Out of character: debating Dutchness, narrating citizenship
van Reekum, R.

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As has been discussed in chapter 4, one of the crucial aspects of Dutchness that came to be articulated in the burgeoning identity debates of the early 1990’s was the notion that Dutch identity lacked – for better or worse – strength, emphatic expression, emotionality, substance and conviction. With this trope also came the suggestion that it was precisely this lack that constituted something of a national image. As we have already seen, the crucial development here is the way in which national identity comes to be known and argued over as something that the public itself is continuously imagining. Consequently, if a multitude of Dutch people imagined their Dutchness in a conspicuously non-emotional, non-emphatic, anti-essentialist fashion, it had to be concluded that this very tendency should be credited as a part of national particularity. We have also already seen how this situation interpellated historians and other experts of national culture to redefine their right to speak. Indeed, when national identity debates became a privileged site of imagination, namely as a crucial viewpoint upon the public’s current attitudes, the scholarly and, thus, non-democratic expertise of historians and other geesteswetenschappers (cultural experts associated with the humanities) could come into conflict with the more and more often repeated argument that Dutch is what the Dutch imagine to be Dutch.

Just as a reminder of what this kind of reasoning sounds like, let’s look at a wonderfully textured example by noted public historian and commentator Geert Mak in 1992, who while not entirely unconcerned, strikes a relativizing tone by arguing that not much could be made anymore of Dutch identity:

The Netherlands isn’t proud, it is even non-proud in a proud manner. Even the most well-off Dutch [Hollanders] seem to have clenched to the outward frugality of their 17th-century fathers with a certain stubbornness. […] An explanation for this modesty as national pride lies in the simple fact that the Netherlands as a nation has already been complete for so dreadfully long. […] What binds a modern nation like the Netherlands is not primarily a flag and a state but that which some refer to as ‘civic religion’: the largely unuttered conglomerate of attitudes, values and ideals that used to be asserted by schools and churches and that today forms the permanent undertone of opinions in

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20 This turn of phrase was lifted from the title of a book by Dutch sociologist and legalist Kees Schuyt: Schuyt, K (2009). Over het recht om wij te zeggen: groepstegenstellingen en de democratische gemeenschap. Amsterdam University Press.
broadsheets, debates in parliament, news selection by the NOS-evening news, the signs of the ANWB [national automotive organisation], the shop windows of the HEMA [conspicuously plain department store] and the thousands of other signs that are projected towards the citizens and tell him: this is the Netherlands. An ‘imagined community’, as anthropologist Benedict Anderson calls it, a schema of ideas that people need, according to him, because it provides them with a sense of continuity, the idea that people share in a common fate, without having to know one’s peers-in-fate [lotgenoten].

Now, in the Netherlands, this civic religion is still Calvinist through and through, notwithstanding the secularisation [ontkerkelijking]. And more than anything else, this is probably the deepest source of our prohibition on pride, our national compulsion for civilising, our manic egalitarianism and our almost blind duplicity. […] The problem with the Netherlands is that it is never the same, and yet also already finished for a long time. That it is without God [van God los, which also mean ‘gone wild’], and yet also trembles at His wrath. That it is itself, and yet also doesn’t know what lives in its own cellars. (December 24 1992, NRC Handelsblad) (#129)

In the following analysis, I will deal with the debates about history and national identity in the post-2000 era. More specifically, I will analyse the debates concerning the construction of a canon for the purpose of history education in schools. In analogy with the policy program of civic enculturation, the program of canonisation presents the central, if not the sole policy measure to remedy the lacking sense of national belonging. Of course, there have been many other projects and initiatives, governmental or otherwise, concerned with the reinvigoration of national identity, culture and/or cohesion after 2000-2002. Yet, these appear sectorial and partial in comparisons to the ambitions and expectations loaded into a national history canon (see Boomkens 2010). It was specifically with respect to such a canon that the problem of constructing a common ground among everyone residing in the Netherlands became thematised and debated. How would that work? What would that require? While the civic enculturation program was targeted at the allochthonous population, aspirant-residents and candidates for naturalisation, the program of canonisation is conversely targeted at the native public, ostensibly including those deemed allochthonous. Whereas civic enculturation pertinently did not refer to natives, canonisation is brought forth as a measure uniquely fitted for the native public itself. In this sense, it forms the other half of a broader policy push to inculcate national identification and feelings of belonging. Notwithstanding the symmetry, the national history canon would come to evoke a debate about the relationship between experts and publics instead of the debates about obligatory testing and demonstrated effort with respect to civic enculturation.

We begin by exploring some of the context in which plans for canonisation emerged.
The nativity of the public
By the end of the 1990’s, the topic of national identity and its rhetorical forms had become a far more familiar part of public discussion. What happened next was the enactment of more pronounced attempts to actually do and make something to the effect of national reinvigoration. One such attempt came from sociologist-cum-publicist Herman Vuijsje and cultural psychologist Jos van der Lans. In two separate publications – Lage Landen, Hoge Sprongen (1998) [Low Lands, High Jumps] and Typisch Nederlands (1999) [Typically Dutch] – they sought to give some substance to the oft discussed national identity. The first presents a thematic insight into the unification of the Netherlands, much in line with the geographical perspective presented by Knippenberg & De Pater (2002). The emphasis is on processes of rapid change – modernisation – that brought the rather divers peoples who found themselves within the European borders of the Kingdom more closely together, made them more similar and, ultimately, convinced them that they were all Dutch.21 The second is an alphabetically ordered vademecum, or handbook, that goes through a myriad of topics, symbols, quaint phrases, historical sketches and contemporary particularities that together should constitute an evocative sense of Dutchness for the reader. The authors write in their introduction:

Typisch Nederlands is an attempt to open up the Dutch particularities in all their diversity and contradiction. To achieve this, we have consciously adopted a presentation in alphabetical order. This has precisely the required arbitrariness: everything is randomly ordered. This inevitably makes it into a construction kit. Some parts evoke feelings of irony, others evoke enthusiasm, pride, anger or astonishment. The Dutch identity is nothing other than what the Dutch make of it on the basis of their own experiences, insights and opinions.

We have not aimed for completeness; that would have been an impossible endeavour. Moreover, our description is inevitably coloured by our own observations and preoccupations. This is a reassuring aspect if this book: the Dutch just won’t let themselves be known fully. (Van der Lans & Vuijsje 1999: 8-9) (#130)

Thus, the typification style is explicitly not one of completeness, exhaustive description and insight into a deep and hidden core. Nor are the emotional attachments meant to be coherent. Instead, the authors propose to place themselves among the many attitudes, opinions and experiences of the people and to project an evocative sense of identity through the inevitable inflection of their own subjective engagement. It would be wrong to think that this style is one of endless subjectivism. In fact, this style – Dutch is what the Dutch make of it – entails its own problems and matters of concerns with which its interlocutor may critically engage herself. This becomes readily apparent from an essay entitled ‘Peculiarly

21 For a similar approach that emphasises institutional layering within territorial boundaries, see Kuipers 2010.
Dutch’ and published alongside Lage Landen, Hoge Sprongen by one of the authors, Jos van der Lans, in Trouw:

In the Netherlands, history is not a matter of emotion and consequently, we know remarkably little about it. […] The Dutch more emphatically create a we-feeling as they become less of a we-community through modern phenomena like individualisation and depillarisation. It is a form of paradoxical compensation. We invent neo-folklore with the demise of the old one. […] That’s why today we can openly wonder what our national identity is. What is typically Dutch? What is our national character [volksaard]? There has been a taboo on such questions for a long time. Those were the questions that formed the basis for every form of nationalism and WOII is the living proof of what excess can follow from that. That memory inflects our national consciousness to this day.

That is why it is still impossible to muse unreservedly about such questions. Indeed, we only need to look at the Balkans […], where the historical hatred between peoples [volkeren] has been sustained so strongly that in name of nationalistic feelings the most atrocious ethnic cleansings have been executed as if they happen every day.

[…]

But with the desire for equality [gelijkheidsdrang], the need for security and a homely, local sanctuary surely the basic ingredients of the Dutch culture are named. Even the polder model, the avoidance of conflicts by deliberating as long as possible, is the result of the joining of these three cultural chemicals.

[…]

We should become much more aware of the narrative behind the reality as it surrounds us daily in the Netherlands. The narrative of modest riches, of equivalence and of local sanctuary.

We may well be a bit more chauvinistic about this. This history merits narration. It wouldn’t do any harm to recount it aloud more often. (July 4 1998, Trouw) (#131)

National identification need not at all be a question of imposing cultural sameness, so argues Van der Lans. Rather, it may be a matter actively engaging in storytelling. Van der Lans’ mention of ‘the Balkans’ is interesting in this respect. As happened more often throughout the 1990’s, ‘the Balkans’ or ‘Eastern Europe’ more broadly functioned as a cautioning example of what would or could happen when nationalist tendencies regained their strength: irrationality, division and violence. Yet, the prospect of ‘the Balkans’ only rarely placed the debates over Dutchness in an unfavourable light. Instead, discussions over Dutchness gained in gravity and, far from denunciation of the issue, the question became how to deal with it properly. The efforts of Vuijsje and Van der Lans can be understood in this way. Far from a relativizing tendency, the search for relativism and unreservedness entails a project of ‘louder’ narration. This louder narration may be conspicuously non-authoritarian, flexing with the imaginations of people themselves, but this nonetheless introduces its own responsibilities and its own right to speak: breaking taboos, making stories and evoking popular recognition.

Already after the publication of Scheffer’s drama-essay, S. W. Couwenberg published a distinctly ideographic overview entitled ‘What is our cultural identity’
in which he demonstrates a combination between subjectivism and objectivism by discussing Dutch identity as an ideographic phenomenon: what matters are the actual ideas that are dominantly present in the politico-cultural orientations of the Dutch public (see also Couwenberg 2001). Much in line with the reasoning of Fortuyn, Couwenberg combines an acceptance of statist nationalism, focusing on politico-cultural orientations of citizens, with the idea that national culture is, in the end, pre-political and grounded in the daily exploits of peoples. This positioning is interesting not only for its enactment of a peculiarly pluralistic traditionalism, but also because it nonetheless resonates quite strongly with the fragmentary approach as, for instance, enacted by Vuijsje and Van der Lans.

Couwenberg starts as many did throughout the nineties:

In the Netherlands, we have great difficulty acknowledging that we have a particular [eigen] cultural identity. When we do make an attempt to describe our identity, we more readily look for it in moral qualities like tolerance and a tradition of consensus than in factual data such as a particular [eigen] language, convivial customs and history. (October 14 2000, Trouw) (#132)

Then, he proceeds to discuss the ideological developments of the Dutch demos as a reflection of the lived orientations of Dutch people, concluding that:

Since the nineties, the latitudinal-liberal [vrijzinnig-liberal] orientation has gained prominence in public opinion, and this has been accompanied by a clear reaction against the left-libertarian derailments of the sixties. The Netherlands is hence in search of a new balance between the tolerance of the moderates [rekkerlijken] and the strict deference of the hardliners [preciezen]. Sticking up for maintenance and development of the own national identity is also no longer taboo. (October 14 2000, Trouw) (#133)

But how then does the diverse orientation of Dutch people relate to something like a Dutch identity, especially considering the influx of newcomers to the political community? For this Couwenberg mobilises an immensely important argument. It is presented here in some detail as Couwenberg articulates it in crystal clear language, but it is far from his invention or his exclusive position. In fact, it represents one of the more important ways to argue about the right to speak of us:

In the Netherlands, people – in leftist circles in particular – successfully fought for the recognition of [het respecteren van] the cultural identity of the ethnic minorities, especially the recognition of their language and culture in education.

In opposition to this I have defended the position that within our society a number of subcultures can be distinguished along religious, regional and ethno-cultural characteristics. But these subcultures are encompassed by a common Dutch culture, consisting of a common language and an evolving complex of norms and values that form the basis of our political culture and rule of law. That culture is a national variant of our European and western culture and this Dutch culture we may, in principle, put up as a norm for allochthones who durably settle here. (October 14 2000, Trouw) (#134)
How then does Couwenberg explain this subordinate position of allochthones in matters of cultural plurality? Why don’t they enjoy the same pre-political prerogative to live out cultural orientations, a way of dealing with culture that grounds the multiplicity of Dutch identity? Here, Couwenberg introduces a principal difference:

The cultural relativism is valid for states with autochthonous ethnic minorities, like Kurds in the Middle-East and Kosovars in Serbia, to name two current examples. There we are dealing with veritably multicultural societies. The adaptation that we may reasonably require of allochthonous minorities, e.g. migrant groups, does not apply to autochthonous minorities, who traditionally live in a certain area and through capricious processes of state formation are part of a polity that is alien to them. In this respect, recognition of certain group rights, such as administrative autonomy and the preservation of a distinct [eigen] language and culture, present a reasonable and adequate solution.

