Out of character: debating Dutchness, narrating citizenship

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Out of Character: the national inflections of citizenship politics

This study set out to develop two interrelated ideas about the role of nationalism in Dutch citizenship politics. I’ll rehearse them and draw some initial conclusions after which those conclusions will be elaborated in more detail. At the heart of my conclusions is the idea that nations matter for citizenship politics because there are national inflections of citizenship politics. I’ll end in more directly normative terms by considering how alternative inflections of nationhood could come about in citizenship politics.

An ethnomethodology of inflections
What have I tried to do and what has resulted from this study? In summation, I will argue that this study has sought to analyse citizenship politics beyond the dramaturgy of inclusion. It did not seek to analyse where, when and how inclusion happens and who plays which role in the process. Rather, the aim has been to analyse the national inflections of citizenship politics. In order to do this, I prioritised how participants in such politics themselves articulate what it is they are doing. Not because self-understandings ought to be privileged, but because it was central to this study to introduce performativity into the account of how citizenship politics is done. By following how participants articulate what it is they are doing and analysing the ongoing composition of storylines about the Dutchness of citizenship in public, I tried to show how debate about national citizenship gets recursively performed. Central to this endeavour was the question to what extent and in what way citizenship came to refer to specific kinds of people – those deemed Dutch – and how it could be ascertained what that meant.

This study is very far from comprehensive. In fact, it is performed in rejection of the myriad of attempts to grasp the entirety of ‘the debate’, precisely because such comprehensiveness is itself pregnant with national pretension. As if an analysis of the ‘entire debate’ could finally disclose what is happening with ‘the Netherlands’. Indeed, this study demonstrates that such an idealised generality – to grasp the multitude of speech acts all at once – plays an immensely important role in doing Dutchness today. By focusing on the performatative aspects of debating
Dutchness I was able to better understand how nation – in this case Dutchness – matters for citizenship politics. The resultant approach reconstructs discursive formations not as well-structured frameworks, but as intensive networks that may acquire certain, recurrently performed inflections. Such an approach seeks to take very serious the problems that face participants in citizenship politics as they bump up to similar problems over and over again. Inflections are indicated by problems that won’t go away. This approach seeks to analyse how participants actually come to partially resolve and live with the problems that plague them. This approach could be summarised under the label of an ethnomethodology of national inflections.

This study performed an ethnomethodology of national identity debates as long as we not forget that in order to reconstruct even the most minute gestures and situational predicaments we have to always already be linking those gestures and situations to currents and genealogies that far outrun the bounds of interaction rituals. In fact, to even begin to conceptualise what kinds of inflections might be at play in the narrations of Dutch citizenship, I have had to constantly make broader assessments of the landscape. In a very general scope, Foucault’s sensibility about such broader currents and genealogies – which is aptly summarised by the phrase ‘society must be defended’ (2003) – served as a guide in this respect. How is it that participants of citizenship politics actually conceive of and enact such defences? I will come back to Foucault on this point a number of times throughout my concluding comments.

This study did not perform an ethnomethodology of participants’ agency, but rather demonstrated how the various methods of doing citizenship politics are constantly running in between the participants themselves and sending local agitations across the discursive milieu. As methods, the inflections of citizenship politics are trans-local and trans-personal. They are nobody’s tools of power even if they privilege some and injure others. This is precisely what makes inflections dangerous. Let’s look in some more detail how I have been performing this ethnomethodology of inflections.

First of all, as the Introduction explains, this study set out to argue for the continuities in citizenship politics that are associated with nationhood. The continuity of the nation is not merely a local myth that varies with the changing opportunities of power. Rather, participants in public story-telling rely on recognisable and habituated repertoires that could only be created through considerable performative effort and ingenuity. In this sense and this sense only, this study was an exercise in culturalism. National myth making is play, but it is never free play. At the very least, interlocutors are faced with the problem of
persuading their publics that what they are articulating is in some form or another contiguous with already existing narrations about the nation, even if forgotten, repressed or marginalised. Continuity is a persistent concern for them as nationhood is, time and again, imagined to be about perseverance. Importantly, these discursive repertoires include recurring ways to disagree and contest. There are shared means of disagreement. The mere occurrence of discord and contention turns out not to be a very good reason to assume discontinuity and change.

Secondly and more specifically, this study set out to argue that a process of inclusion into a purportedly liberal and pluralistic order not only involves confusion about what it means to ‘come in’ but is equally, if not more thoroughly disruptive for ‘being already included’. The confusion, otherwise called ‘debate’, over what it means to occupy the native, already-included position has effects of its own. I’ve used Abram de Swaan’s suggestion, explored in the introduction, as a counter-point. He contended that minorities may well be mistaking liberal-cum-pluralistic self-affirmation – ‘we have the freedom to be different’ – for recognition of their difference. De Swaan contended that the newcomer need not be recognised at all, she is merely granted ‘our’ civic liberty to be different. De Swaan speaks self-assuredly from the included position. This leaves unquestioned who is actually included and able to grant such liberty. Instead of reconstructing the confusion and surprise of any one group – thereby attributing said group a prefixed role in the dramaturgy of inclusion – this study has set out to reconstruct the way in which national inclusion is argued about and discursively made into an issue. De Swaan articulates his suggestion from a firm disbelieve in civilisational relativism – critiques of the West are always already deploying the intellectual tools of the West – and thus positions himself and his public at the heart of a liberal-cum-pluralistic order: ‘do the newcomers really know what’s coming to them?’ A very different line of inquiry is opened when we, somewhat defiantly, turn the tables on De Swaan’s questioning: ‘how do the natives know what constitutes their nativity?’ In this line of inquiry prefixed roles of native and newcomer are no longer of primary significance. This study therefore sought to go beyond the dramaturgy of inclusion with its particular enrolments and expectations. It is no longer a question of how well the host includes and how well the newcomer settles in. Or, for that matter, how well the privileged exclude and how well the disadvantaged usurp.

