Out of character: debating Dutchness, narrating citizenship

van Reekum, R.

Citation for published version (APA):
9.

Enacting the style of popularity

In the years after 2002, a foray of books continued to be published about the Netherlands and the troubles with Dutchness aimed at lay audiences, who were presumed to be eager for perspective (for a discussion of a multitude of them, see De Haan 2008a). Many of such publications, as has already been explored, deal with this situation reflexively. The fact that there is public and political contestation about the issue of Dutchness is presented as at least one of the reasons for publishing such books. The authors seek to provide some orientation in what has, apparently, become a very disorienting matter.

Historians and cultural scholars played a central role in these publications. Many did so with the express intention of relativizing the intensity of concerns over Dutch identity. Take, for instance, the booklet by Maarten van Rossem, who would later ridicule attempts at canonisation (Van Rossem 2005), in which he sets out to blow apart the notion of Dutch typicality by introducing his readers to a multitude of perspectives on the matter, including his own attempt to ‘clarify in a very subjective way what I appreciate about the Netherlands so much so that I would not emigrate for any price’ (Van Rossem 2004: 4). As he explains in an ironic manner:

The results of that international comparison will no doubt disappoint many who are of the opinion that the Netherlands is a very peculiar country. After reading this book, everyone may finally determine for themselves what is typically Dutch and what isn’t. (Van Rossem 2004: 4) (#193)

---

Van Rossem suggests that the reader’s perspective may, after reading, be added to the ones provided in the booklet, thereby both attending to the reader’s desire to gain a perspective on what is typically Dutch and relativizing the attempts to capture Dutchness in any clear, conservable form.

We encounter a similar attempt at relativizing in the opening sentences of Peter Klein’s *1000 years of national history*:

“For those in the profession of history writing these are great times. From left to right – *bien étonné de se trouver ensemble* – there is a burning desire for national history. That is good. In fact, it’s too good to be true. There are, as shall become evident from this book, many national histories, none of which is the single truth. Undoubtedly, this is a let-down for all those intellectuals, half- and faux-intellectuals, scholars, pseudo-scholars, journalists, columnists, politicians, demagogues, party-ideologues, philosophical moonlighters [*timnegieters*] and many more who reckon themselves members of the thinking part of the nation and had waited eagerly to finally have the real national history revealed to them. What they actually wanted to hear was their version of the national history, which as a rule they tacitly identify as the true one. (Klein 2004: 7) (#194)

Much like the Commission Van Oostrom after him, Klein writes national history and does so in assent of a captivated public, but he explicitly refuses to give any singular answers. In fact, the first chapter of Klein’s book deals with a variety of ways in which Dutch histories have been conceived throughout the past two centuries. Even more sarcastic is the historian Han van der Horst’s virtuoso mix of historiography and current affairs is entitled *The best country of the world: where do our norms and values come from?*. To be sure, the title is meant to evoke the self-congratulatory and moralistic aspects of the debates on Dutchness, which Van der Horst sets out to relativize, if not straightforwardly debunk:

Clio, the muse of history, also appears in this book as guide. But she doesn’t take the reader by the hand to find in the past finished solutions for current problems. In that case, she would be something of a marsh fire [*dwaallicht*]. We shall see what the real meaning is of the great societal grievances and the festering Fortuyn revolt. And also how we should react to acts of terrorism such as those of Mohammed B., the murderer of Van Gogh, and his comrades. We shall track how the Dutch identity gained shape in the course of centuries. We will also encounter alternatives to the European model of the nation-state. Lastly, on this basis we will reveal processes that are the causes for the great societal changes in the Netherlands. We may then sketch the contours of a new, 21st century normality. Because it is up to the contemporary Dutch to build on history, not to return to the past. (Van der Horst 2005: 10-11) (#195)

Far less relativizing are those who see in history a seminal point of inspiration for today’s troubles. Probably the most prominent exemplar of such engagement is given by Jonathan Israel, the expert of Dutch enlightenment, who expressed nothing short of alarm about the legacy of ‘radical enlightenment’ in the Netherlands in his 2004 Pierre Bayle Lecture. Israel reviews Bayle’s writing on
toleration, which he understands to be a basic constituent of Dutch identity. His lecture opens by painting the scene:

Suddenly, the Netherlands is in uproar – culturally, politically and socially. Since the killing of Theo van Gogh, one finds deep shock and abundant signs of distress on all sides. The feeling in the Netherlands at the moment is seemingly one of a deep cultural crisis revolving around the question of toleration which, until recently, was a basic, unquestioned, taken-for-granted pillar of the Dutch sense of identity. (Israel 2004)

Israel’s history lesson is summarised in that:

Everyone must be allowed to believe whatever they want, asserts Bayle, that is part of toleration. But taken on its own, such a stance amounts merely to official indifference and, as such, is assuredly not toleration. Indeed, experience shows that complacently allowing expounders of theological doctrines to amass as much power as they can over their following can all too easily and quickly degenerate into endemic sectarian conflict and persecution. The essence of true toleration is not what has passed for toleration in Dutch society in recent years, but rather a co-ordinated policy on the part of the guardians of the state, education and opinion-forming to neutralise theological hatreds and bias; that is, prejudice, discrimination and suppression of unpopular views, wherever and whenever such bias rears its head in the form of incitement, hatred and violence. Indeed, neither democracy, nor toleration nor individual freedom can long survive unless government, teachers, media reporters and policy in whatever country join together in a co-ordinated fashion; acting promptly, consistently and without hesitation to block theological power and calls from the pulpit, wherever and whenever these seek to mobilise sections of the populace against unpopular minorities, dissenters, homosexuals, women and independent critical thinkers. (Israel 2004)

Indeed, the native public is to appreciate, once more, the crux of its political past: the marginalisation of theological authority from the public sphere and democratic governance. History, then, is a means to rediscover the true meaning of the current political ideals.

Similarly, Herman Pleij’s *Erasmus and the poldermodel* sets out to contradict the denunciatory stance of authors like Klein and Van der Horst by using national history, and Erasmus in particular, as a way to rethink the pragmatic politics of the so-called polder-model that, today, is blamed for the political troubles in the Netherlands. Pleij’s assessment of the significance of history is markedly different:

The hunger for history is huge. It doesn’t matter what it is, as long as it says ‘history’ on it. Explanations are evident, are indeed continuously given and repeated, yet no less true for being so. They all share one point of focus: the centuries-long available stead fasts of church and state, ideology and world view are done for, worn out and unrecognisable. Therefore, there is a growing hunger for new points of attachment and rituals that can once again provide recognition [een gemeenschappelijk gezicht kunnen geven], ascertained in formalised expressions of

interconnectedness. This will enable people to once again feel safe [geborgen] among each other and to find opportunities to share joys and fears with like-minded [gelijkgezinden]. (Pleij 2005: 104-105) (#196)

What recurs in these reflections about the uses of history is the question whether experts can, may, and should provide clear-cut narratives about ‘our history’ and what it means for its contemporary public. Indeed, the debates about canonisation are deeply engaged with concerns over how such a demarcation of shared history is justified and what the roles of experts, commissions and the state are in such efforts of demarcation. As we have seen, while disagreements abound over the appropriateness of canonisation after 2002, such disagreements more or less univocally follow the argument that coercive nationalism and arbitrary selection should be avoided at all cost. This is why expert’s involvement and pronouncement are in need of careful argumentation. To do this, national history is to be treated as a matter of public debate, not state dictum. In the end, what justifies the right to speak of ‘our history’ is the extent to which a public can be said to exist and to be responsive to it. Quite apart from the procedure through which it can be ascertained, what matters is a popular verdict. On the basis of the previous analysis, it can now be assessed how this pervasive logic of fame (Boltanski & Tévenot 2006 [1991]) inflects the on-going contention.