(October 14 2000, Trouw) (#135)

There are two aspects of Couwenberg’s articulation that merit special attention in order to better understand the ensuing debates over history, expert engagement and Dutchness. First, in no specific sense does Couwenberg’s position contradict the one taken by Vuijsje and Van der Lans. That is, they share quite explicitly a regard for people’s own contemporary orientations. Couwenberg does emphasise the objective moment of such orientations and distinctly describes them as such, but this leads him to precisely the same conclusion as so many others voices at that moment: while the Dutch refrain from explicitly talking about their national identity due to Dutch peculiarities, they in fact do have such a thing as a national identity about which they could be more pronounced. Consequently, when this ‘we’ is articulated, it appears as an emphatically multifaceted object firmly endowed with the flexibility of a liberal, open, enlightened and diverse society. Dutchness appears always already, inherently pluralist.

Second, what matters is not the root historical cause, origin mythology or genealogy of Dutch culture at the exclusion of an outside/other, but the way in which Dutchness historically comes to encompass difference and contain its inherent plurality. What matters is what the Dutch have come to imagine, construct and conserve together as an encompassing nationhood. As we have already explored, this is one of the reasons why public debate on these issues became so thoroughly invested with meaning and gravity: debate is presumed to facilitate encompassment. It is also here that the crucial difference between natives and newcomers becomes apparent. In short, there are two kinds of differences: the native’s difference as part of an encompassing, plural, Dutch togetherness and the newcomer’s difference which resides under but does not in itself constitute the
encompassing capacity of Dutchness (see also Van Reekum 2012a). Thus, what comes to underwrite the supposedly exemplary flexibility of Dutch identity is the assumption that a Dutch people can always – in last instance – be discerned through state-territorial demarcations and their associated legal codifications as these indicate who has been here. The question of who can claim to be Dutch becomes entangled with the question who can claim to have been here, involved in the historical encompassment of Dutchness. When articulating the ‘who’ of the ‘we’ the ‘here’ helps to sort out how a principally non-exclusionary ‘we’ can still describe a ‘they-form-there’ who do not yet belong for not having participated sufficiently in a legacy of encompassment.

So while disagreements abound about what can and should be said and done about the cultural substantiation of Dutch identity, interlocutors tend to have those disagreements by reiterating the notion that the interpellated public of such debates and practices is a distinctly plural population residing and living out their lives in a territorially bounded space. The Dutch are, as the Dutch constitution puts it, ‘ingesetenen’: residents-who-are-settled-in. What matters is that they were here and by being here were part of the historical legacy of encompassment. Consequently, it is territorial otherness that can be used to speak about those that do not-yet-belong and come to entangle the many other notions of difference. It is non-western allochthony – coming from a non-western elsewhere – that is most appropriate for naming cultural maladaptation.

To be sure, territorial otherness is very far from merely geographical. As Couwenberg indicates for instance: Dutch culture is a variant of European/western civilisation. So what constitutes the cultural distance of the newcomer isn’t evident at all. What seems crucially important is the idea that one comes from a place that has enduringly participated in the central (and not peripheral) organisation of global capitalism and is attributed some version of the associated spirit: does one come from a place that has demonstrated economic prowess? The non-western allochthon thereby appears to lack a legacy of participation in what happened here… in the West. An entire debate can thus ensue about how ‘the West’ is to be recognised and what its boundaries may be, while the category itself loses little of its salience (see for instance Van den Brink 2001; Cliteur 2003; Baudet 2012).

In any event, what does become more self-evidently pronounced in this way – even throughout the on-going dissensus over the constituents of the West – is that there certainly is a way of speaking of us. Namely, by speaking for the public among the public; by actively adding to the historical legacy of identitarian encompassment. To speak of us is to compete in the public struggle over who will gain the most widely projected persuasion and evoke the most popular of
imaginations. Even the mere suggestion of territorial boundedness makes such a debate possible as it makes plausible the native public among whose attitudes, opinions, experiences and imaginations Dutchness may be found, while appearing all the more accurate – inherently plural – for never being fully trapped and identified.

It is in such a context that a central proponent of identitarian reinvigoration, Paul Scheffer, could disagree affectively with Peter van der Veer, when the latter had argued that a concerted search for Dutch culture would be in vain as the social processes that had granted such a notion a measure of veracity had irrevocably been transformed. The expert on religious nationalism and transnational life had teasingly titled his essay ‘The Netherlands no longer exists’. In it, Van der Veer advocated a decidedly cosmopolitan outlook and proposed to counter the ills of societal disconnection by focusing on stigmatisation and discrimination, not the reinvigoration of cohesion and identity. Van der Veer wondered:

Are we dealing with a lamentable loss? Cultural nationalists, like Paul Scheffer and Frits Bolkestein, not only argue that there is something like a Dutch culture, but also that something should be dearly done to protect that threatened culture. The Dutch language, the Dutch tolerance, the Dutch history and, especially, the typically Dutch plainness (if one acts normal, one is already being crazy enough) have to be completely brought back to their former glory. This kind of conservative ideologue is generally better in describing what threatens Dutch identity [eigenheid] than what Dutch identity [eigenheid] is. In their writings, this threat doesn’t come from abstract social processes, like globalisation, but from concretely identifiable groups, the Muslims that won’t assimilate. This is an ancient pattern, that one already finds in the early modern witch hunts and is well-described by the American aphorism ‘Blame the victim’. It shows little interest in what is happening in the world or in the experiences and backgrounds of immigrants, but it does show a fear of change, something that affects established elites always and everywhere. Migrants symbolise that nothing is ever fixed, that nothing is rooted and impervious to change, that life is change. It is for this reason that debates about migrants are far less about migrants themselves and far more about what they symbolise. (September 2000, *De Gids* (#136)

Scheffer responded by criticising Van der Veer’s cosmopolitanism as a boundless, indifferent attitude. But what is more interesting here is the way in which Scheffer presents the need to search for identity:

The position of Van der Veer appears to be a critical gesture, but it is far from one. Does he really not notice that his remarks belong in a Dutch tradition, in which all too often self-relativising has been a ground for self-aggrandising. The smaller, the better. […] Not a very innovative insight for a country like the Netherlands, which has described itself traditionally as the intersection of three neighbouring linguistic regions. That self-image has at once been a form of self-exaltation, but has never obstructed a feeling of responsibility. Precisely by taking up alien influences a community is able to reinvent itself continuously, without having to disavow its own existence. Not self-denial, but self-examination: that could be the art of cosmopolitanism in our time.
The Netherlands no longer exists according to the scholar of religion. Why still maintain a Rijksmuseum? Isn’t such a museum, full of Dutch [Hollandse] masters, a strange idea in a world that lives of mixture. Isn’t that a form of ‘cultural nationalism’? […] And why would we erect a monument in memory of slavery when Dutch history has become meaningless? We aren’t responsible for the misdeeds perpetrated by previous generations in the name of the Netherlands. A war in the Indie [the Dutch name of the eastern colonies], you say – never heard of. (January 27 2001, NRC Handelsblad) (#137)

In a now familiar fashion, Scheffer diagnoses the way in which the Dutch self imagines its image and what the consequences of such imaginations may be. As we have also already seen, he thereby is able to embrace wholeheartedly a defence of openness and pluralism, while still keeping the need for reinvigorated imagination going: the national self should engage in self-examination and thus discover a renewed ‘we’ within itself. The culture in cultural nationalism matters, then, first and foremost because it indicates and addresses what is native, what was and is here, what has been here during the legacy of pluralistic encompassment. While Van der Veer and Scheffer may conceptualise culture, nation and identity quite differently, their embrace of openness and cosmopolitanism does not become the main crux of the dispute. What Van der Veer already focuses on and what Scheffer responds to is the question whether nativity still count and should count for something in ‘our’ time. Both authors reiterate, almost without having to say as much, that a search for identity will never end in a steadfast description of the essential core of an identity. That’s not the point, nor does Scheffer posit an essentialist notion of cultural community. The point is whether there still is a native public for whom such a search – all the more appropriate by remaining indefinite – could be said to be necessary, practical or, even, relevant. Scheffer responds to Van der Veer’s criticism by arguing about a historical legacy and native self-understanding: while the scholar of transnationalism may say, somewhat parochially, that the Netherlands no longer exists, there is still, according to Scheffer, a native public for whom it does and for whom he chooses to raise his voice. It is only by acknowledging the existence of that public and its self-imagination that a coherent self-examination can proceed. When speaking of us, it seems the crucial question is whether there is a native public to speak to and for.

**Historical consciousness**

Analogous to civic enculturation policy, it is important to stress that the curricular redesign of history education did in no way originate from the political upheavals of 2000-2002. In fact, two consecutive commissions had been occupied with devising a new outlook and blueprint for history instruction in schools.
(Commission De Wit 1998; Commission De Rooy 2001b). By the end of the 1990’s connections between national identity and history education had gained some articulation in policy discussion. Take for example, one of the concrete recommendations in a RMO-report of 1999: ‘(4) Inquire to what extent a consciousness of national identity can be promoted in (history) education and emancipation policies [vormingswerk].’ (RMO 1999: 24) (#138). Despite of this, both commissions focused their reports on a somewhat different concern: historical consciousness.

While some discussion in response to both reports revolved around the question what historical consciousness might actually be, it is nonetheless possible and relevant to clarify the kind of concern that ‘historical consciousness’ referred to. As is explained in the summary of the De Rooy Commission’s report:

The most important new goal of history education is that it is truly remembered [bijblijven] by pupils. The lessons in history should yield a durable result. With reference to the ideas of historians and educationalists here and abroad, the commission presents the development of historical consciousness as the new, most important goal of history education. This goal elaborates on the recommendation of the Commission De Wit to search for a balance between factual knowledge, understanding [inzicht] and skills. But historical consciousness consists of more [méér]. It enables us to interpret reality in a sound manner, and determine our position with regard to reality. Historical consciousness promotes:

- The understanding [inzicht] that contemporary phenomena are historically determined. Contemporary phenomena are the product of development, but also temporary and bound to a time [aan een tijd gebonden].
- A more detached, more relativizing judgement than is possible in uneducated, spontaneous and irrational reactions.

Historical consciousness should develop in pupils through an extended and coherent educational program. Examination should be concerned with the way in which candidates interpret reality and determine their position with regards to it. It is no longer sufficient to merely test the presence of purely factual historical knowledge.

The commission argues that historical consciousness is not identical to chronological consciousness. The acquisition of chronological consciousness does form a prerequisite for the development of historical consciousness. (Commission De Rooy 2001a: 2) (#139)

At the forefront of the concern for historical consciousness was the worry that neither factual knowledge nor skills were durably instilled because they did not become part of a more expansive and coherent framework for viewing reality and its temporality. As such, it was not durably instilled and remembered past the moment of instruction and testing. History education, it seemed, had itself become fleeting and contingent. The report quotes from Youth and History, a Europe-wide survey on historical consciousness and political attitudes (Angvik, Von Borries &
Keri 1994) to articulate the crucial importance of temporal continuity for an effective instilment of historical consciousness:

‘Historical consciousness is characterised by a complex relationship between the interpretation of the past on the one hand and the perception of contemporary reality and expectation of the future on the other.’ (Commission De Rooy 2001b: 1-2) (#140)

To emphasise the distinction between historical consciousness as the eventual goal of education on the one hand and chronology and factual knowledge as means to that end on the other, the report quotes Dutch historian Ed Jonker:

So Ed Jonker writes in an article on historical consciousness22: ‘With historical consciousness we are dealing with a deliberately produced cultural resource [cultuargoed], which apart from empirical historiography also contains an element of interpretation and signification [zingeving]. Such a historical memory operates as a point of orientation, provides identity, is socially and politically effective and contributes to competence and goal-orientation of civic life [het maatschappelijke leven]. (Commission De Rooy 2001b: 2) (#141)

Within the goal of historical consciousness, then, a triplet of concerns are conjoined: (1) the durable instilment of a view onto reality and its temporality, which is associated with a more prudent, less irrational reaction to contemporary politics by youths; (2) the deliberate production of a coherent, contiguous and commonly shared framework in which historical facts and interpretive work become contextualised; (3) as such, the more coherent governance of history education by projecting the development of historical consciousness as the overarching goal in relation to which curricular decisions and didactic measures can be judged, thereby maintaining and promoting a common, cultural resource. So while, indeed, the recommendation concerning historical consciousness conspicuously refrain from any mention of canonisation and/or the reinvigoration of national identity, it is clear that historical consciousness concern a cultural resource of a commonly shared, identity-orienting and durable view onto the world.

Additionally, the ‘more’ [méér] that the De Rooy Commission provided, consisted of an epochal grid in which specific knowledge and educational activities would be placed. These 10 epochs provide all pupils with one and the same framework of history to be filled with interpretative content. The epochs are not chosen for their Dutchness, nor are they argued for as such. The epochs prescribe a historical framework that resonates broadly with a European, civilisational

historiography. They are about what made the West: early cave paintings and agricultural development, classical culture and conquest, the development of new territorial states and Christian religions, the establishment of monarchies and republics, their revolutionary transformations, the technological upheavals of society after the advent of steam and the horror of technological warfare and genocide in the 20th century. So while the ideas associated with historical consciousness did not already contain a specifically addressed concern for Dutch identity and its more coherent projection, the importance of a coherent, contiguous historical consciousness in all Dutch pupils for navigating their position within a European horizon was most certainly part of the emerging discussion over shared memory.