A perspective that moves away from enrolled groups and their performance indicators obscures just as much as it opens up. In no way do I want to claim that it provides a better survey of the landscape. For one, it cannot adequately show the extent to which people are or are not included – however that is defined – as it is precisely the ways in which national inclusion is narrated that forms the focus of
the inquiry. Nor is it possible to critique and contest the enduring power differentials and their related forms of domination and exclusion. Yet, by opening up the question of nativity it is possible to see how the struggle over and confusion about nationhood is actually performed and how discursive repertoires that are formed and deployed in these confrontations inflect the politics of citizenship. In this respect, the study set out to show how a liberal and pluralistic narration of ‘we-the-included’ was both reiterated and continued in citizenship politics while at once becoming the occasion for the enactment of disruptive changes and, thus, the opportunity for a further deepening of conditional citizenship.

So, while it is quite hard to actually find the supposedly qualitative discontinuities in the significances of Dutchness for the governance of citizenship, rupture is of the utmost significance. Not because narrations of Dutch citizenship underwent some qualitative shift in the recent decades, but because rupture has become a crucial gesture in the ways in which participants of citizenship politics are able to enact their disagreements. To wit, narrations of Dutch citizenship did change in a significant way throughout the period under investigation, namely in that change has become a more and more important spectre of it. As such, coming up with recognisably novel ways of speaking about citizenship and introducing new policy measures became highly significant. Even if those ways of speaking reiterate the scene of liberal-cum-pluralistic inclusion and policy measures further deepen the conditionality of citizenship, the enactments of change ought not to be conceived as mere illusions that hide from view the more basic rigidity of a national citizenship regime that is deterministically reproduced to exclude the excluded. As will be discussed, there are no national models of citizenship that structure what national citizenship is or can become. Nations matter, but not by modelling citizenship.

As this study presumes to demonstrate, enactments of change are complex achievements that are hard, if not impossible to perform strategically or in isolation. In many instances, it was explored how entire ensembles of performative flow actually mattered most. In chapter 5, the elaboration of dialogical Dutchness was reconstructed in this way, while chapter 4 saw the exploration of a post-racist consensus. Even the moments of reaction (chapter 6), authored by Scheffer and Fortuyn, could only take place along the performative flow. Moreover, enactments of change have tended to involve quite particular projections of what ‘real’ change looks like. Most poignantly, it came to involve the spectre of more pronounced, explicit, outspoken, coherent, persuasive, evocative and instructive imaginations of Dutchness through the liberal-cum-pluralistic conduit of public debate and expression. As both chapter 4 and chapter 5 demonstrate, this reflexive move –
‘let’s stage a national debate about national identity’ – cannot be understood without the historical and contemporary context of characterology and racism.

Projections of change are therefore far from a mere smokescreen for a more basic model of citizenship. By emphasising the importance of continuity – against the diagnoses of sudden transformation – I do not want to claim that Dutch citizenship is actually pre-figured in a certain way. As if the model of Dutch citizenship is obscured by attention grabbing and ephemeral gestures of merely symbolic politics, or what in Dutch parlance is deflatingly called *symboolpolitiek*. The reason for focusing on continuity is precisely the opposite. Only when we appreciate the significance of various gestures of change for the continuing narration of a liberal-cum-pluralistic exceptionalism do we better understand how political and governmental avenues were opened up. As long as one merely focuses on the supposedly non-symbolic, institutionalised aspects of citizenship – laws, policies, regulations, outputs and outcomes – will it be possible to suggest that ‘Dutch citizenship’ has changed from x – ‘multiculturalism’, ‘accommodation’, ‘pragmatism’, ‘racism’, ‘paternalism’, etc. – to y – ‘monoculturalism’, ‘assimilationism’, ‘culturism’, ‘nativism’, ‘neoliberalism’, etc. The aggregate to which such qualifiers refer, will nonetheless remain out of play: it is always the self-same nation-state. Even if such an approach concludes that Dutch citizenship has been radically transformed, this conclusion pertains to an entity that itself plays no role in our understanding. It figures in our accounts as a mute prop staring back at us without moving a muscle: Dutchness.

When we include the public narrations of Dutch citizenship, and particularly the disagreements about Dutchness, into our accounts we find that diagnoses of change play roles in the continuation of certain discursive repertoires. Far from keeping the institutional structure of citizenship stable, such continuations play a crucial role in creating discursive opportunities and political cleavages in very particular directions: (1) the justification of increasingly repressive and selective border management, which all too often go far beyond the bounds of legality and dignity, by questioning the moral equipment and thus deservedness of those moving across borders (Vermeulen 2007; Dijstelbloem & Meijer 2011; Bonjour et al. 2011; Groenendijk 2011; Suvarierol 2012; Van Oers 2013; Vink & Bauböck 2013; Van Houdt 2014) (2) the differentiation and erosion of citizenship itself into imbricated hierarchies of belonging and being properly ‘at home’ by questioning the moral equipment and thus deservedness of those who reside among ‘us’ (Duyvendak 2011; Schinkel 2013; Paulle & Kalir 2013; Schinkel & Van Houdt 2010; Hurenkamp et al. 2011; Uitermark 2013). On the whole, the performative effect of change has been to enable an intensified territorial and civic *bordering.*
The movement is one of shrinking and barricading the national citizenry from outsiders that are not or are not yet ‘like us’.

Change came to mean articulating borders and protective defences around the liberal-cum-pluralistic homeland and its natives. The emerging significance of change need not have yielded these performative effects. Change might have become the enactment of a different tendency in citizenship politics. Change might have revolved around the issues of colonialism, neoliberalism, racism or mobility. It revolved, however, around the Dutchness of citizenship. Thus, it is quite significant how enactments of change took place and what came to count as change. Moreover, this perspective provides some hope for the future as change might be enacted in ways that counteract, contradict and delegitimate the intensified bordering of national community, while projecting alternative spectres of what ought to radically change in Dutch citizenship and what will have to be done to achieve that. Such insurgent acts of citizenship (Holston 2009) will then be effective, at least in part, because they continue an already established repertoire – advocating change –, albeit in surprisingly new ways.