As was discussed in chapter 4, for the likes of Huizinga it was possible and indeed crucial, to enact what I dubbed a style of the lecture. It is in that style that Huizinga was not only able to argue for satisfaction and moderation, but also perform such affects in the articulation of the argument itself: he performs a contemplative reflection on what – for better and worse – has been the enduring profile of the parliamentary democracy that the Netherlands should strive to remain. Conversely, the debates about reinvigorated Dutchness through history education are the context for a quite different style of engagement. The point is not to convey what the public doesn’t know, to lecture from a position of learned elevation and, thereby, to create the possibility of moderating popular uncertainty from above. Instead, the point is to ascend to a public concern and to contribute to public imagination in the here-and-now with particular concern for those who come from there and have not shed the ways of then. Such activity is then to be justified with reference to evocativeness and popular response in the form of public debate.

While Huizinga is in the position to teach his public about the unacknowledged or, at least, unappreciated constitution of the Dutch nation – its enduring burgherly mental character –, contemporary experts on history and culture
involve themselves in a rather different communicative practice. Instead of providing an attentive public with knowledge of the nation’s historical existence – its developing yet persistent mental constitution, for instance –, it is a matter of providing appropriate materials and procedures for the public’s contemporary self-imagining – a canon and its debate, for instance. To be sure, neither the style of the lecture nor the style of popularity are discrete entities. Huizinga’s argument is certainly not devoid of concerns for persuasion and public recognition. Huizinga does indeed anticipate that his rhetoric of burgherlyness will evoke recognition in his public, an anticipation that was not unwarranted as the narrative of burgherlyness formed a widely used repertoire of typification in the interbellum period (Aerts 2002; Van Heerikhuizen 1985). Nor are the post-2002 debates on Dutch identity and history lacking in claims of elevated expertise. Yet, Huizinga performs his persuasion by expounding insight that his public is presumed to be lacking, while the post-2002 interventions explicitly prescribe evocation of public debate and popular responses as a means to construct, here and now, an image of Dutchness that will bring together a public and solidify its nativity. The difference between the styles of engagement and typification is certainly not between consensus and dissensus. Many could and would contradict Huizinga’s arguments (see in particular Van der Lem 1997). Even Huizinga’s own words are a testament of this as he vehemently denounces the false prophets of national unification. The fact that history is a debate is certainly not absent from Huizinga’s enactment. The lecture is clearly expressed in a context of contention. Nor are the so-called ‘canon debates’ of the new millennium a bonfire of public disagreement as there emerges a near complete agreement about the need to put history to debate. However, the notion that history is a debate becomes much more than a sociological circumstance: it becomes the very justification for its use in ameliorating societal problems. In the style of popularity, national history is not only communicated in the sociological context of public disagreement, but its very possibilities and production become that of the public forum. The encompassing effect of this discursive formation is actually quite hard to avoid as even principled opponents of canonisation will tend to prescribe, quite understandably, debate as a means to pluralise historical consciousness.

The consequential difference lays in the way that consistency may come about between style and narrative. What Alexander (2011) has conceptualised as ‘fusion’ – the situationally accomplished consistency between the ensemble of performative elements – may overstate what is actually at stake in performative success, but it does highlight an interesting stylistic problem. A certain discursive style entails certain roles and consequences for both its persona and its interpellated
public. Huizinga’s narrative of burgherly satisfaction is consistent with his style as the lecturer may bring his public back into some measure of security by providing it with an overview that it had previously lacked. Overview becomes a path to burgherly calm and moderation. In Huizinga’s style the public is reassured both with the message of his argument as well as the style of his engagement: the lecture is itself a performance of burgherly self-understanding, demonstrating its perseverance against the forces of fatal hubris. The public is challenged to ascend to this enduring, yet never fully accomplished national constitution of moderation. In the end, moderation is an assignment for the public.

Yet, how can it be possible that a public-cum-nation should still acquire insight from some elevated expert in order to remember what was actually already its mentality? This style of the lecture can only become true as long as nationhood is never truly accomplished, as long as the nation is always in need of further instruction, in need of further clashes with the forces that threaten it. For a statement about such Dutchness to be true in Huizinga’s style, it still ought to be realised more fully by its public. Whether burgherly Dutchness will persist, is for the public to ensure after having been made aware of the challenging assignment by one expert or another. So while Dutchness has persisted and exists to this day, it will still need to be completed. The struggle is not over, nor is victory necessarily justified. People will have to make the difference. Time will tell.

How different do matters become when articulated through the style of popularity. Consistency becomes possible here by acknowledging the public’s desire for imagination and providing appropriate means for doing so. It is this latter point around which much of the disagreement collects itself: what are the appropriate means? The possibility of reassurance all but disappears as claims to withhold, deny or decline the public of what it is said to need almost inevitably appear as the dead-ends of overly detached, up-rooted or academic doubt and arm-chair cosmopolitanism. If there is a native public, there should be a native-cum-national identity for it, full stop. The fact that the public finds itself in an imaginative crisis is the very occasion to which the experts should rise. This also means that interventions cannot be revolve around reassurance, as did Huizinga’s, but are most basically concerned with worry, alarm and anxiety as the expert should ascend to the concerns of the public and not the other way around. Insofar as Dutchness appears as the public’s prerogative, it also appears to be in crisis and is thus appropriately engaged through alarm. This is not primarily because the plurality of public opinion is said to determine what Dutchness is, as if a postmodern perspectivism has undermined a modernist sense of identity. Rather, it is part and parcel of the style of popularity to attribute a desire for explicit and
evocative imaginations of Dutchness – such as a canon or an enculturation test – to its public. Without a public in some state of crisis, there would be no sense in intervening. In contrast to the style of the lecture, the problem of nationhood in national identity discourse is not that it is perverted by false prophets (Huizinga’s heroic nationalists), but is the confusion of the public itself. Yet what expert voices subsequently tends to provide are not clear images of Dutchness, as that would contradict and exclude so many parts of the public and constitute unwarranted nationalism and state led lecturing. What they seek to provide is further material and arguments for a public debate about Dutchness, arguing that such debate will attend to the confused state of the public. Instead of providing reassurance, the experts reiterate and affirm the attributed confusion in which the public is said to wallow: Dutchness most certainly exists – as demonstrated by a native public’s concern for it – and a craving for its clear imagination appears omnipresent, yet it shall not materialise as that would contradict the very justification of its relevance.

