the questions that are still left unaddressed.

In 1983, after a long history of rephrasing and reconsidering by legislators (De Bruin 2010), a principled declaration of equality and non-discrimination is given the front seat in the Dutch constitution. Article 1 of the constitution states that:

All those who reside in the Netherlands are treated equally in equal cases. Discrimination on the grounds of religion, orientation, political persuasion, race, sex or any other ground, is prohibited. (#23)

From the phrasing of the article it becomes clear that the legislator seeks to deal with human equality in a particular way. The law does not affirm human equality as such. It affirms the principle of equal treatment in equal cases. Importantly, this implies that persons can and, indeed, should be treated unequally in unequal cases. It expresses the idea that government is constantly engaged in making differences
between citizens and that such differences ought to be made. Therefore, equality before the law cannot and should not imply that government will not make any differences. Moreover, Article 1 is concerned with the problems of groups. Rather than outlawing the significance of supra-personal commitments and memberships, only affirming the status of the individual, the article calls for an appreciation of group differences in determining whether and how persons are to be treated differently. The presence and recognition of these differences itself doesn’t constitute discrimination. Lastly, the article pertains to all those who reside in the Netherlands, not just to the bearers of Dutch citizenship. We are not dealing with a right of specific rights bearers, but with a duty effective within a sovereign territory, binding for whoever might find themselves within it. Thereby, Article 1 places a moral conviction at the basis of what it means to be in the Netherlands. As the first article of the 1983 constitution it marks the rejection of discrimination as the first and foremost boundary of civil society. The article canonises the conviction that, if anything, Dutch civil society rejects discrimination of any person on any grounds.

It was particularly after the WOII and the redesign of the Dutch empire through the Statute of 1953 that diversification could no longer be ignored (Jones 2007). Beginning with the ‘repatriation’ of Indo’s, KNIL-soldiers and their families after the independence of Indonesia and ending with the migration of Dutch citizens from Suriname in the run-up to its independence (Schuster 1999), the image of a white nation was thoroughly challenged in the second half of the twentieth century (Jacobs 2000). Moreover, in the course of the 1970’s it became increasingly undeniable that the large numbers of the Mediterranean guest workers, who had settled in the Netherlands from the 1950’s onwards, were not going to return. Finally, a number of violent actions by groups fighting for Moluccan independence brightly lit these shifting boundaries of the nation (Essed & Nimako 2006).

In light of these developments, Article 1 forms the symbolic centre piece of state efforts to curtail and manage what are understood to be rising racial and ethnic tensions in the course of the 1970’s (Tinnemans 1994). It is important to note that it is hardly the result of a struggle for equality or justice by postcolonial, migrant or minority movements. Article 1 is not the product of calls to right the wrongs of any past. Rather, it expresses the determination by government to control and civilise group animosity. It is a declaration of moral conviction and idealism, not an admission of guilt or debt. Article 1 came out of post-war efforts to solidify once and for all the dignity of every human being, parallel to international
efforts in the UN and Europe and most directly in response to nazism and the Holocaust (Fennema 2000).

Article 1 of the new constitution presents us with one of the central dilemmas in the debates concerning racism in the 1980’s. As the recognition of the racial diversification Article 1 solidifies the constitutive rejection of racism for Dutch society, becoming the pinnacle of what Dutch sovereignty stands for. Now more than ever should it be clear to everyone that racial discrimination is rejected. Yet, the article does not speak about racism. It states that inhabitants of the Netherlands should be free from discrimination on the grounds of race. Does that also mean that all races residing in the Netherlands should be treated equally in equal cases? Here, race seems to be quite different from its neighbouring categories. Article 1 is intently and carefully formulated to include valued group differences within civil society, while at the same time expunging discrimination on their grounds. That strategy becomes highly unstable when confronted with race. What if race doesn’t exist? Indeed, the idea that race does not constitute a biological-somatic difference between people and has no basis in the scientific state-of-the-art was a major constituent of post-war discourse on race and racism (M’Charek 2013). How then should Article 1 be understood? Does it intend to include or exclude racial differences? What does the new constitution seek to recognise: the emergence of a multiracial nation or the moral ideal of a non-racialised one? What kind of problem is racism: the unjustified discrimination on racial grounds or the discrimination on the unjustified grounds of racism? The constitution of 1983 not only placed equality and non-discrimination at the forefront of what it could mean to be Dutch, but at once laid bare the ambiguity and instability of concerns over race. Racial discrimination was resolutely rejected, but it was not at all clear what that rejection entailed. By equating racial difference to others kinds of differences, it becomes unclear what the new constitution does and does not seek to include into civil society. What kind of difference is racial difference?