As it became increasingly significant to explicate publicly what constitutes the nativity of the natives and such public evocations became crucial occasions for projecting notions of what ‘real’ change might be, it was the spectre of Dutchness and more specifically Dutchness-as-a-public-problem that came to inflect citizenship politics. Its emergence was explored in chapter 4 against the backdrop of characterology. Thus, this study focuses on how participants in national identity debates were able to narrate citizenship and, crucially, what kinds of disagreement they were able to stage by doing so. This study thereby engages with public discourses on Dutchness in a very specific way. It does not seek to analyse such discourse as the container of a master code, revealing a politico-cultural script or enforcing a hegemonic logic. Of course, the empirical chapters give rise to the conclusion that there is in fact such an overriding significance of Dutchness. Yet, that ought to be understood as the effect of studying discourses on Dutchness in very particular settings and in view of very particular issues. Now, it may be true that there is, for those settings and issues, a dominant way of articulating Dutchness. I can’t say that this study presents much to contradict that overall conclusion, which may well be one of its limitations. However, the aim of the analysis lies not in demonstrating discursive hegemony – for that goal the counter-hegemonies have not been considered to any adequate extent –, but in reconstructing the enactments of discursive repertoires and thereby demonstrating the importance of performative creativity and re-iteration (see also Bell 2007: 36). It seeks to envision the field of struggle in a state of play and practice, while never
being completely agnostic about it also being in a state of domination and violence. The aim is to understand better how concerns over Dutchness might have inflected citizenship politics, thereby constituting one piece in a larger puzzle, not providing the overriding answer to the question what Dutch citizenship actually is or has become. In fact, this study seeks to demonstrate that answering such a question is not a responsibility of research at all.

The indulgence with which this study analyses, at times, rather minute and particular discursive exchanges and situations should be understood in this light. Cases and materials were selected and enlarged because they aid in reconstructing a string of concerns in debates about Dutchness that pull into focus the methods of particularising what is at once universal: citizenship. That is, they help explain how and why this particular context is made to be different from others in Europe and beyond. As such, the study seeks to add its piece to the puzzle of how to understand the dynamics of national citizenship politics by suggesting that participants in such politics are very often intently engaged in nationally particularising it and that this engagement has its proper performative effects. It has such effects not necessarily or even primarily because there is one, overriding meaning to national citizenship that can be imposed by powerful players, but because struggle over how nation and citizenship are to be entangled draws participants into specifically articulated issues and problems that come to mutually inflect their antagonisms.

Finally, this study reconstructs the national inflection of citizenship politics by considering national identity debates against the historical backdrop of characterological discourses. It is against this backdrop that I have tried to show how disagreements over Dutchness acquired new tendencies. The recurring motif in these tendencies is the way in which an imagining public is articulated to be the very agent of national determination. That is: it is in public and through publicity that Dutchness is to be found. In its most banal form, it means that Dutchness is what the Dutch imagine to be Dutch. What seems in many ways a conversation stopper turned out to be the very opposite: it is a conversation machine. In fact, this emerging public imaginary of Dutchness, what in chapter 5 I have dubbed dialogical Dutchness, resonates with and re-articulates well-established typifications of Dutchness, while also hugely inflating the importance of public debates about national identity as they become the pre-eminent locus of national imagination.

Not character but identity: how change was done
A crucial impetus for the formation of national identity debates is the confrontation with race and racism in the 1970’s and early ‘80 as explored in chapter 4.
expressed anxieties over race and racism dislocate Dutchness – it may not be what it seems to be – as the confrontation with native racism is said to reveal the Dutch to be out of character: ‘Is self-image merely self-deceit? It is not Dutch to be racist, yet there seems to be racism in Dutch society. How then should images of nationhood be appreciated?’ Race and racism either became articulated as a pressing cultural taboo that ought to be lifted or a backward behaviour by specific persons that ought to be banned. Within these discourses, we see the gradual yet faithful swap of ‘character’ for ‘identity’ (see also Van Ginkel 1999). I’ve argued that this swap indicates much more than window dressing. It is accompanied and made possible by the emergence of new ways in which nationhood is articulated and disagreed about. The move out of character and towards an identitarian discourse is both a rejection of essentialist and particularly racial-somatic difference for nationhood, while also the configuration of a discourse in which character, race and racism are constitutively null and void. Such essentialist differences, not in need of identitarian imagination to be real, become deliberately other to what can be said about the nation in its identitarian instance: it is what the public imagines, remembers, contends, declares or responds to. It is public-ness itself.

Race and racism have thereby been rejected in citizenship politics in a very limited sense: they have been severed from the issue (see also Uitermark 2012; Essed & Nimako 2006; Bosma 2013; Boehmer & Gouda 2012; Jones 2012; Romeyn 2014; Weiner 2014). With respect to national citizenship the discussion was foreclosed: ‘we’ are not or ought not be racist. For a while, it was particularly Hans Janmaat and his CP (later CD) that was placed in the position of extra-civil racism – not like ‘us’ – and enabled boundary drawing around a post-racist, civilised society. As the analysis of the new constitution of 1983 showed, this boundary drawing was all but stable. For one, it was and is markedly unclear whether civil society ought to recognise race and the unjust discrimination on its basis or, conversely, that it ought to reject that unjust discriminations of racism.

The confrontation with race and racism was managed through a race/culture distinction that even Janmaat used to articulate his position: the problem is not idle or illusionary race locked in the body, but the dynamic and causally weighty culture, determining one’s ‘life rhythm’ – as Janmaat called it – or capacity to succeed in a modern society of morally autonomous persons. As demonstrated in chapter 5, in place of a confrontation over race and racism a public imaginary of dialogical Dutchness was configured and national identity debates were thereby taken to be both demonstrative of the liberality and pluralism of Dutchness, while at once suggesting that the Dutch are not in agreement about what they imagine
Dutchness to be. Thus, the move out of character is a potent and evocative conversation machine: the nation must be debated.

It is in these debates and with reference to these debates that participants of citizenship politics can begin to perform their diagnosis of governmental failure and subsequent enactments of change (Van Reekum & Duyvendak 2012). What have ‘we’ done to make inclusion a failure and how do ‘we’ need to change in order to include more successfully? Public dissensus over Dutchness is thereby the premise of change – something ought to be done –, while at once figuring as exemplar for what ought to be defended – our liberalty and pluralism. What ‘failure’ and ‘change’ actually entailed in a variety of policy fields and what proponents of such change were able to implement is well beyond the purview of this discursive analysis (see Duyvendak et al. 2013; Vermeulen 2007; Vink & Bauböck 2013). Policy changes have been varied, mutually incoherent and, in some cases, mainly symbolic. Yet, the fact that national inflection does not directly predict the institutional re-arrangement of citizenship does not mean that it is insignificant. National inflection does not affect citizenship politics by imposing a so-called national model onto policies and legal regulations as if there can be a point-for-point correspondence between policies and a nationally subscribed philosophy of citizenship. In fact, philosophies of citizenship and national models are discussed and conceptualised by participants in citizenship politics precisely because there is incessant disagreement over what follows out of them in terms of policies and legal regulations (Bertossi 2011; Van Reekum et al. 2012).