One more point of difference: In rather stark contradiction to Huizinga’s style, the crisis of Dutchness is to be remedied through an evocative debate and, thus, the construction of a national identity. This identity, whether canonised or not, is understood to be changing with the public’s views on it. Dutchness is thereby already accomplished, always already complete: public construction-through-debate is its once-all and end-all. Consistency is not sought in the direction of instruction. There is no challenge posed or assignment given to its public apart from the imperative to participate in its on-going imagination: ‘iedereen moet meedoen’…everyone ought to participate. Refusal to join in and participate become self-inflicted forms of segregation from a practice that cannot possibly be exclusionary as it is built from dialogue and inclusion. Indeed, newcomers should be recognised – they reside here –, yet their recognition and belonging is guaranteed by a native public and a mode of encompassment that was already here – dialogical Dutchness – and to which newcomers should therefore assimilate. Indeed, this sense of what of it may means to be Dutch is emphatically all-inclusive, yet that same inclusivity is guaranteed and granted on the basis of autochthonous encompassment. Thus, the style of popularity postulates an autochthonous people that must have been always already Dutch and whose Dutchness is in no way in need of completion or amelioration. This people has no assignment to complete or ideals to still realise. To use Foucault’s terms: Its only goal is defence itself.

The line of argument should not be misconstrued: there are compelling reasons for having moved away from the style of the lecture and its transhistorical nation persisting through history. Even Huizinga, prefacing his exposition with
thoughtful reflexivity, cannot escape the prescription of a genealogical line through history that will determine what is (and is not) Dutch. His analysis may not follow the overt and often quite intentional biological raciology that is such an important part of national character discourses. He may have chosen in its stead the prescription of a politico-cultural mentality quite devoid of any somatic connections, but that does not alter the fact that Huizinga’s essay conceives of the nation as a demonstration of a people’s perseverance against the attrition of time. It is still a matter of an unchanging constitution moving through time, of defending society and thereby of discrete peoples who threaten each other’s existence. It is still a discourse of war. It is not for nothing that people have sought ways to abandon characterological discourse and speak the nation differently. The trouble is that the move away from characterology has not constituted a move away from exceptionalism. The style of popularity and its all-inclusive construction of national identity in public debate has not meant that there is no longer a prescription of hierarchy and pre-eminence: those that can claim to be native, to have already been residing and to have already been encompassed have still gained a pre-eminent right to speak of an us in which others will need to be included. The typification of Dutchness through the style of popularity still seeks out people-at-the-margins-of-encompassment upon whom the emancipatory effects of inclusion can be demonstrated and through whom the non-essence of Dutchness can be iconified. What’s more, this national identity protection entails no obligations for those whose inclusion is uncontested, apart from the unconditional imperative to participate in imagination, wherever that may lead them. If there are obligations, they fall to those whose inclusion is somehow not-yet-finished as it is they who need to become included in ‘our’ nativity.

Two contrasting attempts at non-exclusion
In this final segment, I will juxtapose two attempts at non-exclusion in the stylistic context that has been described above. This juxtaposition serves to show what is and what is not plausible in this context. The juxtaposition thereby highlights the way that enactments of national identity discourses are inflected by the style of popularity and the prerogative of the native public that is prescribed with it. First, one of the most prominent statements in the post-2002 debates on Dutchness will be addressed: the speech of then princess Máxima at the presentation a WRR-report on national identification. Secondly, I will analyse a specific publication of

---

38 I will use the name ‘Máxima’ throughout this chapter to refer to the person that was born, Máxima Zorreguieta, and whose naming has subsequently become a matter of diplomatic protocol that I do not wish to untangle here. The name ‘Máxima’ is regularly used in public discourse and, for my purposes, refers nicely to the public phenomenon rather than the biographical person.
the Dutch Centre for Folk Culture\textsuperscript{39}. As shall become evident, these two attempts at non-exclusion are strongly related: the one refers to the other and they both seek to develop non-exclusionary images of what it means to be Dutch. Yet, they are at once markedly different in the ways in which they do so.

\textbf{When the sovereign spoke}

The remarks made by Royal princess and wife of the future monarch at the presentation of a report on ‘national identification’ by Scientific Council for Governmental Policy would become one of the most evocative moments of the post-2000 period. The remarks themselves and the subsequent responses will be analysed in some detail, but first it is necessary to consider some of the work leading up to the publication of the report. From these considerations follow the idea that the report itself and the remarks made by princess Máxima can indeed be understood in line with the kinds of interventions I’ve been dealing with so far: attempts to actually provide some substance in the form of statements and policy measures in lieu of the idea that Dutch identity is to be reinvigorated. Yet, it will also become clear that the WRR-report and Máxima’s accompanying speech were quite particular interventions when considered in this way.

First of all, the WRR’s role in policy discussions over migration and integration should be taken into account. As has been demonstrated at various point in this study and by other research, the WRR has at times played a crucial role in mediating and facilitating the dispersal of new notions, goals, critiques, priorities and policies in the field of migration and integration policy (in particular Essed & Nimako 2006; Scholten 2011; Entzinger & Scholten 2013; Van Reekum & Duyvendak 2012; Van Dooremalen 2011). The main trajectory of this role can be described as one of ‘setting the pace’ to one of ‘offering alternatives’. Whereas earlier contributions of the WRR to policy debates on migration and integration were absolutely instrumental in forming and reforming the issue as such (see WRR 1979; 1989 and to a lesser extent 2001), it is particularly after 2002 that the WRR has published reports that explicitly seek to convince government to change course and seek alternatives to its current approach (see WRR 2004; 2007). Over time the reports had become more reactive. This is reflective of a broader transformation in the relations between research and policy making on migration and integration in the Netherlands (Entzinger & Scholten 2013): from a very closely knit web of interactions between academic research, research funding and policy development in the 1980’s and early 1990’s to an increasingly disjunctive field of exchange

\textsuperscript{39} The organisation has since taken on a more expanded name to reflect its more expanded ambitions: the Dutch Centre for Folk Culture and Immaterial Heritage.
where a larger variety of approaches to questions of migration and integration exist, particularly as party politics has become much more important in setting policy agendas and actually taking on certain policy measures. The boundary work between research and politics has become more complex. The WRR-report of 2007, entitled *Identification with the Netherlands [Identificatie met Nederland]*, is part of this transformative process and clearly represents an attempt by the WRR to speak truth to power, albeit in a very particular way.