This emphasis on the position of Dutch society and culture within a European historical legacy also resonates with the extensive research project ‘Dutch culture in European culture’ that was finished by the beginning of the new millennium. Designed and financed in response to the national identity debates in the late eighties and early nineties – specifically those about the value of national identity in a post-Maastricht Europe – the entire project consisted of a series of separate studies. Each study is concerned with ‘the Netherlands’ in a specific year, consecutively 1650 (Frijhoff & Spies 1999), 1800 (Kloek & Mijnhardt 2001), 1900 (Bank & Van Buuren 2000), 1950 (Schuyt & Taverne 2000), with one publication overarching the entire period up to the present (Fokkema & Grijzenhout 2001). In line with the reasoning of the De Rooy Commission, the project presents Dutch culture in a European horizon, is concerned with continuity across time while relativizing the idea that history can provide a description of a definite Dutch particularity. Dutch culture remains what the various authors found culturally relevant at one moment and place in history. It is culture of a place – the burgeoning republic that is today remembered as the forbearer of a kingdom we call the Netherlands –, not the enduring cultural constitution of a people – the Dutch – that forms the heart of the project. In this respect, the projections of the De Rooy Commission already go one step further as its recommendations emphasise much stronger the importance of a shared, coherent and identity-orienting framework for what pupils should know and remember about ‘their’ history.

As noted by Karel Davids (2002: 550), it is nonetheless quite striking that many of the ‘Dutch culture’ studies of that period recursively deal with notions of deliberation, negotiation, moderation, toleration and discussion when articulating cultural tenants of public life. Typifications that, in turn, resonate with the way in which Piet de Rooy himself has dealt with the history of gradual democratisation and politicisation in the Netherlands of the 19th century and 20th centuries, namely
as a history of constant discord and deliberative consolidation of differences (De Rooy 2002).

**Neo-patriotism: the uses of ‘our’ history and feeling at home**

It was in the years after the assassination of Fortuyn that a need to specifically and concertedly do something about the national identity of the population became a key part of the political response to that moment of reaction. These positionings were taken even more urgently after the murder of Theo van Gogh in November of 2004 (Eyerman 2008; Hajer & Uitermark 2008). A host of parliamentarians and public figures took it upon themselves to articulate such positions and to argue for governmental action (Lechner 2008). Governmental action or attempts thereof would include many different avenues and initiatives, but it was the canonisation of Dutch history that would become the primary object of debate. Such new attempts at establishing Dutch particularity through history and memory stood in direct relation to earlier discussions about the relevance of history for Dutchness. In chapter 5 we have, for instance, already seen how Pierre Nora’s notion of a lieu de memoire was embraced by a variety of academic historians who sought to invent a new, more publicly interactive role for themselves. The crux of this role was that historians could no longer presume to be the gatekeepers of national self-understanding, but should rather act as experts in specific projects of memorialisation. Indeed, Dutch was what the Dutch imagined to be Dutch, but this new concept of nationhood still gave historians something to do with respect to nationhood: they could begin to guide and enhance the imaginative-cum-commemorative practice of their public. Yet after 2002, the public construction of sites and fragments under the auspice of historical expertise was no longer enough for those who sought to claim that they had understood the worries of the autochthonous population. A more coherent, recognisable, persuasive and delineated image was in order and history was to provide clarity. Such imagination should not be scattered across a multitude of lieux – each one as valid as the next –, but should take hold in the national site par excellence: the classroom.

In an early exchange between two historians, one of the main points of contestation was immediately drawn out, namely to what use could and should history be made? A question that was reminiscent of Paul Scheffer’s well-established plea for a more deliberate and coherent construction of national identity: there is utility to Dutchness. Peter Sierksma argued:

If one seeks to return [teruggeven] some sense of togetherness to the population in this period of Post-Purple Confusion [referring to the demise of the purple coalitions], then history education is one of
the most natural instruments for it. A clear view on history can teach people that in the country in which they live there are, of course, not only differences in descent, culture and religion, but also similarities and common goals, such as trade and the necessity of toleration. […] Whereas De Rooy didn’t think such a list necessary, in this time of idols and icons, stories from Hadewych [canonic literature] to Hafid Bouazza [contemporary Dutch novelist] and from Marnix van Sint Aldegonde [canonic literature] to Clarence Seedorf [famous soccer player] could actually work quite effectively. And the fact that some typically Dutch [op z’n Hollands] bickering will take place about the names and the amount of names, well, that won’t hurt our awareness of national identity at all for the time being. (October 30 2003, Trouw) (#142)

David Hollanders retorted that this would amount to a political instrumentalisation of history, detrimental to the development of historical consciousness as advocated by De Rooy:

Historian Peter Sierksma wants to keep history obligatory in secondary education (Podium, October 30). An inspiring historical vision will presumably contribute to the enculturation of new co-patriots [nieuwe Nederlanders]. This also requires, according to him, a new canon […] In this view, history education is a form of social studies [maatschappijleer], with which the discipline regresses into political instrument. Previously, this lead to examination questions about German unification (when it turned out the youth taught negatively about Germans), women’s history (when feminism had to be promoted) and European unification (as promotion for the Treaty of Maastricht). All interesting topics, but motivated by mere current political and not scientific or didactical considerations. […] The value of history doesn’t reside in the making of simple analogies (‘Never again Auschwitz’), but in cultivating the awareness that such analogies are mostly untenable. In education, what matters is historical consciousness, not political urgency. (November 6 2003, Trouw) (#143)

With this confrontation, we have encountered a crucial question as to what the relationship between history education and Dutch identity is considered to be: does such a relationship involve pragmatic utility in the creation of a more self-assured society or will political instrumentalisation be the inevitable outcome? Are we dealing with a common and creative project of fabrication or are we dealing with a form of forceful imposition under a guise of national well-being? It is this questioning that helps explain why it became so important for proponents of the national history canon specifically and the use of national history more broadly to distinguish themselves from the very pertinent associations between canonisation and imposition. That is, any policy project that assumes to instil a coherent national image will need to address how and why that project is not a form of unwarranted nationalism, imposed from above. It will have to be addressed how and why such a project does indeed create a less conflicted society. Moreover, it will have to be made clear what can constitute the national in national history. This last point may be considered particularly complex as the new hopes for history education could barely take their cues from a well-established tradition of national history education. Due to distinctly plural schooling system in the Netherlands, national
history had always already been educated along quite divergent lines. In the main, these problems had been made addressable by ostensibly avoiding any claims to exclusive historiographical authority and, instead, relaying the problem in the hands of the public itself.

Let’s explore this way of dealing with the problem through an example: when KRO’s Reporter, an investigative journalism TV-show, performed a representative survey of the Dutch population on what they deemed to be at the heart of Dutch culture, journalist Esther Hageman argued that:

Queens Day, Sinterklaas, ice skating. These are the most typical symbols for the Netherlands. This can be concluded from a survey that KRO’s ‘Reporter’ will present tonight. Dutch culture is threatened, says a majority of the respondents. To protect that culture government should not avoid coercion.

[...]
The particular [eigen], Dutch culture is threatened. That is, this is the feeling of autochthonous Dutch. Among them, 66% endorses the idea that the Netherlands is at risk of losing its culture. Of those people, 96% thinks this worrisome. Allochthones look upon this more calmly. Of them only 42% thinks that Dutch culture is dilapidating. But of this 42% of allochthones, the lion share, as high as 92%, also thinks this is worrisome. (March 31 2004, Trouw) (#144)

Neither this small summary of the survey, nor the actual reportage by Reporter had any long lasting significance in the debates, but they nonetheless enact a crucial style for talking about the relationship between history, culture and Dutchness. The ability and justification for speaking of us is underwritten by a logic of fame (Boltanski & Thévenot 2006 [1991]). That is, what matters is the popular recognition and embrace of certain opinions and feelings, over and above the expertise that certain participants in debates may claim. This primacy of popularity becomes even more evident when one of the central experts of history and culture (and a vocal proponent of historical canonisation) addresses the usage of history. In an intervention entitled ‘Long live history – but which one?’, Michaël Zeeman writes:

For the first time in three centuries a politician has been murdered and a popular uprising has manifested itself, the likes of which we have not witnessed for a long time. Who have we become? [...]
A couple of weeks back, the first part of what should become a new ‘general history of the Netherlands’ was published: the part that the eminent, reformed [gereformeerd] historian A. Th. van Deursen devoted to the Golden Age, The burden of fortune [geluk]. [...] Van Deursen is, apart from an extraordinary expert on the sources of the period, a great narrator: he offers a story, a story of the past that everyone longs for. He does so with authority and persuasion. [.....]
It forces us to recognise the crucial question: what does a national history look like in a postnational time? When consecutive governments would once again seek to instrumentalised that history, which purpose does that instrumentalisation serve and how does that work?

History is back, even if only because we look for a mainstay in it. The answer to the question where we hope to find this support is far from clear. Van Deursen provides one: in our reformatory [gereformeerd] ancestry and in the decisive role that the Dutch [Hollandse] elites traditionally have played. But that elite finds itself in great distress today and Islam reaching the numerical levels of the reformed church. However tempting it may seem to unequivocally [klip en klaar] point out a Leitkultur, as is argued by Frits Bolkestein (de Volkskrant, October 19) among others, that won’t be a panacea.

Zeeman doesn’t argue for Van Deursen’s historiography as such (see Van Deursen 2004). Rather, he argues that an authoritative offering, good narration and a persuasive style can open up a broader debate in which many may voice their vision of national history. So while Zeeman, who is often referred to specifically as an exemplar of a cosmopolitan intellectual23, argues that his public has entered a post-national era, this does not entail the end of national history. Rather, it entails a different mode of reasoning about and dealing with such history. It is not a matter of pointing out this or that decisive narrative, but a question of publicly proclaiming and debating ‘key moments’ as they become competitors in a struggle for the public’s attention and recognition.

The public authority of cultural and historical experts does not emanate primarily from some elevated position of learning. As enacted by Zeeman and others, the point of delving into history is not even to find a conclusive verdict. The expertise of the experts lays in their ability to bring appropriate material to the public, not to impose an exclusive vision onto others. This does not effectively change after 2000-2002 when proponents of canonisation and a reinvigoration of Dutchness argue for the unifying function of ‘our’ past. Such proponents argue that appropriate material is material in which a native public recognises itself and helps it to overcome a sense of abandonment and loss. Established ways of teaching history and enabling memory are indeed critiqued for a lack in focus, continuity, coherence and native context. But they are critiqued because they do not attend to the public’s needs, affinities and feelings, not because a national history canon ought to be coercively imposed by an exclusive group of experts who are

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23 As frequent contributor to De Volkskrant Zeeman has written extensively for that newspaper and others. Often his essays and interventions dealt with the arts, culture and the politics and policies concerning culture. Living in Rome for extended periods of time, his contributions to discussion over history, Dutchness and culture were often presented and responded to as a perspective ‘from the outside, writing as a foreign correspondent. As such, his writing on these issues partly resonates with the broader tradition of writing on Dutchness-form-outside yet coming from a figure at the heart of the Dutch cultural elite (see Van Ginkel 1997).
knowledgeable about the true historical outlines of Dutchness. So while the point of canonisation and an emphasis on ‘our’ history is clearly justified by pointing out the need to instruct and instil a stronger sense of identity and commonality, the debate over such a project is also inflected by a style that purposefully evades the suggestion of coercive imposition.

In line with the notion of ‘civilised nationalism’ that was repeatedly used in the years before 2000 – see chapter 5 – it was Jozias van Aartsen, the leader of the VVD during those years, who presented the new emphasis on history as ‘renewed patriotism’. By doing so, he was distinguishing precisely coercive and anachronistic nationalism from persuasive and contemporary patriotism. As he argued in an interview with *De Volkskrant* explaining why the conservative liberals should seek a stronger, more effective state governance:

How does the school become royal purveyor of good citizens? ‘One should fill society with emotion, like the French and the Americans do. There are the old themes like equality between men and women, private property, protection of your property. But more is needed, a binding element. Why are we Dutch? I concur strongly with Paul Scheffer. He is a representative of what I call the neo-patriots. That patriotism is also in me.’

‘The Netherlands has been able to incorporate immigrants for centuries. Two hundred years ago, we demanded the synagogues to use Dutch. We’ve never done that with our mosques. We have neglected that transmission of values. A generation has grown up that knows too little of our history, when the keynote [*grondtoon*] of the nation should be taught in school. I want the substance of history curricula to be bolstered [*aangescherpt*]. Freedom and tolerance should be dealt with, but also the Delta Works [engineering project strongly associated with postwar regeneration and defence-against-water typifications], Cruijff and Van Basten [famous soccer players].’

Singing the national anthem in class every day? ‘I don’t think that’s necessary. I believe very strongly in this country. In ten years, I want a society with futures perspectives, where a young generation grown up that says: it is nice to be in the Netherlands. I’m not going to go to Harvard to study, I’m not going to be a banker in London, not going to design fashion in Milan. No, I’m going to do that in the Netherlands.’ (December 30 2004, *De Volkskrant*) (#146)

The hallmark of neo-patriotism, then, was to avoid the imposition of a nationalist ideology. Instead, neo-patriotism prescribes an emotional and identitarian revival (see also Duyvendak 2011: Lechner 2008). The bolstering of a history curriculum is needed, not because it included items that are now deemed non-national and should thus be rejected – as if the Dutchness of history needs to be repaired –, but because it didn’t sufficiently include items that evoke recognition and response in its public. Needed are items such as public works, which are presumably recognised as national achievements among many, and famous soccer players whose names even the least interested in sports will recognise. Neo-patriotism, articulated through a logic of fame, is enacted in opposition to coercion and exclusion, because it purports to work through persuasion and public recognition.
Thus, the project of a national history canon is demarcated from inappropriate nationalism. Moreover, Van Aartsen is concerned with the question whether entrepreneurial individuals want to be in the Netherlands, not whether people understand that there is a Dutch nation to which they endemically belong. It seems a more forceful state policy aimed at the patriotism of its public is needed, in this line of reasoning, precisely because national belonging has become the public’s pejorative rather than a collective, transhistorical being.