National context does matter, but not in terms of a model, philosophy or political culture. It matters, because participants in citizenship politics are bent on nationally particularising said politics: they engage with it by problematising how and why ‘we’ have failed to do better and which national attributes will enable success. They seek to justify their positions with reference to and by deploying discourses about nationhood. Thus, national inflection effects the creation of discursive opportunities for those seeking to stage issues and grievances. In other words: National context matters through the configuration of particularly inflected disagreements. So while much of the national identity debates involve complex exchanges over the nature of national culture, patriotism, solidarity, integration and belonging, the main policy effects ought to be sought in the fields of border control, migration, crime and welfare reform. It is there that the ongoing public dissensus over what makes the natives native have yielded openings and opportunities for the introduction of repressive and corrective measures through the assessment and cultivation of the moral equipment in citizens, denizens and migrants. It is there that the public envisioning of territorial and civic borders have
been most extensively translated into governmental practices of bordering and exclusion.

This also means that we ought to include in our analysis of boundary work not only the complex interactions between symbolic and social boundaries (Lamont & Molnár 2002; Pachucki et al. 2007), but precisely those modes of boundary work that seek and make divisions outside of the interplay between the symbolic and the social. That is, the struggle over symbolic boundaries, so prominent in this study, may very well create opportunities and avenues for boundary making that are neither symbolic nor social. Bordering, conceived in this sense, indicates precisely those (governmental) practices that seek to police and resolve the confusing interplay between symbolic and social boundaries by re-enforcing demographic and spatial divides in the hope that such division may be less ambiguous, by seeking certain deterministic fixes for the contentiousness of citizenship. Such hope is vested in the bureaucratic administration of civic status, thereby creating demographic facts about the state of Dutch society and its integration (Yanow & Van der Haar 2013; Schinkel 2013; Boersema & Schinkel forthcoming). Also, hope is vested in the ever more vigilant surveillance and control over spatial borders in order to see plainly who can and cannot enter the native ground. Boundary work, here, is neither symbolic nor social, but rather concerns the development of monitoring and control, of seeing and grasping divisions ‘out there’ in the world. They are attempts at ‘materialising’ social and symbolic boundaries into natural divisions that can be monitored and observed by neutral experts and officials.

While we may be well aware that such materialisations of boundaries yield anything but unambiguous divisions (Bowker & Star 1999; Hacking 2007), we ought not to reduce these attempts at materialisation to the power of social groups to instate their preferred distinctions. Technologies of administration and border control are not the play things of the establishment. Rather, such bordering practices constitute a third pole, both effected by and effective for symbolic and social boundaries making. In any event, the persistent notion that national identity lacked in symbolic clarity – whatever its proper appearance was deemed to be – has thereby created openings to step up and intensify the bordering of national boundaries as such bordering evokes the promise of less ambiguity.

**Instruments of Dutchness**

Inflected by debates about Dutchness – and not, for instance, racism or mobility – projections of change tend to involve the assertion that Dutchness lacks in consensual imagination, in part by referring to the contentiousness of the issue, and relating this lack to the failure of integration and migration policies, a failure that is
eventually branded as the now infamous, pan-European ‘failure of multiculturalism’ (cf. Alexander 2013; Lentin & Titey 2011). Measures are then proposed that ought to enable the natives, and consequently the newcomers, to more coherently and explicitly imagine what it means to be Dutch and identify with the nation. Those proposals, however, have almost invariably as their motif the principle that natives ought to be able to figure out for themselves what that means and that this moral capacity is precisely what exemplifies nativity. ‘We’ are free to be different and such liberal difference constitutes ‘our’ exceptionalism. Newcomers are still to acquire this individualistic moral autonomy and self-assertive disdain for imposed morality. In other words, what tends to be proposed in place of an all-too-liberal-cum-pluralist conception of Dutchness, which is deemed to have prevented the development of effective integration and migration policies, is a liberal-cum-pluralist projection of Dutchness, as the exceptional hallmark of native moral capacity. It is this dynamic that we saw in the case of civic enculturation (chapter 7) and the historical canon (chapter 8).

This means, first of all, that any imposition of Dutchness falls necessarily to the side of the not-yet-Dutch as the capacity to live morally without the imposed guidance of others is precisely what qualifies nativity. If natives claim that they no longer feel at home because of diversity and migration, they thereby do not qualify for a mandatory civic enculturation course to assess their identification with and loyalty to a liberal-cum-pluralistic nation. Their dis-identification never removes them from themselves. In terms of enculturation, natives have nothing to do. Natives are already free to be what they choose to be and their difference from other natives is never the same kind of difference as that of the not-yet-Dutch. Enactments of change tend to reiterate a liberal-cum-pluralistic exceptionalism for the native public. One wonders what citizenship politics would look like if it was actually about what citizens are hoping to do instead of the static imagination of an always-already exceptional person.

Secondly, the very fact that projections of change evoke concerns that such changes are antithetic to ‘our’ liberal-cum-pluralistic identity demonstrate publicly – where it matters most – that the Dutch are still not in accord over the Dutchness of citizenship. What’s more, critical reactions to the enactments of change, often associating them with political persona such as Bolkestein, Scheffer, Fortuyn, Balkenende or Verdonk, tend to reiterate rather than contradict the nativity of liberality and pluralism as they concur that the ‘neonationalism’, ‘xenophobia’, ‘populism’ and ‘intolerance’ constitute a sea change for Dutch citizenship politics. Oppositional voices can be remarkably nostalgic: ‘we are no longer who we once
were…liberal and pluralistic.’ And so, progressivist nostalgia becomes implicated in the performance of enduring identity crisis.