The fact that the WRR-report was born out of worries about the shift in governmental policy concerning migration and integration is quite apparent. It is already in 2004 that the idea of devoting a report on the issue of national identity and integration was part of discussions within the council. The project of delivering such a report was supervised by council-member Prof. dr. Pauline Meurs. A full professor in the management and organisational development of care, she had already supervised the publication of another WRR-report on immigration, *The Netherlands as an immigration society* (2001), that was at times credited with finally dispelling the idea that the Netherlands was not an immigration country.

As regularly happens within WRR-projects, the research for a new report on questions of national identity included a preliminary study executed by a number of now familiar participants in the debates on national history and canonisation: Siep Stuurman, Kees Ribbens and Maria Grever.40 Their publications and interventions throughout the discussions over a history canon emanated in part from this preliminary study entitled *The paradoxes of (de-)canonization*.41 As we have seen, their engagement with government plans to construct a new canon for history education had been quite adversarial, questioning the historiographical basis, the political rationale and the possible outcomes. The WRR was engaging with researchers that could provide alternatives to the government thinking on national identity from the outset. Kees Ribbens and Maria Grever would eventually publish a so-called exploratory report with the WRR, *National identity and multiple past* (2007), in which the development of Dutch identity and its education in the form of history instruction in schools is analysed from a pluralist perspective. Both the legacies of de-colonisations and subsequent waves of immigration to the Netherlands are extensively considered as Grever and Ribbens not only provide an analytic overview but also give policy advice.

---

40 The WRR-project also lead to the publication of two other exploratory studies, namely *De casus Inburgering en Nationaliteitswetgeving: iconen van nationale identiteit. Een juridische analyse* by Fouzia Driouchi, en WRR-Webpublicatie nr. 34 *In debat over Nederland. Veranderingen in het discours over de multiculturele samenleving en nationale identiteit* by Fleur Sleegers. The latter of which informed, at least partly, the drafting of the research proposals that secured funding for this study.

A notable part of this exploratory study is the way in which interviews with youths are used to understand better the ways in which identification with the past takes shape in a postcolonial, ethnically diverse present. The use of such interviews and youths’ own views on the past plays to interrelated roles in the report: firstly, the report thereby focusses on the actual processes of identification, orientation and self-awareness relevant to both autochthonous and allochthonous youths; secondly, the prerogative is thereby given to youths themselves. This indicates two breaks from what is perceived to be the current governmental approach. Firstly, the report focuses on the actual processes of identification shaping how people – in many different ways – construct their identities instead of substantiating a monolithic notion ‘national identity’ and ascertaining youths’ identification with it. Secondly, instead of trying to figure out how national identification can be cultivated and imposed through history education, the report focuses on actually existing possibilities for such cultivation to which curricular and pedagogical reforms could be fitted. As seen through the exploratory study, government seeks to impose a rather one-dimensional and monolithic identity upon youths without considering the plurality of the past and something like ‘Dutch identity’ from the view point of youths and without attending to what they would deem relevant in constructing an identity in the Netherlands. As Ribbens and Grever explain when considering the policy implications of their research:

The current debates about national identity and historical consciousness in fact contain two political positions. On the one hand, there is an increasingly powerful neonationalist proclamation in which the transference of national values in a Western context is emphasised. Strikingly, many countries with all their emphasis on modernisation and future-orientedness are in search of historical ‘roots’. On the other hand, there is a weaker representation of a supranational approach in which pluriformity and universal – not necessarily western – values are central. In this discourse Europe and cosmopolitanism are emphasised. This message appear less self-evident, is more complex and harder to communicate in the political arena. (Grever & Ribbens 2007: 158) (#197)

These aspects of the exploratory study – prioritising people’s lived identifications, fitting policy goals to those actually existing processes of identification, contradicting the imposition of a simplistic and homogenous national-cum-western identity – are significant as they are also at the heart of the justifications for and arguments in the main WRR-report Identification with the Netherlands. As the press release that accompanied the publication of the report on September 24 2007 stated: ‘Change of perspective needed on national identity’ (#198). The Council had explicitly set out to moderate, depolarise and restrain the ever more contentious conflicts over national belonging. In the words of the Council,
...there are sturdy debates over ‘the’ Dutch national identity, over what are its essential characteristics and over the value and meaning of this identity for the cohesion of the Dutch society. […] In order to be able to approach the issue of ethnic diversity and national community productively, the WRR proposes an approach that centres on various possibilities of identification instead of a focus on the strengthening of national identity and the precise description of what it is or should be. (WRR 2007: 31). (#199)

In this way, the WRR indeed proposes a pragmatic approach to national identity formation that takes its cue from the actual dynamics through which identifications more or less collude. The report distinguishes three forms of identification – functional, normative and emotional – in relation to which government may seek to devise policy initiatives. National identity happens along each of these lines. What is, according to the report, often deemed the true hallmark of national identity in public debates – emotional attachment and loyalty to the nation – should only be taken as one among many ways in which residents of the Netherlands come to form identifications. The report thereby advocates a thorough redirections of governmental concerns. More specifically, distinctions should be maintained between (1) the socio-economic and educational disadvantages that hamper functional identification, (2) the debates about, adaptation to and enforcement of shared norms, and (3) the emotional bonds that may form in context of conviviality. The report effectively argues that recent governments have sought to deal with all of these issues as one and the same problem of a disintegrating national identity-cum-society, thereby muddling the distinctive particularities of each and counterproductively taking emotional identification to be the overarching aim. In place of the vain hope that emotional identification and its cultivation will allow government to solve a host of problems associated with migration and integration, the WRR places a disaggregated vision that resists an ill-advised reification of national identity:

The point of departure is not the whole – an image of an ideal society or an imagined community – but the nature, form and intensity of the relations between the parts. A coherent whole is thereby an imagined terminus. (WRR 2007: 31) (#200)

And:

With this report we want to contribute to the process of ‘re-imagination’ of the national community. (WRR 2007: 33) (#201)

It was at the occasion of the report’s presentation to government and the broader public that princess Máxima gave a speech. As such she performed many roles: at once wife of the king-to-be, recent immigrant to the country and successful
careerist; at once unquestionably at home in the Netherlands and an exemplar for immigrant women’s emancipation, Máxima could speak on the issue of Dutchness in ways that were unique to her position. Her speech that day – reportedly written by aides of the prime-minister – opens by acknowledging the popular anxieties over national identity: ‘The theme of identity occupies many people in our country’ (Máxima 2007) (#202). In what would turn out to be the crucial passage of the speech, Máxima recounted her own process of enculturation:

Some seven years ago I started my search for the Dutch identity. I was aided by numerous dear and wise experts. I had the privilege to meet many people. To see, hear and taste a lot of the Netherlands. It was a beautiful and rich experience for which I am enormously grateful. But ‘the’ Dutch identity? No, this I haven’t found. The Netherlands is: an attachment to privacy and intimate company [gezelligheid]. The Netherlands is: one cookie with tea. But also: enormous hospitality and warmth. The Netherlands is: sobriety and restraint. Pragmatism. But also: experiencing intense emotions together. The Netherlands is far too multiple to catch in one cliche. ‘The’ Dutch person doesn’t exist. Consolingly I can tell you, ‘the’ Argentinian doesn’t exist either. Therefore, I think it’s very interesting that the title of the report by the WRR is not ‘The Dutch Identity’. But: ‘Identification with the Netherlands’. That allows space for development. And for diversity. (Máxima 2007) (#203)

In the speech, the personal experiences of Máxima, as an allochthon finding her way in the Netherlands, resonate with the Council’s intervention of disaggregation: ‘the’ Dutch identity cannot be found. The significance of not finding ‘the’ identity is even more profound as the person not finding it is not only an allochthon but also a member of the Royal family. She is both a recent arrival to the Netherlands and an embodiment of it. In the context of the speech, Máxima enacted the persona of a stranger who is able to identify with greater ease what is distinctive about a people, recount her lived experiences of trying to settle in and being the celebrated icon of what despite everything can be called Dutch, the House of Orange. She speaks from the ambiguous position of a sovereign: both completely identified with yet also autonomous from society. It is, of course, precisely this position that would seem to make Máxima an ideal vocaliser of the report’s message. The speech does indeed argue as much as it recounts how Máxima and the WRR arrive at the same conclusion: ‘The’ Dutch person doesn’t exist. This conclusion ‘allows space for development. And for diversity.

It is in all likelihood Geert Wilders who was first to react to the report and Máxima’s accompanying report. In a tweet sent out that afternoon, he deemed it ‘politically correct malarkey’. Indeed, many were to follow Wilders rejection of the report’s ‘change in perspective’. Both CDA and VVD came out to renounce the report and its more pragmatic approach to Dutchness. As such, the report itself and

---

the array of critical reactions it called forth can be understood as yet another instalment in the ongoing confrontation of neo-nationalist and cosmopolitan positions. These contentions would seem to affirm two opposing, yet related assertions: there are still those in powerful places who wish to revive the corpse of multicultural accommodation by suggesting that who ‘we’ are cannot be determined; the significance of a more pragmatic and cosmopolitan take in issues of migration and integration is beleaguered by a more readily communicable neo-nationalism. Along these lines, the entire controversy may be and, indeed, was at times reduced to a Babylonian misunderstanding between interlocutors who could no longer hear the background intentions of each other’s utterances. In short, one could suggest that Máxima/WRR had merely suggested that the Dutchman doesn’t exist, whereas quick-to-judge critics had misinterpreted – strategically or not – those words to mean that Dutch identity as such should be sacrificed for the greater goods of multicultural tolerance and cosmopolitan flexibility. Even though this interpretation of the ensuing controversy over Máxima’s statements were indeed frequently articulated, the previous analysis of a logic of fame will draw our attention not to the confrontation of two opposing philosophies of governance, but rather to the performative limits of what can be persuasively said and done in a discursive situation constituted by a logic of fame. In short, we should be attentive to the way in which both the WRR and Máxima are themselves reiterating arguments about how to deal with national identity politics that effectively disable what they purport to achieve.

From Huizinga to Máxima
The limits of Máxima’s performance and the WRR’s goal to ‘change perspective’ come into view when we directly contrast the presentation of the report with the stylistic components of Huizinga’s characterology. Much like Huizinga warned for the consequences of popularity, Máxima – in consonance with the WRR – warns for the dead-ends of characterology: cliché and particularism. Moreover, she does so by enumerating precisely the kinds of affective dispositions and habits that fall under the purview of characterological typifications: homeliness, sobriety, pragmatism, stinginess. It is no coincidence that these typifications resonate with Huizinga’s narration of burgherly Dutchness as it had become – not in the least through Huizinga’s efforts – a widely reiterated cliché (Aerts 2002). Seeking to distinguish her own convictions and the proposals of the WRR from exclusionary

43 A more thorough discussion of the reports’ merits can be found in the special issue of Migrantenstudies devoted to it in 2008, issue 3: http://www.migrantenstudies.nl/archives/category/2008/2008-nummer3 (accessed 07-03-2014)
articulations of nationhood, Máxima embraces the shift towards *identification* as the proper object of concern. Yet, this is also where the configuration between concept, persona and public begins to unravel. It is here that consistency between performance, narrative and interpellation is interrupted. As a collaborator with the WRR and central icon of the royal family, Máxima speaks for and personifies both scientific expertise and territorial sovereignty. Yet, the WRR-report and her speech embrace an identitarian concept of nationhood at the explicit expense of characterology. A question arises: by what justificatory logic does Máxima speak? What allows Máxima to evaluate the practice of national identifications? How can she say that she hasn’t found the Dutch identity.

While Huizinga’s discourse instates his own persona and narrative in the historical perseverance of national character – it demonstrates what burgherlyness is and that it still works while speaking about it –, the WRR-report and Máxima’s speech lack such performative consistency. If national identity should indeed be relinquished from its characterological past and instead be understood as the process of people’s own identifications, how can Máxima’s right to speak be justified? In fact, Máxima’s performance disavows what it is meant to convey: there can be no privileged opinion on what is and isn’t Dutch, there can only be *popular* opinion. Only popular opinion is worthy enough to demand attention when national identity has become the actual occurrence of so many identifications. Both the scientific privileges of the WRR and the aristocratic privileges of the Crown clash with the purported embrace of identification as the object of nationhood and the ostensive critique of characterology. If the national is popular, who is Máxima to speak? How can she claim to pacify an issue that, as she herself acknowledges in the speech, ‘occupies many people in our country’?