An ambivalent outsider
With the advent of the Centrumpartij (CP) it seemed that a fixed point on the horizon could be assumed: this must be racism. The anti-immigrant rhetoric, alarmism over ethnic and racial mixing, and self-proclaimed role as protectors of a native and besieged population surely qualified this newly formed political party as proof of home-grown, reactionary racism rearing its nasty head in Dutch politics. To this day, the Centrumpartij is frequently used as a clear cut example of racist
politics in many discourses and thus provides interlocutors with a more or less firm grasp of what can and cannot be tolerated as part of Dutch society. Yet, the example of the Centrumpartij also allows us to see how the avoidance of racism was to solidify race as one very specific kind of difference making distinct from others.

The presumption of racism becomes a point of contention in a heated radio-interview in November 1983, shortly after the Centrumpartij managed to obtain a seat in parliament. The occupant of that seat, party leader Hans Janmaat, had managed in the preceding years to assemble and organise a variety already existing anti-immigrant and nationalist movements and actors into a party that would be able to mobilise an often radicalised and marginal base while at the same time being able to attract new constituents responsive to a moral unmasking of the established political parties. A key to Janmaat’s success was his ability to craft a political message that was both shocking enough to draw attention and civilised enough not to repel the media and broader publics entirely (Brants & Hogendoorn 1983).

After already obtaining seats in municipal elections, national parliamentary success for the Centrumpartij was almost always presented as definite proof for emerging racism among the population, particularly among ‘common people’ in working class neighbourhoods. Wanting to address the rising tide of racism head on, Hans Janmaat was invited to an interview in the VPRO-radio program *De blanke top der duinen*, – satirically named after a strophe of a sentimental, patriotic song – that dealt with issue of xenophobia. Other party leaders were also invited, but declined to debate Janmaat, demonstrating their repulsion of his party and honouring an agreement not to engage with the Centrumpartij. The interview quickly centres on the accusation of racism when the interviewers bring up a book written by a prominent member of the CP, Wim Bruyn, containing justifications of *apartheid*:

Interviewer: That’s racism right, this kind of talk, pure racism [referring to the book]

Janmaat: what’s purely racist about it? That has nothing to do with race, sir, you should know what you’re talking about.

[…]

Interviewer: …but now answer the question, is this racism or is it not, what it says here [referring to the book], racial mixing leads to mental disorders and criminality, respond to that…

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Janmaat: We are dealing, well, we’re dealing with people from totally different upbringings. That isn’t related so much to race, although one could maybe maintain that people who are born in Africa or wherever in the world have a different physical appearance [uiterlijke kenmerken] from us, but it’s not about physical appearance [uiterlijke kenmerken], the point is that people who have totally divergent ways of living [leefgewoonten] come to our country, having been prompted to do so, in fact, by the big political parties in our country, because it would be so beneficial for them here in the Netherlands, and what’s the result? Both the Nederlander whom the Centrumpartij represents in the first place, as well as various members, large amounts of those minorities, whom many others, small leftish parties in particular represent…

Interviewer: Well, it’s very irritating but you are avoiding the question again, mister Janmaat, because that mister Bruijn is the number three of your party…

Janmaat: No, I think, mister Van Wezel [one of the interviewers], that you can’t stand the fact that I’m formulating a very good response…

Interviewer: No, it’s not a good response at all, because you’re not responding to our question…

Janmaat [continuing on]: …so, those differences in culture lead to tensions…

Interviewer: But do they lead to criminality and do they lead to mental disorder?