To be sure, the plea for neo-patriotism was hardly exclusive to a conservative right-wing politics. The idea that a native population felt uprooted and homeless became a widely articulated position in Dutch politics (Duyvendak 2011: 95-98). In fact, one of the most vocal proponents of the neo-patriotic discourse was the leader of the socialist party, Jan Marijnissen, as he explained in response to the killing of Van Gogh:

The Muslim community must understand that there is a collective responsibility to combat excesses such as political Islam. Educators, teachers and imams must choose for our Constitution and bring up children in its spirit. If one is not prepared to conform to our values and obey our laws, the pressing advice is: seek a country where you feel at home. (quoted from Duyvendak 2011: 93; Marijnissen 2004) (#147)

Together with Maxime Verhagen of the christen-democrats he would later introduce legislation for the construction of a national history museum, which along the lines of new canon and the classroom should have become a focal point for the reinvigoration of Dutchness. The initial motion, that would be co-signed by PvdA, VVD, CU and SGP thereby involving all but GreenLeft, D’66 and Group Wilders (the forbearer of the PVV), stated that:

Considering, that creating connectedness with each other [verbondenheid met elkaar] and the values of Dutch society is one of the great challenges which are posed before us;

24 The subsequent debates and political manoeuvring over the construction of the museum were to evoke quite similar concerns as compared to the debates over the canon: the avoidance of state-imposed nationalism, the importance of chronology in creating coherence and the question whether such a newly constructed museum did not distract from other museums that, de facto, played the role prescribed to it. In the end, the museum never materialised as differences between its initial proponents and the actual executors undermined the process of planning and development. Meanwhile, rising costs made the museum increasingly hard to defend for coalition governments dealing with an impending financial crisis. Budgetary constraints eventually became the justification for abandoning the project. The organisation set up for its development did continue for some time by presenting exhibitions in temporary locations and developing a Nora-inspired smartphone app that enabled users to ‘collect’ entries of the virtual museum by visiting certain locations of commemorative significance. In this sense, the entirety of the Euro-Dutch territory was made into a national museum. In the end, the new leadership of the Rijks Museum succeeded in taking over the initiative and has included, after an exhaustive rebuilding project finalized in 2013, a permanent exhibition geared to Dutch history beyond its former focus on fine arts. The debates over the planned museum are not included in the analysis here. Not because they are not relevant -- there are --, but because to the extent that they dealt with the right to speak of us, these debates would not add considerably different conclusion.
Of the opinion, that a national historical museum promotes the proliferation of historical consciousness and historical knowledge and can contribute to more connectedness;

Of the opinion, that the canon that is now in development is an important instrument for the spread of historical knowledge;

Appeal to the government in view of existing proposals, […] , to provide proposals with regards to one national historical museum and present concrete ideas for the establishment of such a museum on prinsjesdag [the day of annual budgetary briefing in parliament] and inform parliament about incidental and structural costs thereof… (TK 30 300 VIII nr. 249, June 27 2006) (#148)

For a parliament that, near unanimously, came to discuss and disagree about matters of migration, integration and national belonging in terms of homelessness and feeling-at-home (Duyvendak 2009: 92-103), the canon became a central policy measure for the concrete effectuation of such political ambitions.

Making a national canon without a nation
The impetus for the actual construction of a national history canon came from the Education Council in early 2005. The Education Council is one of the many specially equipped advisory councils that form the beltway of Dutch policy making and is composed of carefully selected educational researchers and civil society leaders. Building on the policy discourses of the 1990’s, the Council published a string of reports on the significance and application of citizenship in schooling. These reports resonate strongly with the established citizenship narrative: citizenship appears as a civilising disposition to be cultivated in pupils (Onderwijsraad 2002; 2003; 2004). The rationale for cultivating citizenship is presented as the need to civilise society – Learning to Live Together (2002) – through targeted measures and courses in schools – Education and Citizenship (2003) – and thereby enable young people to navigate both their Dutch and their European identities – Education and Europe: European Citizenship (2004). It is in line with these ideas that the Education Council published an overall assessment of education in the Netherlands as a closing statement of its tenure in early 2005: The State of Dutch Education (2005). As part of its discussion on socio-cultural developments in the Netherlands, it lists four key processes that give rise to the Council’s advice to construct a canon: (1) demographic developments; (2) the recalibration of values due to increased ethnic diversity; (3) the emergence of a reorientation on individualism: more attention for community building; and (4) the contemporary debate on the cultural identity of the Netherlands (Onderwijsraad 2005: 17). The Council subsequently presents its advice:

Advice 2: attention for the ‘canon’ as an expression of our cultural identity
The second item which the Council points out in its advice, is the necessity to devote more attention to the task of socialisation in education, among others particularly attention for our cultural identity.
Two important components of this are contribution of education to a cultivation [invulling] of modern citizenship and a contribution to the transmission and further development of the cultural heritage. The Council has previously published an exploratory study and two advisory reports on citizenship [mentioned above]. The Council seeks to elaborate the line indicated therein towards a more substantial direction. This is because the Council seeks to strengthen the relevance of education for society by working towards a new ‘canon’ for education. This relates to the valuable components of our culture and history with which we want to endow new generation through education.

The canon is of importance for the entire society, not just for an elitist group. Also, the canon is both conservational as well as innovative. The canon is a selection of what we think is worthy and in which we perceive our mirror image [waaraan we ons spiegelen], and also offers space for innovation. (Onderwijsraad 2005: 119-120) (#149)

Throughout the report, the Council articulates a concern for the risks of coercive nationalism. It does so mainly by developing a conversation with the analysis of cultural scholar Maarten Doorman. In Doorman’s inaugural lecture of 2004 – for the position of professor in the journalistic criticism of Arts and Culture – he had discussed the merits of a canon for education. In that discussion, Doorman takes on what he dubs the ‘four dogmas about the canon’ (2004: 8): conservatism; immutability; idolatry; and elitism. The bulk of his lecture is concerned with relativizing these dogmas. Much like other proponents of a canon at the time, Doorman was concerned with the coherence of schooling:

The question what we want to teach our children, is not a top priority. There is a drizzle of a debate about ‘norms and values’ throughout the country, yet that hardly has any consequences for education. In recent decades, education has gone through large changes, changes that have not received sufficient attention on the stage of public debate. At times, someone briefly startled by the segregation between schools, or a violent incident, and then people say classes should be smaller in size or there is some fumbling with the curriculum. Discussion on universities and the applied sciences are mainly about the level of student loans and scholarships. But this leaves little room for the question who should learn what and why. (Doorman 2004: 6) (#150)

After having relativised the criticisms lodged against a canon under the headings of the four dogmas, Doorman concludes with an affirmative suggestion:

Then what is the canon, apart from a misleadingly singular noun? In principle, this is up to the public, as consumer and as executive of a general discussion about values, taste and norms, a discussion that always rages on. It is here precisely that the importance of criticism shows itself. It is criticism that is first to select what may possibly come to belong to the canon and what won’t, and it is often times criticism that decides what we commit to the history. Criticism demonstrates what the canon is, how it constantly manifests itself in a different appearance, and how we relate to it. Criticism makes public who we are in changing world. And who we want to be. (Doorman 2004: 16, italics in the original) (#151)

Doorman’s approach here is first and foremost sociologically descriptive. That is, he concludes that public criticism, and the journalistic press in particular,
effectively produces an ever changing, always contested and contestable canon within the national-cum-public sphere. Yet, from that sociological appraisal of how and why a canon is what it is, there do follow normative considerations. While Doorman pointedly agrees with the critics of canonisation – it should not be traditionalistic, singular and concluded, idolised and instructed from above – this does not end the possibility of a canon:

The question thereby remains: should one give up the canon as a leading principle in education and thereby the identity of our shared culture, or should one engage in conversation if not a struggle over the canon, without repudiating the principle of the canon and no longer teaching our children about the monuments and highlights from our past. Not the principle of the canon, but its content should be subject to discussion. It is an asset that with the content it is also the values of the particular [de eigen] culture that are put up for discussion: it underlines that the canon offers the context for the inevitable debate about cultural identity and diversity. (Doorman 2004: 15) (#152)

It is to this final, normative statement that the Council refers when seeking to accommodate questions of coercive nationalism (Onderwijsraad 2005: 120). Much like Michaël Zeeman had argued before (April 19 2002, De Volkskrant), the point of supporting and developing a canon is not primarily because experts or others notables can claim to know what it should contain, but to enliven a public debate about its contents. The point is not to impose a canon – whatever its substance and quality – but to open up a discussion. As the Council argues:

The Council understands the canon to consist of three parts: a sum total of contents, an argumentation accompanying those contents and a method for periodic adjustments of the contents. Thus, it’s not only a matter of contents, of importance are also the argumentation and the periodic changes of the canon. The canon is not permanently given, it is rather a permanent and well-structured debate. (Onderwijsraad 2005: 120) (#153)

In lieu of the Council’s publication, Fons van Wieringen, its chairman, further elaborated this position in an interview with NRC Handelsblad. When asked how an endless debate could be avoided, he stated:

‘In a deeply pillarised society this is indeed tricky. But those days are gone. There are decision-making methods for the establishment of the canon. We imagine that it will be a combination of selections by professionals and devotees [liefhebbers]. Complete laypersons do not have an input.’ (January 17 2005, NRC Handelsblad) (#154)

And when asked whether the Council now joined the neo-patriot promotion of historical consciousness, Van Wieringen emphasised:
‘Our plea is broader. It is more than historical knowledge, it is about national identity. The canon was always already there, but in the Netherlands it was never made explicit. Think of the sleigh in which the victors of the European Championship in ice skating are driven round. That image, said the reporter, gives many Dutch people a feel-good-feeling. So that is something we share.’ (January 17 2005, NRC Handelsblad) (#155)

Neither the journalists posing their question, nor Van Wieringen in answering it appear to be aware that the neo-patriotic position emerged precisely as the suggestion that historical consciousness was itself not enough and should be extended and accompanied by a more explicit emphasis on Dutchness and the public recognition of it. Nonetheless, it is clear that the ambitions of the Education Council were articulated in direct connection to Dutch identity and the hopes to forge a stronger feeling of national community among its public.

As the actual project of constructing a history canon became more and more concrete, public discussion proceeded as to the sensibility of the project. Two interrelated problems recur in these discussions: coercion and selection. And two interrelated solution to these problems are suggested: debate and mutability. In the now familiar style of annoyance and scepticism, Van Doorn attacked the project in his weekly column:

And yet, the whole business concerning the canon doesn’t please me. The governmentally ordained ‘canonisation’ of selected national accomplishments and achievements, to bolster our national identity obligated in educational programs – it smells, how should I put this without being tendentious, it smells un-Dutch [niet Nederlands]. Such a cultural state paternalism is alien to us and should remain so.

By the way, the entire concept is uncouth. It boils down to an intellectual contrivance in service of a political goal, resulting in a pedagogical monstrosity, unusable for teachers and unpalatable for pupils [...] It should be dealt with differently. Of course, a wide knowledge of the history and the culture of the Netherlands can fulfil worthy functions. For a democratically oriented civic cultivation [burgerschapskunde] there is a wide panorama of inspiring themes. The Republic of United Netherlands was a marvel of political pragmatism, the Golden Age a triumph of entrepreneurialism and tolerance, the pillarisation a rare combination of group particularism and cooperative state craft, the German occupation a heartless lesson in Zivilcourage.

All this and more offers abundant material for exiting stories and lively discussions. But in that case, they should not be offered up as the proud exhibits of our unique national ‘identity’ but as the more or less successful answers to the fundamental problems that everyone can empathise and come to terms with after some reflection. They not only connect the past with the present and the future, but also the life world of the ‘established’ with that of the ‘outsiders’ [Van Doorn is paraphrasing Elias & Scotsen] because they are recognisable for anyone who is trying to find their way on a modern society. (January 22 2005, Trouw) (#156)

Coercion and selection are also the problem when Annelies Huygen questions the need for a canon:
Meanwhile, the political winds have totally shifted. Today, our culture is understood as hegemonic. Whomever comes from elsewhere, need to assimilate. Education needs to instil these new values via an official, new canon, to be selected by appointed experts.

[...]