The crucial means of disagreement in this conversation machine is, again and again, the notion that Dutchness is what the Dutch deem to be Dutch, that the prerogative is with the native public itself. Consequently, becoming Dutch entails the active participation in this individualised and variegated imagination of Dutchness. As we’ve seen, this means that Dutchness is effectively sought and found within the public debates about it. It also means that the notion of a native public is of the upmost importance. It implies that insofar as there is a public that actively imagines its nativity as evidenced by the public prominence of national identity debates and the electoral support for new assimilationist politics, there ought to be governmental efforts to protect and cultivate that nativity. What ought to be protected and cultivated is precisely public-ness, namely those capacities that enable natives to publicly – freely and diversely – entertain identifications with Dutchness. Herein also lay the performative limits of Dutchness: the native public cannot be contradicted.

We’ve seen the notion of native public at stake in both debates over civic enculturation policies and the historical canon. In the former (chapter 7), the native public is an audience as the assessments and judgements of enculturation policy do not pertain to it but are performed for it. In no way does the ensuing ridicule of and dissensus over civic enculturation detract from the claims made by ‘new assimilationists’ such as Verdonk. The capacity to ridicule and disagree with impositions of Dutchness, i.e. mandatory enculturation courses, are precisely what constitute the nativity of the public to whom the test of enculturation, already for that reason, does not apply. The malleability of the natives is re-iterated and this malleability is at the forefront of what the civic enculturation tests are set up to assess: the capacity of the aspirant resident-cum-citizen to actively reform their commitments before one is granted rights and recognitions. Civic enculturation tests do not so much assess whether one is the right kind of person, but whether one has the capacity to become the right kind of person while rights or social assistance are still withhold from you (see also Mezzadra & Neilson 2013: 115).

As has been remarked upon extensively, Dutch citizenship – burgerschap – is almost always called forth and discussed as a moral capacity (Van Houdt 2014; Van Gunsteren 2008; Hurenkamp & Tonkens 2011; Dekker & De Hart 2005; Schinkel 2010; Kloek & Tilmans 2002; Aerts & Te Velde 1998; De Haan 1993). The politics of and debates over civic enculturation aren’t significantly different, nor is the moral conception of citizenship in any way an innovation of post-2000 claims for cultural adaptation. The push for cultural adaptation is itself not
insignificant. It is yet another enactment of change that performatively enabled the deepening contractualisation of citizenship that was part of the program from its inception in the early 1990’s. The idea that mandatory tests would attend to the anxieties of a native audience was not a post-2000 invention but already articulated by previous proponents of the program. The fact that after 2002 ostensibly ‘cultural’ elements were added to the test only implies ‘a turn to culture’ in a very specific sense: it is argued that the native public has called for cultural adaptation through a ‘civic revolt’ and because it has called for it, it ought to be done. ‘Cultural adaptation’ is here still a pedant of the native public, not a project of cultural ennoblement onto the national population as a whole. Couwenberg is still waiting for his revival of cultural Dutchness. The post-2002 civic enculturation program is a practice of bordering through ostensibly cultural demands, not the border outpost of a national education in culture. To stress once more: in no sense do the courses and tests pertain to the ways in which natives imagine and articulate their Dutchness.

This latter point can be given even more force when we compare the contestations over civic enculturation to those over the historical canon (chapter 8). When it comes to the education of the native public itself, the rules of the game are remarkably different. First of all, at no point is it relevant to withhold rights, recognitions or assistance. Rather, what the canon – already in its pre-2002 iterations – should do, is to amend, broaden and solidify the imaginative capacities of the native public. It is there, in stark contrast to enculturation courses, to help the native public in its imaginative exploits. Again, this program is a pendant of the native public: it is taken up by government because there is a native public that seeks and merits aid in the imagination of nationhood. The project of the historical canon is also ‘changed’ after 2002. Where civic enculturation was renewed by a self-proclaimed ‘new assimilationism’ the historical canon is promoted through a ‘neo-patriotism’ as a follow-up to the ‘civil nationalism’ of the 1990’s. Across the public contention over the canon there is a re-iteration of the notion that debate, a to-and-fro of public responses, ought to be the conduit of canon formation.

Debate justifies the project by demonstrating a native public in need of imaginative aid. Debate forms it by openly and freely bringing in a myriad of elements. Debate evaluates it by critically responding and suggesting amendments. Debate fulfils it as the canon becomes the centre of a debate, which doesn’t need to be resolved, and has thus made the imaginations of the native public more audible. The canon is said to track a ‘ground tempo’ for those who are ‘here’ and ‘now’. Along this process, the native public appears exceptionally free and differentiated and yet these attributes never undermine the idea of a historical canon for ‘us’. At
best, they help justify the project as they appear to distinguish it from what is resolutely and routinely rejected: imposed nationalism. History, then, is all important: national citizenship and the right to speak on it is articulated as the privilege of those who have been ‘here’ and were part of a history of encompassment. Yet, history derives this significance from the native public, ‘here-and-now’, imagining and remembering itself thus. As the canon commission declares: it is not the anachronistic idea that ‘the Netherlands’ has persisted through history as an essentially self-same entity that matters, but the way in which ‘we’ today imagine and debate over the history of the ‘region’ that is now called the Netherlands. If a ground tempo indicates native temporality, region indicates native territoriality. This territorial ground is crucial as it provides a guarantee that the native public does indeed have boundaries outside of its imagination, namely in relation to allochthonous newcomers who have not been here in this region. So although it need not be clear where territorial boundaries are to be drawn at any one point, it is certainly the case that such boundaries are to be drawn, that a native public can claim the right to speak about the history of a region. So although Dutch citizenship has been predominantly institutionalised through jus sanguinis and complimented with jus soli elements (Heijs 1995; Vermeulen 2007), territoriality plays crucial roles in its own right as the Dutchness of citizenship is narrated and re-narrated through distinctly territorial story-lines: ‘we’ imagine to have been ‘here’ and thus claim the right to speak from the position of the natives and treat those associated with non-native descent as newcomers not-yet-included in this encompassing public-ness.