Janmaat: well, well, that’s possible when someone from a totally different part of the world resides in the Netherlands for a long time and is unable to live out his own life rhythm [leefritme], someone like that is brought off balance, and you’ve seen, for instance, that naturalised man from Turkey, that he was so out of balance that he didn’t even want to fit in anymore, that he starts rejecting this society. […] That is a blunder of the Dutch government, of the big parties, making those people believe that the Netherlands is an ideal country for them. That is cowardice. And you cannot sweep away those cultural differences, the big political parties can’t do that and mister Van Wezel [one of the interviewers] can’t do that… (VPRO-radio broadcast of interview with Hans Janmaat 1983) (#24)

Quite aware of the consequences of being framed as a racist party, Hans Janmaat carefully and explicitly distances the CP from a racist position. The threat of immigration does not stem from anything having to do with somatic difference, thus it has nothing to do with race. The problem is a cultural one, having to do with divergent ways of living and ill-fitting life rhythms. It’s not just the natives who are victimised, but also the immigrant who loses his balance, getting in all kinds of trouble and burdening society. The actual culprits in Janmaat’s narrative are the ‘big political parties’. So, even though the Centrumpartij is given the role of racist outsider – providing a fixed, outsider position to move away from – the position of the CP turns out to be far more mundane. That is, Janmaat’s narrative addresses matters – cultural differences – that he carefully distinguishes from racial ones. Janmaat’s discourse hardly enacts the position of a radical outsider. In fact, it draws the same principle boundary between race – the inescapable, physical constitution of one’s being – and culture – the recurring pattern and balance of a way of life –
that organises almost all discourses on diversity emerging at that time (Tinnemans 1994).

What both Janmaat and his interviewers leave unmentioned is the proximity of Janmaat’s critique to the reasoning of government and the ‘big political parties’ at the time. Precisely like Janmaat’s CP, Dutch government assumed that a concerted effort would be needed to integrate groups of culturally divergent residents into mainstream society (Tinnemans 1994: 205-206; Duyvendak et al. 2009). Government’s management of this process seeks to compensate for a lack of integration and was explicitly justified by pointing out the dangers of sustained segregation and ethnic polarisation. With the advent of the minorities policy framework government had taken onto itself to address precisely what Janmaat is problematising: the inability of newcomers deemed culturally divergent to find their place in Dutch society without creating social and moral disorder. Janmaat is far from occupying an outsider position in this sense. Both the policy discourses that emerged in response to the ground-breaking report *Ethnische Minderheden* (WRR 1979) and the positions of the main political parties in this period are concerned with the cultural alterity of newcomers and the extent to which culturally divergent groups will remain segregated and subordinated if government does not act responsibly. The goal of such governmental efforts was the integration of ethnically identified target groups whose supposed cultural alterity necessitated government action.

What sets Janmaat apart, however, is not so much the priority given to the native population as it is assumed to provide a normal life rhythm to which newcomers ought to adapt – a priority which has been firmly, although at times implicitly part of the discourses of the main political parties (Rath 1992; Fermin 1997; Vink 2007; Schinkel 2007) –, but the legitimacy of the endeavour as such. The burdening presence of culturally divergent communities is deemed illegitimate in and of itself. Whether the cultural divergences can or cannot be surpassed, is – in Janmaat’s narrative – already the wrong question. Whether we could or could not live together already assumes that we should and will make the effort. What justifies the burdens and efforts of integration to begin with? Not surprisingly, the Centrumpartij and other critics of the emerging policy framework (see SP 1983) promoted remigration, undoing a burden that was illegitimately put onto the shoulders of the native population. The Centrumpartij became known for its catch phrase – ‘full is full’ – implying that too many immigrants were occupying social and moral space and thus ought to be removed.

So beyond the antagonisms between the political mainstream and emerging anti-immigrant voices, we might also take note of the way in which someone like
Janmaat purposefully enact a post-racist position. That is, he takes great care in demonstrating that his concern is not with racial-somatic difference but with cultural maladaptation. The race/culture distinction thereby becomes immensely important as it allows interlocutors to address race by demonstrating that they know how to avoid it, how to ignore it.