According to Education Council, the goal of the canon is a cultivation [invulling] of modern citizenship and explicating the cultural identity. This is constricting. Curricula should not serve the cultural identity. Teachers shouldn’t mould their pupils into modern citizens. In fact, the reverse is the case. Pupils should be given a certain baggage of knowledge and culture in order for them to understand their surroundings. They need to gain control over their capacities. With a good foundation they will be able to determine themselves what good citizenship is and what the cultural identity entails. Government doesn’t need to do that for them. (January 25 2005, Trouw) (#157)

As many participants in these debates had expressed their concern over a canon in terms of a native public and its orientation in a European space, the problem of selection was also associated with the question of scale and geography. Such critique came most specifically from historians working in a world historical framework (see Stuurman 2006). Werner de Coninck articulated this concern by pleading for a canon of global citizenship:

Too bad that Van Wieringen can’t tell us what that cultural-historical [cultuurhistorisch] identity exactly entails. Is there something like a true Dutch [Hollands] race? Or can the Dutch identity be traced back to religious affiliation? In the year 2005, language and costume cannot provide support for the alleged Dutch identity either. In short, determining a clearly delineated Dutch identity is impractical and in light of the past undesirable.

Maybe, historical geography approaches it the most. People are conditioned by their surroundings. […] It is, however, a fact that the European society is flowing through into Dutch society more and more. Van Wieringen’s plea for a clearly delineated canon in education provides little added value. Indeed, it remains an arbitrary selection from the national culture and history.

Pupils of today will benefit more from a canon that prepares them for global citizenship. Because despite all the conservatism of Education Council the cultural-historical [cultuurhistorische] identity of the Netherlands in the 21st century will in fact be very dynamic and constantly subject to changes. (January 25 2005, NRC Handelsblad) (#158)

Interestingly, the Education Council and the neo-patriotic proponents of canonisation more generally make precisely the same argument about a Dutch canon: it ought to be open, changing, non-coercive, modern, and provide orientation in a globalised world. The idea that the canon should not be a definite prescription of Dutchness imposed by a self-selective group of experts is at the heart of the ways in which proponents of canonisation argue for the reinvigoration of Dutch historical consciousness.

This can be further illustrated by looking at an intervention arguing in favour of the Council’s ambitions by considering much the same kinds of problems. In their op-ed entitled ‘Long live the canon but not too absolutely’, staff of the Meertens
Institute for Dutch Language and Culture, the royal centre for ethnological research in the Netherlands, prof. dr. Hans Bennis, dr. Peter Jan Margry and prof. dr. Herman Roodenberg first take great care in problematising the notion of ‘identity’:

The complexity of the concept ‘identity’ makes the proposal of the Education Council an intriguing yet risky venture. In essence, the Council proposes to institutionalise a yet to be formulated ‘national’ identity. (January 26 2005, *NRC Handelsblad*) (#159)

They then proceed to salvage the possibility of canonisation:

In order to capture such a variable identity in an educational program, we first have to come to an agreement about a general, dynamic interpretation of the concept of ‘national identity’. Identity is, according to us, an encompassing term. It is subsequently possible to name a number of cultural categories that are crucial in the concrete formation of that identity. Lastly, we have to see to it that the substantiation of these categories does not gain the status of a fixed canon, but instead of a variable selection, that can again and again match up with a constantly changing societal reality. (January 26 2005, *NRC Handelsblad*) (#160)

It is in this same sense that Michaël Zeeman worries that the ambition to bolster historical consciousness had devolved into a deceitful instrumentalisation of history and neo-patriotic self-congratulation:

But the trouble with patriots is that they always only tell half of the story. Except for matters in which a culture like the Dutch one can take pride, there are the incidents and developments for which it should be deeply ashamed. The great asset of the European culture, with which the Dutch one is inextricably bound, is that it not only commemorates its triumphs, but also its disappointments, its disillusionments. Here, historical consciousness escapes in all too simplistic optimism and patriotism in European perspective becomes something measly.

[…] The point should be to provide citizens with a more or less common frame of reference through education in history. This is – in part because of the many new participants in that society who have no direct relationship to the history of it and thus can, at best, recollect all those wonderful emotions forcefully – a far greater invitation to participate in it with respect and a certain passion.

[…] This [the complexity of historical consciousness] is enlarged even more because of the revolution that society has performed from ethnos, a more or less homogenous ‘people’ [*volk*] in the cultural sense, to demos, a very heterogeneous company [*gezelschap*], that needs to find her citizenship in a democratic society. It is a question of wanting to belong to that society, its rule of law with all the rights and duties. It is not a question of wanting to be part of a people [*volk*] and its mythological self-images. Presumably, this is impossible without myths, but let’s have these myths as far removed from out-right lies as possible, however noble their intent. (February 5 2005, *De Volkskrant*) (#161)

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25 Peter Jan Margry and Herman Roodenberg are also the editors of the 2007 edited volume ‘Reframing Dutch culture: between otherness and authenticity (Progress in European ethnology)’ published by Ashgate.
Both the staff of the Meertens Institute and Zeeman find their passage between the impossibility of a canon and the ‘out-right lies’ of self-serving nationalism by arguing for the dynamism of continuous debate and the grounding of national identity and citizenship in a democratic self-conception. Not surprisingly, Paul Scheffer himself takes up this line of reasoning as well, when he explicitly sides with both Zeeman’s and Doorman’s justifications for a canon:

And that’s how it is: precisely the continuing conversation about the canon offers the possibility for self-reflection and thereby reveals, through the years, a variable self-image. What first is considered to be part of the canon can become outdated some decades later, only to be rekindled by yet another generation. (February 12 2005, *NRC Handelsblad*) (#162)

And this is once more the line of reasoning in Olivier Hekster’s denunciation of a prescribed canon. The professor of history at Leiden University argues in close proximity to the Commission De Rooy that a more profound historical consciousness is desirable because it enables pupils to engage more thoughtfully and, indeed, critically with notion such as ‘national history’ and ‘nation’ as such:

There are great risks in such an ‘identity-cultivating’ [*identiteitsvormende*] history. First, as has been frequently noted, the selection of the canon has a strong political slant. The canon becomes the common core of the Dutch identity; that which will not only be taught in schools, but what immigrants should learn in their civic enculturation. Such a core is limiting by definition. All histories should fall within ‘society’s history’ [*samenlevingsgeschiedenis*]. The risk of state mythology, of a historical image that may be politically accepted but excludes groups from the new communal past, is all too evident. Equally, the risk of an all too nationalistic historiography, in which the particularity [*eigenheid*] of the Netherlands is overemphasised.

[...] From an appreciation of the past, whatever past, questions emerge. About the transience [*tijdelijkheid*] of things and the strangeness of past societies. Particularly in this time, when subdivision in ‘we’ and ‘the others’ are so strongly exited, these are relevant problems to think about. History shouldn’t be employed to determine an identity or to encourage patriotism. Rather, history could clarify the relativity of such concepts. (February 25 2005, *NRC Handelsblad*) (#163)

What, then, does debate, democratic grounding and constant mutability entail for the appropriateness of canonisation? Does it mean that a canon is justifiable as it forms a crucial, commonly engaging object of democratic discord, thereby only strengthening the forces that work against an exclusionary, ethnicised conception of Dutchness; or does it mean that a canon isn’t justifiable as it limits and precludes the cultivation of autonomous judgement and engagement in pupils that is a prerequisite for modern citizenship? This ensemble of problems – coercion and selection – and solutions – debate and democratic mutability – recur through much of the discussion following the actual construction of the historical canon.
The commission and its problems
In line with the Education Council’s recommendations, Maria van der Hoeven, the christen-democratic minister for Education, Science and Culture ordered the formation of a commission that would actually construct the historical canon and develop the antecedent argumentation for it. This Commission Van Oostrom did not exclusively consist of academic historians. There were also a philosophically trained public commentator (dr. mr. drs. Maxim Februari), a social geographer specialising in youth attitudes and regional identities (prof. dr. Rob van der Vaart) and an educational administrator (Paul van Meenen). The chairman of the commission, prof. dr. Frits van Oostrom, was and is one of the pre-eminent historians of Dutch literature having received both national and international recognition for his work. Furthermore, the commission included a historian specialising in women’s history (dr. Els Kloek), who had published on the relationship between historiography and national identity debates in the past (Kloek 1993), a historian well known for his efforts in the public diffusion of history and national history in particular (dr. Herman Beliën), and a historian specialising in colonialism, the post-colonial legacy and memorialisation, migration and nation building (prof. dr. Susan Legêne).

In her letter of institution, minister Van der Hoeven explained that there was a lacking level of shared knowledge of history, culture and society and that therefore administrative action was now needed on the part of the ministry:

Societal developments in recent years are the occasion to reconsider the identity of the Netherlands and the way in which it is expressed in education. The beginning of the 21th century appears to have brought an acceleration in the process of the development of this identity. There seems to be a widely dispersed need [in brede kringen behoefte] for a new ‘story of the Netherlands’. (Van der Hoeven 2005: 4) (#164)

The minister explicitly followed up on the previous efforts of the Commission De Rooy and its European contextualisation of historical consciousness:

With the construction of a canon I aim to bring about shared cultural, historical and societal knowledge about the Netherlands in an international and primarily European context. ‘Valuable components of the Dutch history’ [paraphrasing the words used by the Education Council] can refer to both positive as well as negative aspects, as both have contributed to the formation of the Dutch culture. I also deem it important to devote attention to the way in which the Dutch culture has been and is being influenced by non-Dutch cultures and vice versa.

[...]
The substance in the rapport of the Commission Historical and Societal Education [the Commission De Rooy] forms an excellent point of departure for the (further) development of a canon. (Van der Hoeven 2005: 4). (#165)
Reactions to the installation of the Commission Van Oostrom were quick to materialise. They reiterate much of the problematisation and justifications articulated in the run up to the minister’s decision to appoint a now third commission. So in a plea for Nora’s concept of lieu de mémoire and the antecedent role of historians to disclose their mnemonic potential, professor of contemporary history and chair of the history department at Leiden University Wim van den Doel, argued that:

There is a clear difference between the promotion of citizenship and the ignition of nationalism, a difference between Balkenende and Milošević.

It is also harmless to speak of a canon of National history. It is a mere testament of intellectual laziness to avoid such a discussion. But here too it is our own responsibility to choose to connect that history to the history of Europe and the rest of the world. Dutch history is simply part of world history, in which people, goods, ideas and services have always been exchanged internationally.

In other words, as long as Dutch history as framed in a canon is connected to the history of the rest of the world, there is no danger that National history will promote the emergence of a new kind of nationalism. (October 28 2005, De Volkskrant) (#166)

As Wim van den Doel reminded his public, the Commission Van Oostrom was now the third in a series of commissions to bring coherence and evocation to history education. As is also evident from Van der Hoeven’s letter, the commission could not presume to work from scratch. It was her explicit instruction to extend and develop further the framework provided by the Commission De Rooy. Chronological order and European contextualisation are the two most important aspects of that framework, mentioned by Van der Hoeven. Yet, the Commission was thereby also instructed to go beyond, to provide something more. In short, to work towards a canon that was not merely geared to shared historical consciousness but also to more explicit and recognisable Dutchness of that shared canon. The effects of the canon should not just be ‘historical’ but also ‘cultural’.

It is in this way that a confrontation developed between historians promoting the epochal framework of the Commission De Rooy and the endeavours of the Commission Van Oostrom. This historikerstreit gradually came to involve many more participants with their own forms of engagement. The confrontation between these historians articulated the most crucial problems that the latest commission had in following the minister’s instructions: how will a canon be made under the express intention of bolstering a sense of national belonging by government and in the context of increasingly vehement political appeals and policy measures aimed at ‘not-yet-integrated’ populations to demonstrate their willingness to succeed and belong in the Netherlands? And how, for that matter,
will that canon be recognisably Dutch and thus enact in a faithful manner a
civilised nationalism and an encompassing narrative? And what will be the
scholarly justification for the knowledge and narrative conveyed in the canon?
The confrontation between historians has a beginning in a series of
booklets, books and articles published by De Rooy *cum suis* in which they
provided a view onto ‘our history’. On October 30 2004 the NRC Handelsblad
published ‘What everyone has to know about the national history: a canon of the
Dutch past’ (Bank & De Rooy 2004) in which they take up the 10 epochs. In the
introduction to this short-hand version of the historical framework, the
protagonists explain that a lack of continuity in the historical consciousness of the
public is the main reason for presenting this canon:

Such continuity is usually found in a canon: an ensemble of knowledge and insights, of ordering and
interpretation of the past. We are obliged to immediately add to this that such an ensemble is not
immutable. To the contrary, a canon cannot and should not be canonised. It is crucial that it is
constantly made the object of reflection. Who and what deserve a place in the canon and why?
Michaël Zeeman once said: “The canon doesn’t teach fixed generalities, the canon tutors in reading,
looking and listening, that is critical judgement.” The canon invites criticism, addition and, in any
event, use. (Bank & De Rooy 2004: 3-4). (#167)

The publication of this canon in one of the most prominent and intellectually high-
minded broadsheets of the Netherlands was explicitly aimed to evoke public
response. Gijsbert van Es, the editor who had supervised the publication, wrote in
an accompanying remark:

“The canon invites criticism, addition and, in any event, use.” write the authors in their introduction.
Reactions are thereby welcomed at canon@nrc.nl.
As reassurance: NRC Handelsblad will not test the readers of this canon, nor will there be

In the weeks following the publication, the newspaper provided space in its pages
for responses that were sent in. Apart from support and suggestions for additions
and changes, there were also negative reactions. J. C. Blom, the head of the
Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, deemed the canon to be the
instrument with which the goal of a structured and mandatory history education for
all pupils could finally be realised.26 Hotze Oldhoff listed a few items that were
lacking and contested the fact that Pim Fortuyn was included in the canon.27 M. H.
Cornelissen critiqued the Holland-centric perspective from which, he argued, the