This narrative of what it means to be included works through a logic of fame. Nativity is not given by empathy (spiritual worth), sovereign decree (domestic worth) or mechanistic expertise (industrial worth). Instead, the many, the public, the majority have worth. It is the congruence of many that ensures the nativity of some. Contradicting fame, and more specifically contradicting the public’s concern for nativity, is quite hard to do as long as one also seeks to speak for everyone. This is the performative trouble that was analysed in relation to Maxima’s speech. Whether on the basis of scientific expertise, national solidarity or sovereignty, Maxima contradicted the native public. Not because she seemed to be remobilising a defunct relativism about Dutchness, but because she apparently presumed to be able to know better than the native public. Within the logic of fame knowing better is all but impossible. Of course, one can take up a particular position and compete for attention, but only by relinquishing the presumption to speak for everyone. It is only particularistic positions – ‘we fight against the leftists church’ – that can gain the momentary gloss of universality. The presumption of
civic universality – ‘couldn’t we all agree that…’ – is precisely what demonstrates hypocrisy and deception. The right-conservative voices in citizenship politics have been far more successful in making their particularistic positions count as universal precisely by speaking of and for a particular constituency: the ‘normal, hardworking Dutch citizen’ concerned for her nativity (see also Oudenaampsen 2010; Pels 2011).

Finally, it is possible to know better within a logic of fame, namely through the technique of polling. Polls give the native public to itself and thus set up hierarchies of fame that prioritise, ostensibly without exclusion. Polls merely construct obscurity. Yet, as in the cases of civic enculturation and the historical canon, the polling of fame works only in relation to territorial borders that mark where native freedom-cum-difference ends and the other’s difference begins. The polling of fame is a matter of bordering nonetheless. The native public, which knows itself through fame, is thereby deeply dependent on territorial borders. Its propensity for relativism – Dutch is what is deemed Dutch – is used time and again as a justification for an ever more vigilant protection of its borders. The style of popularity, moreover, is hardly suitable for articulating what the nation is still to achieve, to become, to hope and long for. It is rhetorically disabled for the assignment of public challenges in the future and overly endowed with organs of alarmist exclamation.

**Particularising comparisons: from models to inflections**

The politics of citizenship, migration and diversity has been intensively studied in the last twenty years. Particularly in Europe, the emerging literature has been concerned with distinct national pathways along which a variety of states have sought to cope with cross-border mobility, deepening diversity and intensifying political contention over citizenship in the face of difference (e.g. Schnapper 1994; Bauböck et al. 1996; Favell 1998b; Koopmans et al. 2005; Goodman 2010). Many of these studies, even if comparative, suffered from methodological nationalism as they were set up to compare tautological compacts of nation, state and citizenry. What such studies don’t do and indeed cannot do, is to study the very politics of entangling these notions. In its most problematic form, this meant that ‘countries’ were associated with ‘models’ wholesale and different outcomes of politics and policy were attributed to the ‘model’ that a ‘country’ was deemed to be following. Together with Duyvendak and Bertossi, I have tried to explain why we think this research strategy is wrong-headed (Van Reekum et al. 2012). The crux of that argument was that ‘models’ are constantly contested and critiqued within citizenship politics (see also Duyvendak et al. 2011). Ergo, there is never only a
struggle going on between ‘models’ but also always a struggle over ‘models’ (Bader 2007). Here, imaginaries of nationhood play a major role as they are used in arguments over what ‘our’ model of integration and citizenship actually entails and demands. This study has demonstrated it quite clearly: it is not so much a struggle between different images of the nation that matters but disagreements about what the liberal-cum-pluralistic imagination of the nation may demand of ‘us’.

Much research seeks to analyse change over time and differences between national contexts in terms of the movement of ‘countries’ along stable dimensions between different models: from multiculturalism to monoculturalism, from civic nationalism to ethnic nationalism, etc. This approach leaves out the very real and very consequential struggles over the sense and non-sense of these very dimensions. What does our civic nationalism demand of ‘us’? This dimensional approach is chosen, of course, in order to perform an objectivist reconstruction of what is happening to citizenship. Yet, as long as such research does not take into account how citizenship politics is contextually inflected, it cannot help but objectify citizenship to the point of reification and takes for granted precisely what it ought to study: the contestedness of citizenship (cf. Koopmans et al. 2005). Beyond legal frameworks, policies and their practical implementations, we ought to study the enactment of citizenship (Isin & Neilson 2008). Looking at public discourse and its enactments is one way, among many, of doing that.

If categorising will always tend to slip into more or less sophisticated forms of methodological nationalism, we might conclude that the dangers of tautology are a necessary evil. There will always be a pragmatic need for labels or typologies which sort out nations-as-wholes, and thus tend to reproduce the myth of integrity. However, we might also invoke Charles Tilly’s approach to comparative research. Tilly distinguishes four modes of comparison – variation-finding, universalising, encompassing and individualising – that all have their uses in the study of social relations (Tilly 1984: 81). Much academic controversy stems from a lacking appreciation of each. From the perspective of variation-finding – often with the aim of variation-explaining – the arguments and objections that come out of individualising analysis inevitably seem wrong-headed or worse: unsystematic. From this standpoint those arguments and objections seem to boil down to one, banal yet unproductive edict: everything is unique, nothing can be compared. But the fact that individualising comparisons seek to identity what is individual only seems like the end of all comparison from the standpoint of generalisation. In reality, individualising analysis forms an equal-but-different mode of comparison. Moreover, individualising comparisons can help to correct,
counterbalance and qualify the generalisations of variation-finding. There are tasks for which individualising comparisons are rather well-suited.

In a nutshell, individualising comparisons seeks to identify what is particular, what is immanent to a context in juxtaposition with other cases. Yet, in the context of national citizenship this approach does not to describe an individual. Here, the term individual is rather unfortunate as it is precisely the idea of nation-as-individual – comparable along generalised dimensions of difference – that we want to avoid. What we are looking for is not individuality as compared to other cases, but particularity as juxtaposed to other contexts. This also means that we are not looking for those characteristics that make particular cases different from all others. Although individualising comparisons often lead to conclusions that are irreducible to generalised categorisation, this is not the main goal. The point is not to suggest that each case, when looked at long and hard enough, becomes an irreducible moment in history and cannot be compared. Rather, one seeks to understand how the particularity of a case is sustained. Which kinds of inflections enable participants to particularise their narrations of citizenship? What kind of work goes into the on-going particularisation of a national context? What is it that goes into making national citizenship national? This may very well include processes that are also present in other cases and, thus, not lead to the banal conclusion that each case is a unique, incomparable individual. Particularising comparison seems a better term for this kind of research.