The fact that a tension between persona and concept is much more than an obscure, scholastic inconsistency in the enactment of nationalism was soon evidenced as this inconsistency was effectively exploited by those who sought to contest the central message of the speech. More specifically, contestation of this message worked particularly well if and to the extent that such critics enacted their critique as an expression of popular dissent. One of the fiercest critiques came from Sylvian Ephimenco, who had participated in national identity debates from the advent in the late 1980’s. Ephimenco explicitly disagreed with the substantive arguments of the WRR. He had in previous years become one of the most outspoken critics of ‘Dutch multiculturalism’. In line with those critiques, he summarised the conclusions of the WRR-report:
Conclusion: because of a minority with adaptational problems the majority has to relinquish her central identity and thoroughly reconstruct it. But is it possible to forcefully impose [forceren] your national identity and steer it in a specific direction. The dynamic of the national identity is primarily an autonomous process that is rather unruly when coercion comes into play. The multiculturalism that pretended, since the 1980’s, to put that identity upside down eventually resulted in the fortuynistic revolt [referring to the notion of a ‘Fortuyn revolt’]. (September 25 2007, Trouw) (#204)

Already in his critique of the WRR and its stubbornly ‘multicultural’ approach to national identity, there is the central problem of Máxima’s performance: how can one pretend to coercively impose, to lecture, to prescribe when one has – rightly – determined that national identity should be understood as the dynamic interplay of identifications playing out in society? When Ephimenco took on Máxima’s role in a column two days later, this problem is at heart of his lamentations:

It is because of identity and tradition that Máxima never needs to get her groceries walking behind a shopping cart in the supermarket and that she goes through live as a make-believe princess [theaterprinses], surrounded by luxury, privileges and lackeys. One should be very careful before offending countless people that cling to that institution as if it concerns their self-identity. If Máxima can’t find the identity on which she is so conformably seated, she had better return to Northlands College [prestigious school that Máxima attended] for additional schooling. Offending her groupies is foolish. And not just a little. (September 27 2007, Trouw) (#205)

Ephimenco is not arguing in defence of the monarchy. He is not warning the monarchy for its associations with streams of thought that undermine its pre-eminence, i.e. multicultural pedantry. The problem is elsewhere: according to his critique Ephimenco’s public is fully aware that the monarchy is make-believe, a theatrical performance of national union and authority. The problem emerges precisely because of the fact that the monarchy exists as appearance, that it is nothing more or less than the orange coloured pageantry drawing ever so many identifications together. How could anyone whose way of life directly depends on the imaginations of a captivated public – ‘groupies’ – be so obtuse as to contradict the pre-eminence of those public imaginings? What actor would instruct his public not to look at him? Persona, concept and interpellated public do not affirm each other. An actress playing her part in a Royal pageantry speaking about the fact that the nation is a dynamic confluence of identifications cannot also expect to speak about that nation as if it is an object about which expert opinions matter. As the editorial of Trouw discussed, Máxima’s articulation of the WRR’s argument did not take into account from what position she spoke:

For many, the national identity was all too easily swept aside as non-existent. […] The optimistic plea by Máxima thereby forgoes a consideration of her privileged position. It is relatively easy for a highly educated woman with a protected status to feel like a citizen of the world. In less privileged parts of
society nationality and ethnicity are sources of tension. Yet, what has particularly evoked fierce reactions is that Máxima appears to try and dissolve [wegrelativeren] the Dutch identity. Not literally, but it is the impression that her speech gives. (September 28 2007, Trouw, italics added) (#206)

In what may have been the most poignant summation of the wave of contestation that emerged, Coos Huijsen argued in an op-ed published by the Volkskrant that the national role of the Crown has been compromised. According to Huijsen, Máxima had been allowed to express her private opinions on a contentious political issue, while she could have easily been acquainted with the fact that popular opinion ran against her convictions:

It brings to mind the American scientist Christopher Lasch who already in the seventies pointed out the frustration among the public at large over a cosmopolitan elite who cared little for the feelings of belonging and distinctiveness to which that public were attached. […] It is in this respect significant that we do have a designation for the évant garde elite, ‘de grantengordel’ [an analogous expression to ‘rive gauche’ in France], but none for the average Dutch person, such as the French ‘pays réel’. In effect, the designated group is at least as real in the Netherlands. Whoever seeks to acquaint oneself with the ‘real Netherlands’, needs only to listen to Stand.nl [popular radio program in which regular listeners can phone in to give their opinion on the issue of the day]. (October 13 2007, De Volkskrant) (#207)

A series of cleavages emerge, setting Máxima’s appeals apart from what can properly be called ‘popular opinion’: her elitist position due to her privileged, cosmopolitan upbringing, her role in the theatre of the monarchy, and her association with the scientific expertise of the WRR. All these cleavages work to distinguish her perspective, her experiences, her ideas, her feelings, her particular way of identifying with the Netherlands from those who constantly appear to be ‘many’: the real Netherlands that is worried about national identity. Moreover, neither the intervention of the WRR nor Máxima’s articulation of that intervention in her speech work to address a rather crucial performative contradiction, namely: if national identity is the product of so many identifications, of the imaginings of the public itself, how can the voices of scientific expertise and monarchical privilege presume to lecture their public on how and what to believe about national identity? The privileged position from which Máxima speaks at once comes to explain how a central figure in the theatre of Dutchness could mistake her own significance: she is able to identify with Dutchness in this way because she, as distinguished from many others, lives life shielded from the problems of diversity. As Ephimenco already explained:

In the year 2007 Máxima has become as enlightened and multi-cosmopolitan as the correctly thinking [weldenkend] elite that had (and continues to have) her ear [souffleren]. Herman Pleij, inventor of the formula, would say that her strongly emphasised Dutch identity consist of her rejection of it. She is
As the cleavage between elite and population was drawn out so thoroughly in response to Máxima’s speech, it is interesting to note that ‘ordinary people’ were deliberately given a voice in the matter. That is: the readerships of multiple broadsheets were invited to give their view on ‘Dutch identity’ in response to the controversy (September 27 2007, *NRC Handelsblad*; October 11 2007, *Trouw*; October 13 2007, *De Volkskrant*). If the WRR and Máxima weren’t sure what that identity was, maybe the public itself could find answers. Indeed, broadsheets receive many of such letters everyday on any kind of topic. What matters here is the way in which letters from readers acquire a specific significance: that of the public talking back to the authority of experts. The letters, predictably, give many different kinds of answers. Some focus on characterisation, some attack the cultural relativism of the governing elite, some praise Máxima, some explain that an identity can never be defined conclusively, or only in the negative. Apparently, the controversy surrounding Máxima’s speech was deemed fit for the guidance of a lay public, the very opposites of lecturing experts.

Again, it is in the confrontation with the lay public and its willingness to give an abundance of answers to the question of Dutch identity that the intervention of the WRR and the speech by Máxima ran into their performative strictures. The stream of reactions coming from notable figures, scholars and the lay public together come to affirm that (1) relativizing the issue of national identity hasn’t worked; (2) that the debate over that identity is still in a state of confusion; (3) that the need for a more thoroughly explicated consensus that may encompass the plurality of perspectives is still in order. Moreover, the arguments of the WRR’s report did not stand over and against this conception of how identity happens. Michaël Zeeman explicating this when he criticised the report for the fact that it could not and would not deliver new ideas when it came to encompassing plurality:

It appears to me that the classical sophism in philosophical ethics – the is/ought problem, that is: the confusion that emerges when what ‘is’ is conceived as what ‘ought to be’ – has been applied with a distinct frivolity. There is confusion about what the Dutch identity is, seems to be the argument, that confusion is fed by the great many people that entertain different ideas about their national identity, so let’s cherish a myriad of identities and discourage or frustrate if necessary measures to promote cohesion within the country in terms of national identity. (September 27 2007, *De Volkskrant*)