Curiously, with the increasing salience of the race/culture distinction and the focus on cultural difference that it entails, race becomes the more superficial term. Race becomes mere physical appearance, whereas culture becomes the very fabric and balance that defines and distinguishes ways of life. Race is superfluous, while culture determines outcomes. It is precisely because culture acquires this new significance and causal weight that public discussions over cultural others become worthwhile. Far from a simple shift from race to culture, as if culturalist discourses about maladaptation of ethnic others are merely racisms by other, politically sanitised means, race and racism continue to play crucial roles. It is precisely by demonstrating that one isn’t talking about something so insignificant as mere race that talk of culture acquires significance and a responsible division between intolerable racism and concerns about ethnocultural maladaptation can begin to take shape.

**We are/aren’t racist**

The discussions over racism in the 1980’s are haunted by a troubling question: are we equipped to recognise our racism? The ‘we’ of this question may shift from time to time, but it mostly refers to the self-consciously native, white Nederlander who has become convinced that only a post-racist society lives up to the ideals through which the Dutch have come to recognise their role on the global stage. Thus, concerns over racism are built from the ground up: in everyday life there is still racism, which our ideals and declared commitments cannot tolerate. If ‘we’ are to be who ‘we’ really are, the residual racism occurring in spite of our convictions should be eliminated.

Debates taking off in response to various racial issues – violent clashes between natives and immigrants in the Afrikaanderwijk of Rotterdam, the rise of the anti-immigrant Centrumpartij, new religious and ethnic organising, the killing of Kerwin Duinmeyer – are not about whether racism is wrong. On this point, there is almost complete agreement. Even the Centrumpartij declared that it sought to eradicate racism from Dutch society. The contention does not take place between avowed racialists and avowed anti-racist. Even with the rise of the Centrumpartij explicit claims for a white Netherlands in opposition to diversity remained a
marginal position (Van Donselaar 1991; Van Ginkel 1999). Time and again, concerns deal with the misrecognition of racism.

Anet Bleich devotes her opening essay in *Nederlands racisme* (1984), a collection of essays discussing the rise of racism in the Dutch public sphere, to the question how to actually define racism. She starts her essay recanting a conversation with a police officer. The difficulty of effectively recognising and naming racism is the immediate problem:

The police officer in the preceding anecdote is certainly not what one might generally envision a racist to be. He isn’t even a racist at all. He merely stands for a way of life – in the Netherlands, 1984 – in which racism is nothing extraordinary, not *a priori* shocking, not something most Dutch citizens lay awake in bed about. (Bleich 1984: 9-10) (#25)

Dutch racism in 1984 often proceeds without being recognised, unproblematically and seemingly innocently. What would be the consequence of identifying racism in the police officer’s actions?

Those who dare to question the full proof separation between police work and racist convictions will be confronted with the question if they are in favour of a professional ban. (Bleich 1984: 10-11) (#26)

The consequence would be banning the racist. Recognising and naming racism thus involves far-reaching consequences: a racist cannot be tolerated. Consequently, one will need to be quite sure about one’s claims when it comes to racism. In this light, anti-racism develops into a particular kind of critique. Anti-racism cannot only be the engaged and combative condemnation of racists and their racism. Anti-racism must, first and foremost, address the problem of misrecognition. It must give an account of how to enforce the boundary between the civil and the racist.

In her *Alledaags racisme* (1984) – the basis for her dissertation *Understanding Everyday Racism* (1991) – Philomena Essed engages this problem when she writes:

A sensible discussion of the problem of racism is therefore only possible on the basis of the recognition that society as a whole is racist in character. The Netherlands is a racist society. This means that racism is not an attribute of a particular kind of individuals, for instance those sensitive to authority, or any particular group, for instance people in working class neighbourhoods. (Essed 1984: 17) (#27)

Essed proposes to completely turn the tables on the problem of misrecognition. The problem is not to recognise where and when racism still occurs – in working class neighbourhoods – but to recognise how a post-racist norm cloaks society’s saturation with racism. Social relations are always already racially constituted and
thereby need not be recognised as such. The tension between the problem and the solution – how to ban racism from society / society is racist itself – is apparent to Essed, who continues:

The assertion that most Dutch people are racist will perhaps evoke indignation in white people. Who enjoys being called a racist! [...] Racism is deeply rooted in society. The notion of superiority has been so self-evidently inscribed into the socialisation of white people, in up-bringing, education, media, politics, labour relations, in short the entire organisation and functioning of society, that many white people are not able to recognise the racism in their own feelings, attitudes and behaviour towards black people. (Essed 1984: 17) (#28)

Whereas much of the debate seeks to understand where and to what extent racism still occurs – in working class neighbourhoods, out of fear of strangers, instigated by despicable political movements, born out of ignorance and uncertainty –, Essed raises a number of questions that fly in the face of the idea that racism is a residual, localisable problem. In fact, racism is not to be localised at all. Racism is not hiding in disadvantaged pockets of big cities, but is spread out over ‘the entire organisation and functioning of society’. Racism is hiding in plain sight. That, according to Essed, explains why racism is so hard to recognise.

As in the case of the Centrumpartij, Essed’s anti-racism does not provide a stable counterpoint around which a post-racist imaginary might be envisioned. In fact, Essed’s position is directly at odds with the very ideal of post-racism. Her indictment of Dutch society, redefinition of the problem and analysis of everyday racism do not open up a definite repertoire for the enactment of a post-racist politics. Nowhere does this become more clear than in the Vermoorde Onschuld (Murdered Innocence) by sociologist and public commentator Herman Vuijsje (see also Prins 2004). In Vuijsje’s assessment, anti-racist positionings perpetuate a societal taboo on, what he calls, ethnic difference. The issue of racism cannot be dealt with in an easy-going, relaxed way because it immediately evokes guilt, punishment, apology and self-flagellation:

Essed scrutinised everyday manners of the Dutch, in conversation with black women, and ascertained that the Netherlands is infected by the racism-germ to the bone. This is the result of three hundred years of colonialism and white superiority. All white Dutch carry their part of a kind of collective, inherited guilt. Because they are Dutch.

Preachers of guilt & punishments like Essed are certainly not black by definition. Like most pressure groups on the minority scene they are a coalition of ‘black’ and ‘white’ participants. The latter see it as their duty to profess their inherited guilt, do penance, and in that way hope to be granted absolution. Just a little guilt is not enough; one has to continuously flagellate oneself over one’s depravity. (Vuijsje 1986: 29-30) (#29)
Anti-racists are not only given the role of morally dominating preachers, enforcing an orthodox boundary between good and evil, but also make it impossible to speak uninhibitedly about the fears and apprehensions that natives might have towards ethnic others. Through the attribution of guilt, anti-racists perpetuate what they pretend to fight against: the constant awareness of a moral difference between guilty Dutch and victimised other. Vuijsje’s analysis is intentionally psychological – highlighting emotions – and provocative – using precisely the kind of language that according to his analysis is taboo. The importance of emotions is related to Vuijsje use of Eliasian sociology as a counterinterpretation of native discrimination of newcomers:

*Discrimination* is the divergent treatment of persons on the basis of assumed group characteristics – can be connected to racism, but it can also have more ‘mundane’ causes. In his classic study *The established and the outsiders* (1965) the sociologist Norbert Elias has shown this for a British village, where industrialisation drew in newcomers who were as white and British as the established residents. The latter tried to defend their superiority, their status and their way of life against the invasion of newcomers.

   The weapons used were the same as those used today in the ‘old neighbourhoods’ against darkly coloured strangers: humiliating gossip, stigmatisation of the entire group on the basis of observation of the ‘worst’ members, use of denigrating code words, and exclusion from sources of power. Most of what the established said about the newcomers was false, but nobody was in the position to correct these images. This is why intimate contact between both groups did not take place for a long time. Both groups didn’t know what was happening to them, concluded Elias, and the developments were certainly not attributable to one of either party. (Vuijsje 1986: 25) (#30)

In Vuijsje’s approach, looking for a guilty party will only reinforce the emotional dead lock that is keeping people from actually learning more about each other. The attribution of racism leads to more, not less, inhibitions about crossing the lines of difference. In order to break down such inhibitions Vuijsje not only proposes, but deliberately enacts a provocative stance. Expressing views and feelings about the other should be less restrained, more informal, less cautious, and more imperfect. Vuijsje’s book begins by stating:

In the Netherlands, the road to the ethnic is paved with formal ceremony. A powerful taboo governs our actions towards ethnic others, in public at least. The force and extent of this taboo can, according to the dominant, Dutch morality, hardly ever be large enough.