So what would it mean to compare particularities, as developed above? It should be quite clear that such national inflections cannot serve to attribute certain characteristics to different cases. In fact, they describe ways of doing just that. Nor do particular inflections render particular cases unique and incomparable. In fact, many of the inflections describes above can also been reconstructed in other contexts. Comparison is, here, not a way to unpack variation into a set of constituent ingredients. Rather, comparison can be used to juxtapose ways in which participants succeed, more or less, to particularise and what tendencies can be associated with these particularities. It is therefore imperative to reconstruct inflections not in terms of ‘ideas’ or ‘assumptions’ but through problematics, as it is precisely because certain disagreements persist in certain ways that citizenship politics is inflected. Tendencies do not derive from certain deeply embedded truths so much as they get worked up through perpetual confusion over certain problems.

This study has developed at least three problematics through which the particularity of the Dutch context is sustained, through which national inflections performatively affect citizenship politics.
The problematic of post-racism

To be sure, identifying a problematic of post-racism in relation to national particularity does not suggest that race, racial differentiation and racism are of little significance for understanding Dutch citizenship politics. It is precisely the opposite: because the idea of post-racism – an image of a polity which has left or is on its way in leaving the horrors of racial domination behind – looms so large in narrations of Dutchness, an understanding of racial signification is indispensable (Lentin 2011). What will not work, however, is to evoke the mirror image of a post-racist imaginary by suggesting that much of the apprehension towards addressing race and racism in public debate is basically a slight-of-hand in which ‘race’ is more or less cleverly masked by ‘culture’, ‘ethnicity’, ‘religion’ or ‘the other’. As if beneath layers of conversational propriety lays racism nonetheless and slips of the tong can be heard everywhere if one knows how to listen. Such propriety and slips of the tong exist, to be sure, but the problematic of post-racism, with which participants of debates have been continuously confronted, is far more bewildering that the question how to speak correctly about race and racism. If ‘we’ are or should be post-racist, the accusation of racism is – far worse than public criticism – effectively a form of symbolic expulsion. When and how is such a punishment justified? How can ‘we’ stipulate the appropriate consequences? The well-argued reasons to apply the notion of racism beyond those somatic and colour-coded differences that have come to dominate understandings of ‘races’ to include cultural, aesthetic and geopolitical differences have not made the problem of post-racism any easier to cope with. They increase the amount of potential perpetrators, sometimes indefinitely. If ‘we’ are post-racist, anyone can fall out of the national community through the act of perpetrating racism, even or especially those who imagined themselves to stand firmly at its centre.

The historically weak organisation of white nationalist movements (Donselaar 1991), the complex yet undeniable inclusion of colonial subjects in the national community during the episodes of decolonisation (Schuster 1999; Jones 2007; Jacobs 2000), the specific memorialisation of WOII (De Haan 2008b; Van Ginkel 2011), the eventually widely espoused rejection and denial of racism by public representatives and the very marginal role of antiracist mobilisation in the Dutch public sphere (Van Dijk 1992; Essed & Nimako 2006; Uitermark 2012; Weiner 2014) seem to have reinforced each other, relegating race and racism to a marginal role in citizenship politics. In lieu of this historical legacy, the imaginary of post-racism has meant that public debate over citizenship has inflected away from a veritable struggle over race and racism and towards a supposedly non-racial language of ‘minorities’, ‘identities’, ‘cultures’, ‘ethnicities’, ‘allochthones’ and
‘religions’ (Guiraudon et al. 2005; De Zwart 2005, 2012). Alas, much of what is deeply problematic in racial imaginaries – most poignantly, the self-evidence with which group boundaries are assumed to be given and given a name – persists. In fact, the givenness of groups was hard-wired into the policy idiom and data registration systems with which the networks of researchers, policy makers and public administrators approached the increasingly problematised issue of integration (Geschiere 2009; Yanow & Van der Haar 2013; Paule & Kalir 2013). The problematic of immutable and given group differences has thereby not gone away, while ‘racism’ became a deeply problematic attribution (see Fennema 2000; Vuijsje 1997).

Precisely because of the shift towards an ostentatiously non-racial discourse and set of issues – religion being the most important one (Van der Veer 1995) – it has been far more complicated to delegitimise anti-immigrant and neonationalist politics in the Dutch public sphere. The post-racist imagination of Dutchness has thereby contributed to the emergence of anti-antiracism: the notion that the more acute problem is not racism – conceived as withering backwardness – but, in fact, antiracism itself as it muffles public speech about groups and ‘their’ problems (Prins 2004). A frank and open debate would purportedly serve newcomers much better.

We may say that the national particularity of post-racism lies in its regulation of public speech: while statements deemed racist have become strongly rejected, issues of diversity became more and more articulated in an ostensibly non-racial language in which it became progressively harder to address the problems of assuming immutable and given group differences. The straightforward sociological truth that group differences are never given and immutable became for all practical purposes almost unutterable in public debates. For instance, stating that there is no such thing as ‘the Muslims’ came under critique as relativistic denial of concerns over religious difference. One of the consequences of this national inflection is that cultural assimilation – the idea that people can only be part of society by taking over specific norms and values – could more easily be presented as the self-evident horizon of citizenship policies having nothing whatsoever to do with racism.

The problematic of plurality

If ever there was a narrative cliché about the particularity of Dutch citizenship, it is given by the enduring spectre of pillarisation. The segmentation, paternalist representation and political coordination of a pillarised polity is, even to this day, an important interpretative frame for speaking about and understanding the
particular way in which Dutch citizenship is related to moral, religious and cultural plurality (Van Dam 2011). That being said, the legacy of pillarisation has been contested almost as soon as it had been articulated (Kruijt & Goddijn 1961; Thurlings 1971). What matters, then, is pillarisation’s contestedness.

Although it is true that participants in public debate played around with the notion of new pillarisation in lieu of new diversity (Schover 2010), such prospections were and are rarely meant as celebrations of pillarised plurality (Rath 1991; Vink 2007; Maussen 2013). Rather, if and when pillar-wise emancipation of ‘minorities’ has been advocated, there is the suggestion that pillarised organisation will empower certain, proverbially ‘non-western’ or ‘disadvantaged’ religious or ethnic communities to get up to speed with the currents of Dutch modernity. Frisians, Limburgers, Americans and Japanese were rarely thought in need of ‘multiculturalism’. Instead of interpreting the enduring significance of the pillarisation myth as proof of its enduring effect on policy making – i.e. as a deeper politico-cultural consensus structuring the policy process on a national level – we may more appropriately see its invocation in debates about Dutch citizenship as proof of the way in which plurality had become one of the central problems that won’t go away. What’s more, we might instead argue that internal ambiguities in the narrative of pillarisation became rather unsustainable in the face of the new diversities of the post-70’s era, which prompted an increasingly impatient politics with regards to the communities-to-be-emancipated. Emancipation was needed now rather than later.