26 ‘Geschiedenis is meer dan een spelletje’, November 9 2004, NRC Handelsblad.
canon was constructed.\textsuperscript{28} Hans van der Caaij suggested the canon to portray some more affection, for which he pointed to the examples of Huizinga’s and Van Deursen’s writings.\textsuperscript{29} Agnest Verbiest questioned whether the epochs and their titles didn’t refer to one-sidedly to men and male roles.\textsuperscript{30} Lieuwco J. de Jong pointed out that the occupation and repression of the ‘Indische’ population and the internment of Dutch by Japanese forces were also matters that everyone had to be made aware of.\textsuperscript{31} A far more critical reaction came from Peter van der Veer, long-standing critic of nationalism:

The canon of the Dutch past produced by Bank and De Rooy shows the Netherlands in its most parochial appearance \textit{[toont Holland op zijn smalst]}. It would not be good idea to take it as the basis of historical education in our schools, because pupils are not sufficiently shown that globalisation is not only of today, but has a long history. The Netherlands has become bound to the East and the West [referencing the way in which the colonies were referred to] in the early modern period through trade and this connection cannot be dispensed with in a couple of lines about the early period and a couple of lines about decolonisation. (November 13 2004, \textit{NRC Handelsblad} (#169)

Conversely, Sanderijn Cels argued that the authors had not been polemical and subjective enough:

A worthy canon has a certain command: namely, that you have to relate to it. It is to the credit of the authors that they are willing to enter into debate about who and what be represented in their canon. But nowhere do they indicate the boundaries of this debate. They don’t explain that a canon is not a consensual product \textit{[polderproduct]}. Their invitation appears to suggest that the debate will satisfy everyone. That is just appearance. (November 13 2004, \textit{NRC Handelsblad} (#170)

Concluding, Gijsbert van Es, the editor at the paper who has supervised the publications, rounded up the responses by stating that:

Was hubris the incentive? No, certainly not. Bank and De Rooy wanted to provoke reactions. A firm debate among historians is urgently wanted.

[...]
In short, this first canon of the Dutch past deserves a supplemented second version. A good timing for publication, wherever and however, seems apparent: the coming Week of Books [a yearly promotional week for book and literature] has Dutch history as its theme. (November 13 2004, \textit{NRC Handelsblad} (#171)

In this way, the responses actually effectuated the canonisation efforts of De Rooy cum suis: there had been debate and disagreement, proving that a historical canon

\textsuperscript{28} ‘Waar is de onderdrukking van het katholieke zuiden’, November 13 2004, NRC Handelsblad.
\textsuperscript{29} ‘Een beetje meer liefde graag’, November 13 2004, NRC Handelsblad.
\textsuperscript{30} ‘Mannen, mannen, mannen’, November 13 2004, NRC Handelsblad.
\textsuperscript{31} ‘Waar is de bezetting van Nederlands-Indië’, November 13 2004, NRC Handelsblad.

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is a worthy endeavour as it shown to be buttressed by a public willing to engage with it.

As Van Es had predicted, in March 2005 the three men – Bank, Van Es and De Rooy – published a small booklet as a follow up to their first attempt. Interestingly, this version, which again follows the epochal lay-out, is entitled ‘The Netherlands in brief: What everyone wants to know about our history’. The phrase ‘hás to know’ had changed into ‘wánts to know’. In the introduction, editor Wim van der Weiden indicates why:

This booklet deals with the Dutch history in a nutshell. Previously, on October 30 2004, this overview was published in NRC Handelsblad. The title was: ‘What everyone hás to know about the national history’. And underneath: ‘A canon of the Dutch past’. This ‘canon’ seeks to lay the foundation for knowledge of the Dutch history. Arouse interest, evoke discussion – that is what this short historical overview, in part, aims to do.

Thanks to reactions of NRC-readers the authors have been able to write a next version of this canon. Anno has published this one to great delight and gratitude to the authors, in hope of a new gush of reactions that are necessary to keep the Dutch history alive. (Bank et al. 2005: 5) (#172)

These remarks are of interest because they demonstrate a crucial aspect of the way in which De Rooy cum suis articulated their engagement in the debates about the canon. This engagement is twofold: first, it is indicated that national history has not been effectively presented and broadcast to pupils and the public-at-large. In the original 2004-publication, they state:

There is a strange prejudice in ‘Hilversum’ [referring to the public broadcasting associations of the Netherlands], and it is also dominant in ‘The Hague’ [referring to the central government], which says that there is little interest in serious history. The remarkably high sales counts of an author like Geert Mak in itself proves the opposite.

Of little help are those, inspired by the noblest inclinations, who suggest that historical consciousness no longer exists. It often turns out that what they mean by this is that people are no longer able to pass a school test that some of us remember from high school (at least from before the Mammoet-law [comprehensive educational reforms of the late sixties]): ‘who did what, when and why?’ With scorn, the infamous test of the Historisch Nieuwsblad [popularising magazine devoted to history] is mentioned in which members of parliament score far below passing grades. A recent re-take among ‘ordinary people’ provided an even bleaker picture. (Bank & De Rooy 2004: 3) (#173)

Secondly, this analysis of the problem gives rise to the need for a clear, concise, evocative statement about what everyone has to/wants to know about the Dutch past. The very fact that such a statement evokes critical responses does not detract from the success of the attempt. Rather, it demonstrates that there is a public interest and engagement, thereby justifying the endeavour. It is the public engagement that qualifies the experts’ proposals. As is explained with regards to the change in title from the first to the second version: ‘thanks to the NRC-readers
the authors have been able to write a next version of the canon’ (Bank et al. 2005: 5) (#174) What justifies the proposals of De Rooy cum suis is not primarily their expertise, but the fact that a public is shown to exist. What matters is that there is a public out there that ‘wants to know about the Dutch past’. One last quote from the second versions back cover:

Whoever knows may give the answer [to questions about the national history]. And those that don’t (exactly) remember, read The Netherlands in brief. (Bank et al. 2005). (#175)

Moreover, this public prerogative and the historian’s assent to it will have a civilising effect as it inculcates historical consciousness. When asked why historical consciousness is important in an interview, De Rooy responded:

American research has shown that people with more historical consciousness are less prone to believe in anxious utopias and conspiracies. As a society we are better off not having too many people that believe in those. (March 10 2005, NRC Handelsblad) (#176)

Both Gijsbert van Es and Piet de Rooy would, in collaboration with others, continue to publish overviews and narrative exploration of the Dutch past aimed at wide audiences in their attempt to enliven historical consciousness (see Mak et al. 2008; Van Es 2008).

It is clear then that this loosely coupled group of historians sought to meet a public’s desire for national remembrance in the form of concise and evocative narratives of national history. It is also clear that these attempts to enliven historical consciousness were conceived to spark and arouse debate. That is: debate would be the very conduit and expression of remembrance. Nonetheless, Piet de Rooy expressed concern when the Education Council in cooperation with ministry set out to go beyond the ambitions of the Commission De Rooy and it appeared that a new, more explicitly culturalist push for canonisation was in the making. When asked if De Rooy was pleased with the Education Council’s recommendations, De Rooy articulated concern for nationalistic coercion and unjustified selection:

‘Quite the contrary, it was very unfortunate that their proposal followed so closely after ours. It has significantly complicated things. It has caused inane confusion because their plea has a completely different intent [heeft een hele andere lading]. The Education Council suggests that such a canon will make us love the Netherlands. Chairman Van Wieringen wants to stimulate patriotism, he says. That is a return to the educational laws of 1857. They seek a broad public debate about what should be included in the canon. We know from previous discussion that something like that will go nowhere, only to a polarization of positions.’

[...] ‘I don’t understand the reasoning behind such a broad cultural canon. Apart from the practical objections – demarcation is impossible – I have moral objections. Knowledge and understanding
So while continuity and coherence of history and the assent to a public desire and subsequent debate are at the core of the justificatory logic of De Rooy cum suis, it is still differentiated from the plans of the Education Council and the ministry who, strikingly, follow a similar logic of a coherent and evocative framework of national history and its popular support. The difference is, according to De Rooy, the intent [lading]. Emphasising the Dutchness of a canon will entail a devolution into state pedagogy.

Yet another critique of both De Rooy cum suis and the new canonical ambitions was launched by Kees Ribbens and Maria Grever, whom together with Siep Stuurman had already been working on their project of the ‘paradoxes of de-canonicalisation’ since early 2004 in which they sought to analyse why ‘despite pertinent methodological and cultural critiques levelled at them over the past decades, the canons are still being recycled in history text books and public presentations’. Ribbens and Grever argued that the main priority in history education laid in the further professionalisation of teachers and the extension of curricular hours, not in correctly capturing a canon. Much in line with voices such as Van der Veer, they articulated a principled transnational and pluralist perspective:

Knowledge of the past can provide understanding [inzicht] about contemporary developments. This means that coming to know history as it takes place in education is best served by a wide perspective. Like the Dutch past has been embedded in international developments, so should the representation of that history be deliberately given an international context. Such education offers a more balanced image of history, an image that can lead to feelings of pride and shame, and of empathy with people in divergent times and situations. This multiple perspective onto the past demands points of connection that are often lacking in a national canon. That was also the case in the canon published last year by historians Jan Bank and Piet de Rooy. Their highlight mainly deal with political history, Holland and well-to-do, white men. Migrants, women, Limburgers, slaves merely figure as apparitions on the narrow stage of a Hollands drama. (March 1 2005, De Volkskrant). (#178)

It is indeed questionable whether De Rooy’s own argument for historical consciousness can be effectively differentiated from the new plans of the ministry. As has been shown, historical consciousness is explicitly understood to be a shared cultural good that is effective for the social and cultural identity of its receiving public. Indeed, the rather subtle difference does seem to be the articulated intent

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and political context in which that intent is expressed. Yet, in this respect the difference is also quite hard to find: Van Wieringen and the ministry may seem all too instrumentalist in the wording of their ambitions, as if there can be a unilinear relation between the national canon and national identification. De Rooy’s argument for historical consciousness nowhere disputes this relationship as such, but does emphasise its complexity, thereby perhaps preserving the need for expert guidance to a greater extent. It appears that the difference between appropriate engagement with a canon and state pedagogy is exceedingly narrow. De Rooy’s principled reservations thereby helps to see the rather narrow tight-rope on which the new Commission Van Oostrom embarked: how could canonisation be performed without the lapsing into inappropriate nationalism?

The native public and its canon
Thus, the context in which the Commission Van Oostrom needed to find their way was set. Indeed, their 2006-report demonstrates clearly that the commission was fully aware and earnestly reflexive about the historiographical and public legitimacy of their project. Moreover, they deemed it important to address in some detail their engagement with the problem of nationalistic coercion and unjustified selection. The report starts, from its very first pages, with a lengthy and quite full-throated repudiation of a supposed connection between the new canon and the politics of national identity. The commission summarises:

Indeed, as a complement to the presumed Dutch identity the canon seems a bad choice. Although it is reasonable that people will at times recognise things in the canon that – not in the last instance through the eyes of foreigners – appear ‘typically Dutch’ (for example: our high level of corporatism, parochially put: the polder-model), it is not appropriate to meld canon and identity into one. It’s already complex enough to get the canon in one’s sights without having to weigh it down with the equally heavy and thin concept of national identity. It seems by far the best option to decouple the two concepts. The canon may perhaps reflect the collective memory of a country, but never its identity. Moreover, there seems to be adequate reason to doubt the very concept of ‘national identity’. If it has ever been valid, then today it is even less so: in the international, multicultural world of today it is a deceitful, yes dangerous concept. (Commission Van Oostrom 2006a: 23) (#179)

So how then could the argument for a new canon be performed nonetheless? As is clear from the previous repudiation, it is first of all done by strongly rejecting any connection between canon and nation. Instead, an argument is set up by developing ideas about the polyphony of the engaged public and its understanding of national citizenship. This argument is already evident from the two quotes with which the report opens. The first quote is drawn from an op-ed by Salman Rushdie:
When we, as individuals, pick and mix cultural elements for ourselves, we do not do so indiscriminately, but according to our natures. Societies, too, must retain the ability to discriminate, to reject as well as to accept, to value some things above others, and to insist on the acceptance of those values by all their members. [...] If we are to build a plural society on the foundation of what unites us, we must face up to what divides. But the questions of core freedoms and primary loyalties can’t be ducked. No society, no matter how tolerant, can expect to thrive if its citizens don’t prize what their citizenship means – if, when asked what they stand for as Frenchmen, as Indians, as Britons, they cannot give clear replies. (Commission Van Oostrom 2006a: 9; quoted from ‘What this cultural debate needs is more dirt, less pure stupidity’, December 10 2005, The Times)

And the second directly below it is from Edward Said:

Some etymologists speculate that the word ‘canon’ (as in ‘canonical’) is related to the Arabic word qanum, or law in the binding, legalistic sense of the word. But that is only one rather restrictive meaning. The other is a musical one, canon as a contrapuntal form employing numerous voices in usually strict imitation of each other, a form, in other words, expressing motion, playfulness, discovery, and, in the rhetorical sense, invention. Viewed this way, the canonical humanities, far from being a rigid tablet of fixed rules and monuments bullying us from the past [...] will always remain open to changing combination of sense and signification. (Commission Van Oostrom 2006a: 9; quoted from Said, E. (2004) Humanism and Democratic Criticism. Columbia University Press, p. 25)

Put together, these quotes set out an argument for the canon that, as the commission itself concludes, is in the line of Doorman, Zeeman and Scheffer (Commission Van Oostrom 2006a: 23). As such, it reiterates much of what had become a staple of the on-going discussions over Dutch identity: it appears distinctly multiple, civic, plural, changeable, open and non-exclusionary. Crucially, these aspects are argued for by giving the ability to articulate such an identity to a native public that, through audible debate, is able to express what it deems memorable in its citizenship. The canon presented by the commission is thereby merely one moment in an on-going explication of what becomes canonised through a mixture of voices and thereby nationally shared. Indeed, one could argue that there is a rather glaring rift between Rushdie and Said here. The first speaks of what societies-as-wholes should do and directly identifies the articulation of national distinctions to the enactment of citizenship. Furthermore, Rushdie problematises the presumed fact that people are unable to define what makes them a member of a specific nation, much in line with Paul Scheffer for instance. Rushdie speaks from the view point of national governments and their responsibility for governing difference. In contrast, the quote from Said presents canonisation as an actual process going on in the humanities, a non-state entity, and conceives of the canon as a reflexive phenomenon. It is about intellectual engagement with the legacy of human thought. But it is precisely by putting these two conflicting quotes together – the one about governance of difference, the other about humanistic engagement – that the

33 see: http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1542285/posts (accessed 07-02-2014)
commission’s argument is beginning to take shape. That is, the commission brings together the domain of governance and the domain of public engagement, thereby developing the argument that it is precisely the fact of public engagement with the canon that qualifies and justifies governmental actions towards a canon. Van Oostrom explicates this in his introductory words of the report:

In that year [September 2005 – September 2006], the commission has experienced much interest for her efforts. Apparently, many care a lot how the Netherlands deal with its culture and its history. With the publications of this report, we explicitly seek to understand this as a delighting fact, also because the canon-process, in our assessment, is at times associated one-sidedly with complaints.

The canon of the Netherlands is not a wailing wall, nor is it a chore. It is a positive factor, not directed against modernity, but in fact a valuable force behind it. This is in part why we chose for a frontispiece [see page 2 of the report for the image of the iron clock]. In the clock of cultural history the canon represents, in a certain sense, the big plate that to the eye rotates less dynamically than the brisk wheel behind the small hand, but nonetheless indicates the basic tempo [grondtempo]. Through its permanent affect it helps to move along all that is instantaneousness.

We might, in election time, put it this way: The canon is what amply outlives cabinets and commissions. (Commission Van Oostrom 2006a: 11). (#180)

What time is it? How can we keep time? These are hugely complicated questions. Not only because time itself is a phenomenon that eludes our thoughts and our attempts to capture it, but also because there is in many cases an ‘us’ involved for whom time is to be relevant and for whom it is to be kept. What is clear, however, from these words, is that the Commission Van Oostrom seeks to present their canon as a mechanism for indicating a shared time in analogy to a clock. Of course, ‘our’ time is in perpetual change and, thereby, so should ‘our’ canon. But in this respect, the canonical clock is not calibrated for distinguishing one moment from the next, it does not serve the whims and wishes of this or that cabinet, this or that commission. The canonical clock does not indicate the time of any one specific politics of national identity. It indicates time at a remove from such quotidian interruptions. It doesn’t measure election time and is thereby set apart from the electoral nationalism of the day. The canonical clock ought to indicate the broader, wider time of an ‘us’ for whom elections come and go. The canon serves to elucidate the ground tempo in which the public realises itself.

Indeed, this is all metaphor, but the metaphor is nonetheless important as it shows how the commission is able to keep the risks of an elitist, coercive, arbitrary, anachronistic, finalised and sanctified canon at bay. Through the metaphor of the clock, the commission is able to conceive of the canon as an indicator, not a prescriber, of a process that has already been going on: the ground tempo of a shared, public imagination in which moments may take their place and acquire some measure of coherence. Through the canon, government takes it upon itself to
maintain the canonical clock, making sure that everyone can know what it means to be a Dutch citizen. Yet by design, the canon cannot be exclusionary as it measures a continuous process of public polyphony, engagement and contestation. Any and all disagreement, public criticism, debate and discord is always already part of the development it describes and has the chance to become part of it, if only it endures past the transience of ‘cabinets and commissions’. It is all the more appropriate for the state to equip its citizens with such a canonical time device as it will enable them to continuously track and reflexively give back to themselves their common engagement with each other. Ergo, this cannot be state pedagogy: the state merely enables the public to instruct and memorialise itself. When referring to a now outdated canon, Curtius’s Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter (1948), the commission writes:

Today, we would no longer present the canon in this form, but the fact remains that education still performs the crucial task of transmitting the canon – not in the least to children who do not receive it at home.

The fact that the school teaches the canon doesn’t imply state pedagogy or cultural coerciveness any more than is implied by the instruction of Dutch topography or knowledge of nature. It is nothing more than the historio-cultural translation of the mandate in which compulsory education [onderwijs en leerplicht] is rooted: the only legal form of indoctrination known to a civilised country. (Commission Van Oostrom 2006a: 27) (#181)

The exact state of the canon is irrelevant. What matters is the diffusion of the national citizenry with a shared and therefore effective device for imagining the wider time in which concrete circumstances and events have been and are proceeding. At stake are not the contents, but the public effectiveness of the canon as a conduit for a national historical imagination.

The question that remains, is how the relevant public is to be differentiated from those who are not part of the continuous process of public engagement of which the canon measures the ground tempo? The argument so far already suggests that the relevant public is synonymous with the people in the Netherlands: its residents or ‘ingezetenen’ to recall the Dutch constitutional expression. In fact, the commission explicitly deals with this question when they address what they mean by ‘Dutch’. In a prelude to an overview of the canon – the ‘hoofdlijnen’ – the commission warns the readers of the report:

It is important that one deals thoughtfully with concepts like ‘the Netherlands’, ‘Dutch culture’ and ‘Dutch history’. Indeed, until the 19th century the notion of ‘the Netherlands’ is an anachronism, and also the adjective ‘Dutch’ remain problematic for that early history. When this text deals with the history of the Dutch language and culture, the Dutch territory and the Dutch state, we actually mean
as relevant to this region’, without suggesting that that region has formed a cultural, governmental, linguistic or cultural [sic] unity all that time. We deal with these matters as historical phenomena. […]

The overview offers a sense of location in space and time: it shows in broad strokes what the forgone generations that have resides in this area have been through. (Commission Van Oostrom 2006b: 110) (#182)

And finally, the commission is also concerned with the question of newcomers to the Netherlands. Contrasting their position on national identity, it states:

The commission is less dismissive yet still nuanced about the association between canon and civic enculturation. Of course, one can argue on good grounds that, after knowledge of the Dutch language, the knowledge of the associated history and culture can contribute substantially to the accommodation of newcomers in this country. Yet, this isn’t the main goal of drafting a canon as intended by the commission. That is: the fragile canonical knowledge is a problem of all Dutch, certainly not of allochthones in particular. Indeed, newcomers will relate differently to certain elements of the Dutch past, at times demanding special sensitivity of teachers. But the difference appears in our eyes to be gradual rather than principal. What matters is that this is the canon of the country that we inhabit [bewonen] together. In that sense, the canon can certainly contribute to citizenship. Knowledge and understanding of how this country has developed, what it has produced of value, and where it has and has not stood for in the world is a meaningful and enriching learning objective, and provides society with a frame of reference that pay off in mutual interaction [verkeer] and in acting in the world as a Dutch person [als Nederlander opereren in de wereld]. Thus, it’s the canon of Boulahrouz [celebrated soccer player of the national squad whose familial lines can be traced to Morocco] and Beatrix [celebrated head of the Dutch Royal family whose familial lines can be traced to the society of European aristocracy]. (Commission Van Oostrom 2006a: 24, italics added) (#183)

We can now conclude how the commission argumentatively deals with its problems and justifies the drafting of a canon in contradiction to the presumptions and goals of public and political appeal for stronger national unity-cum-loyalty.

The commission meticulously decouples the presumed or suggested connection between its canonical work and the politics of national identity, clearing the way for an argument that redeems the possibility and right of governmental action on the basis of explicitly depolitical notions of time and space. That is, the commission seeks to connect its canonical work not to the political, transient constructions of national identity, but instead to a broader, public time – metaphorically presented as the ground tempo of public contestation – and a pre-political location that is deemed to exist before the statecraft of territory – indicated by the notions of ‘region’ and ‘area’ –, seemingly evoking a ground-in-itself. Thus, the native public is a matter of here-and-now: (1) its canon is the durable ensemble of what should be remembered as significant for it, rendering the shared past to be the always changing product of public polyphony in the now; (2) while referring to the circumstances and events that are said to be significant of a region or area that
is here. These coordinates appear all the more absolute by having been stripped of their politically instrumental and transient implications. Precisely by backing away from any one politics of national identity, the commission moves towards notions that enable it to argue for the canon nonetheless, despite all odds and in the last instance: ‘musical quality of polyphony’; ‘ground tempo’; ‘region’; ‘area’.

The nativity of the public, whose shared discord about the significance of the past produces the ever-changing canon, is guaranteed and underwritten by depoliticised notions of a here-and-now. This here-and-now – a guarantee in last instance – is a matter of residing. As the commission explains: ‘what matters is that this is the canon of the country that we inhabit together.’ And it is therefore that the commission argues for a circumscribed exemption of the disconnection between canon and nation with respect to those that are not from here: ‘allochthones’.

Although they are most certainly included in the native public – they are indeed here – they are nonetheless exempted from the open-endedness of canonical construction as the canon’s justification – what matters is the shared ground tempo of this region – still relegates them to a ‘special’ position in view of the native public. What can be said unequivocally of those deemed of this ground – autochthones – can be said only presumably of those whose grounding is still questionable and in-the-making. So while the commission clearly indicates to be intently reflexive of the current context in which it is delivering a canon – a context of unwarranted nationalism – it nonetheless is able to argue for the canon’s relevance in civic enculturation because according to the commission’s justifications, it merely places newcomers at a gradual rather than principle distance. If understood in the right way, the commission argues, the canon cannot be instrumented in an unwarranted, exclusionary politics of national identity as it is precisely by constructing it that the eventual inclusion of newcomers is made clear.

Inclusion, then, consists of the eventual right to also say that one is of this ground, to also see one’s concern become reflected in the canon of the here-and-now.

**Canon reviewed**

As the commission’s work neared completion, Piet de Rooy published an op-ed in *de Volkskrant*. In it, he discussed the perils of canonisation, emphasising that neither a historical canon nor a national history museum would promote national cohesion. His argument for that prediction was that historical overviews were always the product of selection and interpretation. Thus, attempts at gaining oversight would prompt criticisms and suggestions for modifications, not cohesive consensus. Appeals for world or global history would not remedy, but instead deepen this problem. The creation of persuasive overviews – national or otherwise
– that could evoke a faithful sense of the flow-of-time is, according to De Rooy, a
delicate craft. The products of that craft are more likely to fall flat than to actually
work effectively in the governmental search for national unity. De Rooy, therefore,
expressed scepticism as to the effort of the latest commission:

The real difficulty is to find a way to give meaning and coherence to the occurrences – in their
multitude and multiplicity –, to sketch causes and connections, and to all that in such a way that ‘the
flow of time’ becomes significant.

And lastly: we have to wait and see what the canon commission will bring, but
perhaps it is wise for us to be aware that the meaning of a canon can never be more
than a reasoned proposal to perceive a part of the past of a part of the world along
certain general lines. A proposal, nothing more nothing less. The worst that can
happen to the commission is that the results of its efforts is taken to be the Final
Verdict [Laatste Oordeel; also referring to Judgement Day].

This points to a third element in the notion of ‘history’: of course, facts matter as their interconnection
is a matter of concern, but in the end it will be inevitable that opinions on this will diverge – and thus
not automatically lead to ‘cohesion’ [verbondenheid]. It has been cited over and over again, but that
doesn’t make the words of Geyl [one of the most prominent historians to have worked on Dutch
national history in the interbellum period] less truthful: history is a discussion with no end.
(September 1 2006, De Volkskrant) (#184)

Being the central proponent and author of multiple national canons and arguments
for them, it is again striking how thoroughly doubtful De Rooy expresses to be
about the possibility of canonisation.34 Moreover, De Rooy’s conclusion – canons
can only be proposals – is as close to a verbatim equivalent of the Commission Van
Oostrom’s argument as there can be. What De Rooy may not have known at the
time, was that his scepticism would be precisely the line of argument put forth by
the new commission. Of course, the crux of De Rooy’s pre-emptive objections was
his already expressed criticism of ‘national cohesion’: good historiography could
not and should not be loaded with the unbearable responsibility of creating more
unity. Much in line with Van Oostrom et al., he predicted that not unity but
discussion would be the consequence.