   Does this ideal bring a well-functioning, multicultural society any closer? In this book I wonder whether that is the case. The inhibition that seizes us in relating to the ethnic also brings risks. It can even lead to what we are trying to avoid. (Vuijsje 1986: 7) (#31)

Anti-racism is problematic as it demands a particular way of speaking about the relations between natives and newcomers, namely one that reinforces rather than breaks down the inhibitions that keep groups apart. In this way, anti-racism
becomes a more vehement, more judgmental instance of the already established taboo on public racism permeating Dutch society. According to Vuijsje, the Dutch have lost an innocent, uninhibited attitude towards others – shamed by the large amounts of Jews that were deported during the German occupation – and anti-racism can only reinforce such collective feelings of guilt.

Enacting a post-racist consensus
As issues of difference and citizenship begin to take centre stage in defining and arguing about Dutchness in public, we have seen how anxious the enactment of a post-racist imaginary turned out to be. Even though the discussions over rising racism and the dangers of segregation constantly call forth a national people – namely a people who agree that racism is entirely uncivil and outside of what it means to be Dutch – it turns out this national consensus cannot easily and unproblematically be performed on the public stage. Although Dutchness has become a problem of public imagination and awareness, it seems rather complicated to establish how Dutchness ought to be imagined precisely because it is deemed clear by almost everyone involved, save those who seek to address racism as a socio-structural problem, that Dutchness is the very opposite of racism. Therefore, Dutchness does not appear to be what it ought to be and the notion of an identity crisis – who do we think we are? – is perpetuated.

It is in this context that the distinction between race and culture becomes crucial. Only by constantly mobilising this distinction can interlocutors hope to place themselves on the right side of the symbolic boundary that separates still existing racism from concerns over ethnic tensions between ‘culturally different groups’. In fact, culture becomes the more fundamental category, whereas race recedes into a background of ‘mere appearance’. As such, cultural difference poses a far greater challenge to societal order than the appearances of non-white co-patriots. What matters are the differences in ways of living and the burdens that follow from cultural mixing. Party political challenges to the governmental status quo, like those of the DS’70, CP and SP, focus on the questions of burden and effort. Who should carry the burden of cultural diversity? Who can be called upon to make an effort?

Discussions over race and racism thereby project the public problem of national identity in two related ways. First, peculiarities of native culture are understood as causes for anxiety about the post-racist ideal: the Dutch have cultivated a taboo on ethnic difference and have become embarrassed to maintain and express their national core ethos, an uninhibited and burgherly civility. In this
view, the Dutch are said to feel inhibited and constrained vis-à-vis the other (Prins 2004). Public debate and political contention thereby have become loci in which problematic aspects of Dutch culture are made visible. Second, the imagination of a post-racist Dutchness risks covering up the fact that racism still happens and is still a part of Dutch society. Here, racism becomes the unjustified discrimination on the basis of ‘mere appearance’ and ought to be rejected. The idea that Dutchness does not or ought not to include racism remains firmly intact. Between taboo and discrimination, the ideal of a post-racist Dutchness is reiterated.

Essed’s anti-racism strikes at the heart of this configuration. Yet, as shall be discussed in the next chapter, the ensuing debates over national identity would not entertain an anti-racist analysis of how and why questions of race destabilised images of Dutch exceptionalism to any significant extent. Such a questioning of what race and racism may actually be, was increasingly abandoned. In its place came a discussion that ostentatiously did not focus on ‘mere race’, but rather on the far more weighty issue of what could reasonably be considered outstanding about Dutchness and could therefore be treated as national ideals over and above difference.