In Zeeman’s view, the WRR and Máxima had misunderstood their own argument about identification with the Netherlands: the simple fact of plurality – ‘confusion’ – in no way prescribes how to deal with plurality. Yet, as soon as plurality is called
dissensus the horizon of a possible consensus, of a more explicit articulation of what binds society together, is already at play. Indeed, Zeeman ends his discussion by suggesting that more cohesion is necessary:

The Netherlands may have begun as a Republic of United Provinces, it was one republic. Many cultural identities distinguish us; the question is how one emphasises the impression of cohesion in society. How one, in short, makes citizens [staatsburgers] out of residents. (September 27 2007, De Volkskrant) (#210)

In a much more supportive discussion, J. J. A. van Doorn follows up on this line of reasoning. Van Doorn too concludes that the report and Máxima’s speech had become an occasion for further public confusion and reiteration of counterproductive conceptions of ‘our national identity’:

I have rarely read a report that offers so many new perspectives on a talked-to-death political and societal issue. [...] Yet, I fear that it will have little effect. The media are already done with it without having seriously looked at it and the public-at-large simply doesn’t understand that the report offers a pliant analytical tool with which cheap talk about ‘our national identity’ can be replaced by a more precise and effective understanding of what the current integration process requires of strangers. Quite the contrary: many [emphasis added] feel challenged to once again fantasise about ‘national identity’, whereby the report has achieved what it was intended to close down: mindless thinking in stereotypes. (October 13 2007, Trouw) (#211)

The style of popularity seems to create a very treacherous mode of discussion when it comes to arguing about ‘identification’. Far from an effective disagreement, what emerges is the almost inescapable recognition that there exists public confusion about Dutchness. In the end, prescription becomes exceedingly impossible. Neither voices arguing for the recognition of plurality nor those that call for a more articulated consensus are able to contradict the immediate pre-eminence of what the public thinks, feels and experiences.

Interestingly, what may escape this dissolution of any privileged position is precisely territoriality. Thus, even when the authority of history is enlisted for clearing up the confusion, its authority is circumscribed. As Frank Ankersmit, one of the most vocal critiques of the WRR-report, stated:

One shouldn’t look for our national identity in a certain set of general and unchanging characteristics that social scientists would distil from the behaviours of the Dutch. No, one only picks up on its trial by taking heed of the overarching line in Dutch history and what historians have said about that.

Now, historians will certainly not agree all of the time about what, for instance, the house of Orange, calvinism or WOII have meant for our country. What our identity is, isn’t fixed forever. It is always in debate. But the fact that we put our national identity up for debate, doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist. That is the error [denkfout] that princess Máxima makes.
Whoever argues like that would also have to abolish history. And all the norms and values, because we endlessly disagree about them too.

Moreover, if our identity is a product of our history than it will also change bit by bit as our country has new experiences over time. Just like we ourselves do not have the identity we had when we were younger and we will have another identity in the future. Our identity is constantly in a state of flux. (October 2 2007, *NRC Handelsblad*) (#212)

The authority of historians is not enlisted to end public disagreement nor to claim that national identity can be conclusively defined. What history does, is to bring into view the container of disagreement, the vessel within which flux happens: ‘our country’. It is in line with this argument that Ankersmit wondered whether the cover art of the WRR-report was not illustrative of errors in thinking that disabled it.44

In their response to the many criticisms of their report, specifically including those by Ankersmit, the main authors concluded:

On the cover of the report one can see a photo of a tangle of coast lines. According to Frank Ankersmit, this illustrates the confusion of the authors. In reality, these coast lines represent a historical theme: change and continuity. A perceptive reader could have discovered in them the changing contours of the Netherlands. The associated dates are mentioned at several places in the report. It illustrates that even the most physical pillar of the Dutch nationality – the land on which we live – is constantly developing. Because the Netherlands and its inhabitants will keep on changing, the debate should concern identification. In order to strengthen the connection with the Netherlands in a most practical way. (October 3 2007, *Trouw*) (#213)

**This Is Us**

We have seen what kind of trouble emerges when a style of popularity becomes a shared means of disagreement for those involved in national identity debates. I have contrasted that discursive situation to the one enacted by Huizinga. In the latter, a consistency between concept, persona and public is possible. It would seem that in contrast to Huizinga’s performance, the contemporary national identity debates are distinctly unstable, self-undermining practices as the opinions of the many come to marginalise the opinions of each, thereby nonetheless perpetuating the worry that something should be done about the incessant dissensus and the deficient identification with the Netherlands. Yet, I will end the analysis by demonstrating how the style of popularity can also be enacted in a much more felicitous manner. By which I certainly do not mean that it is in any way desirable, merely that it is performatively more robust given the stylistic demands of popularity. It turns out that a certain kind of expertise about national particularity may create for itself some stable footing. Moreover, I will show that although such

---

44 The cover-art can be viewed at: http://www.wrr.nl/fileadmin/nl/publicaties/PDF-Rapporten/Identificatie_met_Nederland.pdf (accessed 07-03-2014)
an enactment may be more felicitous in a performative sense, this does not make the style of popularity any less problematic when it comes to the citizenship politics that are involved.

In late 2010 the Dutch Centre for Folk Culture [Nederlands Centrum voor Volkskultuur] published a colourful and richly decorated book titled This is us: The 100 most important traditions of the Netherlands [Dit zijn wij: De 100 belangrijkste tradities van Nederland] (Strouken 2010). In it, Ineke Strouken, director of the Centre, delves into a hundred different items – Sinterklaas, Ramadam, Nasi – and explores the ethnological history behind them. Targeting a wide audience, the book offers readers the pleasant experience of discovering a richer world behind the familiar, the quaint and the commemorative. The display of cultural peculiarities offered in the book is studiously unthreatening and quotidian. This is us is part of a much larger body of publications. Many books of this genre exist (see in particular Enklaar 2007; Demantons 2012). The Dutch Centre for Folk Culture alone has published several of them. They all present more or less the same perspective: a national, canonical core around which a host of diverse cultural practices are assembled. The vision of us offered in these books hinges between deliberately parochial nostalgia and light-hearted openness for diversity and pop culture. Particularly interesting about This is us is how it exemplifies the style of popularity.

To understand why, we have to look at both the context and the compilation of the book. As Strouken recounts in her introduction, the book emerged alongside a number of social and political developments. First, she indicates the statements made by princess Máxima. Second, Strouken mentions the Dutch Centre preparations for the Year of Traditions [Jaar van Tradities], held in 2009, and the ratification of UNESCO’s convention on immaterial heritage preservation. At the opening of the Year of Traditions, attended by queen Beatrix, the 100 traditions featured in This is us played a prominent role.