It was to this specific intervention that a long-standing proponent of a
canon, Michaël Zeeman, expressed annoyance with the unoriginal scepticism of
professor De Rooy:

34 In the same intervention, De Rooy is even out-right sceptical of the civilising effects of historical
consciousness – a core argument for his own canonical work – citing the very developed historical
consciousness in the Weimar Republic not preventing the subsequent atrocities.
Because history as an academic discipline is called, filled with the exalted self-criticism of that lame cliché, ‘a discussion with no end’, because one can think of so many if’s and but’s with respect to the manner in which the past is appropriately recounted, De Rooy anxiously awaits the presentation of the ‘canon of the Netherlands’ by the canon commission on October 16.

[...]

The explication of what the desired minimum of knowledge about the Dutch culture and history is by way of a canon is not going to solve that problem [the self-evidence of Dutchness and its subsequent non-articulation] at once. But it is beyond me why the argument for that desirability and the substance of that knowledge would be more catastrophic than haughtily exclusion [due to the non-articulation of Dutchness]. So let’s have that canon; we can then have a discussion about its contents, but not about the principle. (September 8 2006, De Volkskrant) (#185)

And so there emerged the somewhat odd, yet interesting circumstance that three proponents of the canon expressed disagreements about canonical ambitions along one and the same line of argument: the canon is not and cannot be a fixed, coercive statement about Dutch history, but is to be conceived as a proposal in an on-going discussion to which it may add some measure of coherence and explication. The point of the canon is thereby conceived to be the way in which it draws a native public together around it and facilitates a discussion. Zeeman was not the only one to notice that the dismissiveness of De Rooy was hard to understand. Huibert Crijns, for instance, wondered whether the previous efforts at canonisation by De Rooy cum suis were not merely practical jokes, seeing as those efforts had been instrumental in the run up to the ministry’s new plans:

Has Piet de Rooy changed his opinion in the last two years? That could be, but isn’t very likely. The thinking he articulates in his recent article is certainly not new in the world of history and was certainly known to him. Rather, it seems that the canon proposal of 2004 had been a practical joke that got out of hand. (September 12 2006, De Volkskrant) (#186)

When the canon of Van Oostrom et al. finally did see the light of day, it was received quite positively. That is, in line with the arguments of Scheffer, Zeeman, De Rooy, and the Commission Van Oostrom itself, there was considerable debate over the contents of the canon. Numerous participants in such interventions suggested additions and subtractions from the 50 windows from which the canon was built. The ‘principle’, to paraphrase Zeeman, was much less contested. See, for instance, the praise given in the NRC Handelsblad’s editorial column precisely because the commission had chosen to carefully qualify the connection between national identity and the canon:

The point is good history education and a collective memory. Other goals, such as the description of a Dutch identity, are rightly discarded; if it hadn’t the canon would succumb to the all too pressuring aims of politics and society. Indeed, national identity is a vague concept, but that does not detract
from the fact that a time line with stories and people helps in the civic enculturation of people that want to get to know their new country.

Historians and teachers will differ in their opinions about the selected historical figures, periods and events. The selection will change according to the perspective on the past. The point is to cross the river, less so the rocks which are treaded upon. (October 16 2006, NRC Handelsblad) (#187)

While there were also voices who wondered if those lengthy qualifications were really necessary. Was it not more or less clear that the canon has something to do with what we call ‘national identity’ yet this connection could not be precisely delineated? In an otherwise supportive response Corine Vloet, a journalist specialising in arts and culture, stated:

But one thing really does stand out. Why does the commission struggle so much with the concept ‘national identity’. The ‘presumed Dutch identity’ cannot be appropriately melded to the canon. Preferably, the commission would want to ‘decouple’ the two concepts, national identity is ‘in the international, multicultural world of today’ a ‘deceitful, yes dangerous concept’. It seems the commission has sought to counter all possible reproaches of ‘hollandocentrism’ pre-emptively. Indeed, the canon was not allowed to become a ‘vehicle for national pride’. Well yes, national pride. Das war einmal. National pride, as we all know, at least entails the NSB [Dutch fascist party that sided with and operated at the behest of the Nazi-rule of the Netherlands during WOII, or for example the America of George W. Bush. We’ll settle for national shame.

Yet this makes it odd that the commission is ‘less dismissive’, although ‘nuanced’ about ‘the association between canon and civic enculturation’. What would be the connection between civic enculturation and ‘national identity’? According to Frits van Oostrom, yesterday in these pages, there is no such thing ‘as the national identity of a country. It is impossible to fit everyone in the same mould.’

Yes, that’s why it’s called a national identity, not a personal or a group identity. But why would we pretend it isn’t there. We might be able to describe national identity as the sum of what everyone shared in geography, language, culture, history, etcetera. It is a kind of inheritance that one is bequeathed with, whether one wants the shoddy construction [bouwval] or not. (October 17 2006, NRC Handelsblad) (#188)

Thus the careful consideration of nationalistic coercion by the commission is explicitly recognised and often forms the central question of reviews: did the commission manoeuvre the canon in the right way considering the context of neo-nationalism in politics and the public sphere? Indeed, this was also the crucial point for steadfast opponents of a canon. Emblematic for such principled rejection of canonisation was the position of Maria Grever, a position that resonates to considerable extent with the view point developed in this study. After the publication of the canon, Grever did explicitly recognise the lengths to which the commission had gone to relativize the governmental instrumentality of the canon. Yet, in Grever’s argument such relativizing could never be strong enough as governmentally led canonisation still implicated state authority in what should be a resolutely public matter. One could say that Grever embraces the quote by Said
(what matters in humanist engagement) at the principled rejection of the quote by Rushdie (what matters is national citizenship), whereas the commission had sought a way to combine the two insights. But even from such a position, meticulously emphasising the plurality of perspectives from which history is inherently articulated, it can be quite hard to contradict the justifications of the commission. As Grever concluded in her contribution to an edited volume on the canon and the controversies surrounding it:

A governmentally prescribed historical canon uniformizes knowledge and provides clarity for all Dutch, including newcomers. It does. But this approach entails a few risks. This canon will be counterproductive for social cohesion because the plurality of perspectives onto the past taken by different groups in society is being narrowed. Indeed, it is inevitable that some groups will be excluded. The result is a one-dimensional view of historical facts that, due to their static position, risk losing their connection to the researchable historical reality. History then takes the form of a relic instead of being an expression of a dynamic and polyphonic past. Finally, history education and, more generally, historical culture become more vulnerable, because they are made dependent upon the whims of the political current [politieke actualiteit]. Pandora’s Box is then opened. (Grever 2006: 53) (#189)

Grever’s is in not merely critical, but seeks to provide a way forward:

We are wise to take the document of the commission Van Oostrom as a useful advice for teachers and educationalists. With regards to extreme interpretations of the past, one may assume that historians are ‘man’ enough to contend in an open debate equipped with arguments. Only in this way may we approach what Wilschut calls a sensible, learnable and achievable frame of reference for historical overview [orientatiekennis]. A frame that builds on traditions, remaining shared frames of interpretation and changes in Dutch society. Then we may achieve what had been noted in relation to Lorenz above: empathy and reciprocal recognition by presenting history as a debate between different, at times conflicting images. (Grever 2006: 52-53) (#190)

What redeems the possibility of canonisation in the arguments of the commission – history is offered up for debate – precludes canonisation in the argument of Grever. To the extent that government is involved in dictating history education, it should take great pains to teach that history for what it is: a public debate consisting of a plurality of voices. Yet, this is – in the argument of the commission – precisely what the commission had sought to achieve: the enumeration of a series of windows onto the past which should be re-assembled and adapted according to the public’s changing engagement with history.

This axiom of the public’s prerogative was all the more strongly enacted when the commission published a detailed report of the public debate that had ensued after its presentations in October 2006. As the ministry had requested and the commission had already announced, changes to the canon were to be made in
lieu of public criticism. In a similar way to the follow-up made by De Rooy cum suis in 2005 yet far more extensively, the 2007-report on the public reception of the canon considers in detail many of the positive, ameliorative and critical responses to the first iteration of the fifty windowed canon. As said, the commission concluded that some adjustments were in order. While the report also presented new ideas for the energetic implementation of the canon in primary and secondary education, including ideas about the website (Commission Van Oostrom 2007: 8-9). For the purposes of this analysis, the report’s further articulations of the canon’s Dutchness are of interest. The commission concludes, rightly, that its rejection of political instrumentalisation had been positively recognised. Yet, it seemed also apparent to the commission that it had perhaps overacted its denunciatory gestures:

Yet, there were also those who argued that the commission distanced itself too much from the idea that a canon may have a positive effect on national feeling [referring here among others to the intervention by Vloet]. The commission therefore wants to clarify and nuance her position on this point. As said, we have been deliberately [bewust] apprehensive in order to avoid feeding adversely effective sentiments in an inflammable climate, and with which the pride of one can easily further the demotion and even exclusion of the other. Which, of course, does not deny that in the windows of the canon of the Netherlands something of a collective identity, or at least the experience thereof, is reflected. Even without icons such as Hansje Brinker, tulips, clogs, soccer and korfbal [all symbols that are ostensibly cliché, evoking the banal] the canon contains Dutch anchors such as Rembrandt, the House of Orange, the floods of 1953 and Annie M.G. Smidt [symbols that can be said to be just as banal yet endowed with more political and cultural esteem]. A canon that supports a civilised form of Dutchness [Nederlanderschap] and self-awareness seems unobjectionable to us – as long as that feeling keeps pace with a lived awareness of the relativity of it, including knowledge of the black pages in the historical narrative of the Netherlands [mainly referring to colonialism, repression of non-protestant religions and collaboration with Nazi-rulers]. Highs and lows together form the beckons in the cultural history of the country that we inhabit together; shared knowledge of it is certainly a contribution to proper citizenship [verantwoord burgerschap]. (Commission Van Oostrom 2007: 28-29) (#191)

The commission restates its position here – the canon draws its justification from a public that is deemed native by the act of residing –, but adds to it the explicit mention of ‘civilised nationalism’ seeking to be more outspoken about the imagination of Dutchness that the windows of the canon may evoke. Yes, much of that imagination can be banal, but that does not detract from its emotional registry – ‘a national feeling’. What, again, immunises such a civilised nationalism from indulgence and decivilisation is the reflexive awareness of its constructedness and dark sides. In lieu of public responses, the appropriateness of the canon for the cultivation of good citizenship has been affirmed and enlarged:

In this respect, the commission has been pleased by the reactions of ‘new Dutch’ [nieuwe Nederlanders] who appeared to appreciate our design. The canon certainly turns out to have a
potentially binding effect, and in hindsight the commission could have emphasised that more, especially now that we have noticed in the resonance [weerklank] to what extent the canon offers a shared frame of reference to which people can easily relate [zich gemakkelijk verstaan] and about which people eagerly converse [in gesprek gaan]. That country-wide cohesion [binding] is, for us, still not the main goal of the canon, but indeed a very fortunate side-effect of it. The canon stimulates in a positive way what some call, a tad solemnly, reciprocity of fate [lotsverbondenheid] and others, more homely: keeping things together [referring to the famed words of Amsterdam mayor Cohen in describing his pragmatic approach to integration: de boel bij elkaar houden]. (Commission Van Oostrom 2007: 29; 31) (#192)

As an illustration of their claims, the commission presented the exemplar of an article by Abdelkader Benali, an award-winning author who was born in Morocco and had been a prominent voice in debates over integration and islam, in which Benali expressed support for the canon. It is clear then, that the commission justifies its stronger declaration of civilised nationalism on the basis of public responsiveness, particularly responses of those whose inhabitation appear incomplete as the connection between Dutchness and canon is most relevant for them.

The nativity of the public has become the shared means of disagreement. With respect to civic enculturation policies and historical canon formation, the two major attempts to utilise Dutchness in governmental policy, the concept of a native public allows participants of debates to position themselves and their discourse in view of the citizenry. The native public thereby becomes a crucial element within the performative flow of national identity debates. Or, to put it somewhat differently, to address and assent to a native public becomes a crucial method for finding where and what the national community is and what may constitute the Dutchness of citizenship. In the case of civic enculturation the native public is first and foremost conceived as an audience for the demonstration of individualised effort. That is, insofar newcomers demonstrate a willingness and effort to change can a native public’s anxieties over diversification be managed. The testing of enculturation is pointedly not relevant for this native public. Its continued dissensus over what is actually Dutch merely serves as a public demonstration of its liberality and malleability, i.e. precisely what the newcomers is yet to attain. In the case of historical canon formation, the native public is not so much an audience as it is a primary agent. Only through the responses and activities of a native public can the actions of government and experts be justified. In fact, the native pubic is here a pre-political entity that was already imagining its time and place in the world, its area and ground tempo. Governments and experts merely equip the native public with new and always mutable devices for representing itself to itself. Again,

ongoing dissensus about such a project does not directly contradict this justificatory logic as this dissensus repeatedly demonstrates that there is a native public concerned with how its time and place ought to be imagined. Debate and the disagreement it entails is first and foremost the public demonstration of a liberal, pluralistic and non-exclusionary tendency at the heart of Dutch citizenship. Dutch citizenship is always already open and changeable. Public disagreement about it merely reveals this to be the case. In the next and final empirical chapter, we’ll explore in more detail how enactments of non-exclusion work within the post-2000 context.