In this context the book’s construction exemplifies in stark clarity how the daunting question ‘who are we?’ can be made answerable. The Dutch Centre for Folk Culture did not decide on a list of a hundred traditions after careful consideration of ethnological evidence. Nor did they enlist a committee of eminent historians. The list was not compiled, nor justified with reference to any disciplinary expertise. Quite the opposite. The Centre decided to poll the opinions of the Dutch population concerning their 10 most cherished traditions. The eventual list is a top-100 of the most frequently mentioned items by respondents.

---

45 see: http://www.volkscultuur.nl/winkel_6.html (accessed 07-02-2014)
This way of putting the book together isn’t hidden in small captioned end notes. It is ostensibly explained in the book’s introduction in a section titled ‘Research’. Why a poll of the Dutch population would deliver insight into Dutch nationhood is not explained. It merely states that Dutch people were asked to list 10 traditions that they deemed important.

The fact that an item is often mentioned and widely shared among the population places it higher on a ranking of traditions. The consequences of this method are striking. Although only the first hundred ‘traditions’ are included in the book, the list potentially goes on forever. There is no particular reason, other than convention and costs, to stop at a hundred. Assuming a large enough polling effort, the list would contain each and everyone’s particular preferences, even the one’s entertained by single individuals. The list featured in the book is not necessarily exhaustive at all. By following this method, the book evades any concrete delineation of what is and what is not ‘us’. There is no exclusion, only obscurity.

But if nothing is, in principle, excluded from Dutch nationhood, how can we know who ‘we’ are? The method of ranking addresses this problem by suggesting that although the list is principally all-inclusive, at least the items at the top of the ranking have to be part of Dutch culture as they recur most frequently and are shared most widely. There is no substantial difference between the items on top and down below apart from the fact that certain opinions are more widely shared. By showing which traditions are most popular, the Dutch Centre for Folk Culture is able to suggest which traditions at least merit consideration for preservation. The book itself forms an instance of such preservationist effort.

Indeed, Ineke Strouken identifies some pressing problems in her introductions. First, she is worried that many traditions are subconscious and self-evident and thus do not register in a survey of opinions: ‘That is why relatively many annual commemorations are mentioned and everyday habits far less so’ (Strouken 2010: 8) (#214). There is a clash between the transparency of popularity and the opacity of habit. Second, she remarks that certain entries in the list may not really be traditions – checking email is one of them –, because traditions are typically passed on through several generations. Lastly, the entries have a fleeting status: certain ones are on their way out – prayer before dinner –, while others have just arrived – Ramadan. Moreover, the collection of traditions becomes a ‘momentopname’, a snap-shot of popular traditions at this particular moment in time. Strouken proposes to repeat the survey at regular intervals.

Unaddressed by Strouken but just as pressing is the question whose opinions actually count. The fact that the Centre polled ‘Dutch people’ passes by self-evidently in the book explanation of its research effort: Dutchness is what
Dutch people think is important. But this means that inquiry into the national can only begin after the relevant population has been delineated in some other way. The inclusion of Ramadan or Keti Koti makes ostensibly clear that the Centre’s poll depends on a territorial delineation of the Dutch public: the poll purports to chart the opinions of all persons in the Netherlands. The poll recognises all those who find themselves within the European borders of the Dutch empire. Polling works in this context only with the help of a nativist logic: People’s opinions matter because they live ‘here’ among ‘us’. In this sense, it is rather appropriate that queen Beatrix graced the top-100 of traditions with her presence at the opening of the Year of Traditions (see Nederlands Centrum voor Volkscultuur 2008). The sovereignty associated with her appearance is what guarantees the territorial boundedness of the opinionated public.

It seems, then, that the style of popularity tends to dissolve precisely what This is us strives to grasp: a clearer vision of who ‘we’ are. The Dutch Centre for Folk Culture is in search of durable, immaterial heritage in the form of ‘traditions’, but finds them through a logic that denies the relevance of durability and habit while crutching itself on a territorial delineation of the national population. As Boltanski and Tévenot note in relation to the logic of fame: ‘celebrities can be forgotten from one day to the next’ (2006 [1991]: 178). This, of course, is precisely what Strouken and her colleagues hope to prevent. Fame itself is not up to this task.

Historical durability and habitual practice return in full force in the texts that make up the many entries of the book. Here, expertise once again regains a privileged perspective above the opinion of the residents. As Strouken explains: ‘In this book, I want to tell the stories behind the selected traditions. I’ve used the archive of the Dutch Centre for Folk Culture, the articles in the magazine Tradition [a magazine published by the Centre] and my own research…’ (2010: 8) (#215). The compilation of the book may have followed the logic of fame, but the narratives it contains seek to convey precisely what the public doesn’t yet know about itself. Fame is complimented by ethnological expertise. Even more importantly, fame is complimented by territory. Some other institution – in this case, sovereign territory – must mark off those opinions that count from those opinions that aren’t relevant. This makes it all the more interesting that Strouken sees no need to justify this background assumption: the gaps between territory, population and nation can be left unmentioned as their homology is deemed sufficiently self-evident.

On the whole, This is us present a curious combinations of logics – ethnological, popular, territorial, preservationist – in which the style of popularity plays a crucial role. Fame as a measure of worth seems to enable selection without
exclusion, partiality without discrimination, national identification without nationalist xenophobia. These vices of exclusion become nothing more than justified forgetting as the public itself has cast its judgement on which traditions deserve to be in the spot light. It seems that the style of popularity offers cultural preservationists a way out of the inevitable bifurcations between ‘us’ and ‘them’. In the logic of fame, it is not they who impose their hegemonic narrative of Dutchness, but the public itself that determines its own story. And yet, all of this can only work on the basis of territorial distinctions. Only insofar as it is self-evident where to find the opinions that make up Dutchness does this enactment of popularity gain some consistency.

While the sovereign might not be able to speak, sovereignty remains of the upmost importance as territorial divisions associated with sovereignty are what provide decisive order to a deliberately unordered, popular designation of what may be exceptionally Dutch. Attempts to enact non-exclusionary forms of Dutchness are thereby deeply dependent on territorial normativity. In a sense, territory saves the day. What persists in these enactments of nationhood is not a character or a mentality, but a territorial boundedness within which a native public imagines and re-imagines its identity. While without any constitution other than an imagined one, this public continuously performs and is presented through its exceptionalism and thereby retains the right to protect itself with whatever means it may image necessary. These attempts at non-exclusion may be said to be ‘merely’ nativist, as the sole criterion for inclusion is whether one is *here participating in the identification with the Netherlands*. Yet, even if such attempts thereby seek to escape characterological discourses positing unchanging essences that persist through history, they involve the prescription of a native public. Not only does this means that there is still a society to be defended, it also means that the narration of how the native public came to retain and regain immense significance for citizenship politics. Narration of exceptionally civic, open, liberal, pluralistic, reflexive, mutable Dutchness comes to prescribe the outer-limits and hard edges of national citizenship.