The story of pillarisation has always appeared a conflicted one. Its internal ambiguity provides it with flexibility and drama that partly explains its appeal. Pillarisation-stories share an ambiguity that – in the context of public debate – became more and more unsustainable from the 1970’s onwards. This ambiguity revolves around the question what pillarisation is actually meant to be: (1) is it in essence a form of pacified civil war between wholly incommensurable moral communities that have nonetheless found the means to square their differences parliamentary under the auspice of a monarch supplying the much needed cohesion; or (2) is it in essence a form of protracted assimilation of outsiders – jews, socialists, catholics for instance – into the ‘modern’ world of a rational, entrepreneurial, (post)protestant, ‘Hollands’ establishment. This ambiguity came to matter less and less in the postwar era: if pillarisation was civilised war or protracted assimilation was inconsequential as a moral majority came to be identified and was said to speak for itself in terms of a flight away from pillarised constrictions and into a post-traditional world of individualised plurality (Duyvendak 2004). Instead of being spoken for by the patrons of pillars, Dutch
citizenship became conceived as being able to speak for one’s self. Again, this should not be understood as the emergence of a straightforward consensus. The valuation of individualised plurality creates a whole host of problems and disagreements. Pillarisation’s ambiguous logic for dealing with plurality was not so much consolidated as it was declared irrelevant.

In the face of new diversity, then, pillarisation could only really provide a pathway to its eventual demise: if a pillarised policy approach was to be followed at all – many argued to the contrary – such segmented emancipation should eventually lead to its own irrelevance in order to qualify as an approach that provided entry into Dutchness. The valuation of plurality became a central problem of the new citizenship politics, but not as a path-dependent continuation of a pillarisation logic, whatever that logic is supposed to be exactly. Quite the opposite: some, pragmatically framed segmentation was decided upon in view of the eventual irrelevance of such vaguely pillar-esk institutions, policies and allowances. Certain communities could be allowed to organise along certain pillar-esk lines, because that would hasten their ability to become what the established Dutch citizenry had already: post-pillarised, post-traditional frontrunners in the race towards modernity’s completion. Of course, specific forms of cultural reification were an effect of this approach (Schover 2010; Koopmans 2002) – it necessitated the identification of coherent ethno-cultural blocs and called forth enactments of such reified identities – but cultural reification can hardly be attributed to an excess of multiculturalism. Reifications were part of attempt to get minorities above and beyond the very need for pillarised life.

Strikingly, the importance of segmented emancipation discourses came to centre on the question of speed: which route will allow ‘us’ to take ‘them’ to modernity most precipitously? When policy questions become problematised in this way, conflicts will focus on lags, hurdles and obstructions. An entire policy battle may erupt over the question if and why ‘accommodation’ and ‘recognition’ is on the whole good or bad for ‘integration’. Yet, such battles are indeed nationally inflected by the complicated legacy of group recognition in Dutch context: accommodation of plurality comes to be judged as bad when it locks outsiders into their segmented institutions and identities. The many advocates for accommodation, recognition and ‘tolerance’ of plurality have hardly been willing or able to disrupt this emancipatory narrative. There are huge and consequential disagreements between what we may call ‘pragmatists’ and ‘culturists’ in this respect (Uitermark 2012), but neither carrier group has been able to break effectively with the idea that recognition of plurality is a path towards citizens’ individualised ability to be different. Rather, the problem of plurality becomes how
to belong to nobody in particular, to incorporate and live out all the many differences that are available in our world but to never get stuck in any of them. Dutch citizenship politics has seen huge disagreements about what government should and shouldn’t recognise as legitimate differences, but the performative effect of these policy controversies has been to affirm over and over again that newcomers need to adapt – either through emphatic assistance or through forceful imposition – to the dynamic, individualised pluralism that the Dutch citizenry is deemed to live out so exceptionally.

Again, the supposed backlash against ‘multiculturalism’ in the Netherlands is a rhetorical figure in public debate rather than an adequate understanding of such public struggles (Duyvendak et al. 2013). What’s more, the problem of pluralism has inflected citizenship politics, because it has introduced the spectre of a ‘failed model’ to get away from. There is little to no narrative innovation in this respect: autochthonous plurality – being different without being fixed – remains the terminus of emancipatory efforts. Even the most relativizing of stances in these debates – often voiced by the social liberals of D’66 – suggest that newcomers will learn to live in a world of plurality eventually.

The curious role of pluralism particularises Dutch citizenship politics as it time and again appears as both the problem to be solved – the other’s difference – and the solution to be sought – autochthones difference. This double role of pluralism – problem and solution – has created many opportunities for those who argue that newcomers never seem to be emancipating fast enough and government policies never seem to escape the legacy of pillarised accommodationism once and for all. The shadow of self-effacing relativism seems to re-appear as soon as participants of debates propose to focus more on ‘our identity’ (Van Reekum & Duyvendak 2012).

The problematic of autonomy
Freedom is one of the most important political concepts of the last three centuries, giving meaning to much of what people the world round express when they speak about citizenship. So how could it be of significance for any one national context in particular? Here, we should again remember that particularity is not given by that which is special or unique, but by the practice of particularising through which one context is enduringly demarcated from another. So when we suggest that the problem of autonomy is of particular significance for Dutch citizenship politics, we mean to say that public articulations of what autonomy might be are crucial for understanding how Dutchness and citizenship are enduringly entangled.
As we have already seen, freedom is important because it figures as the end-point of emancipatory efforts (see also Hurenkamp et al. 2012: 122). To live out one’s deeply personal desires, convictions and hopes is narrated as exceptionally Dutch (Verkaaik 2009). In this view, articulations of Dutchness seem to have shifted rather massively from stories about a frugal, burgherly, christian and somewhat boring nation (Galema et al. 1993) to one’s about secularised promiscuity, expressivity and permissiveness (Van der veer 1995; Kennedy 1995; Mepschen et al. 2010; Hoving 2004; Ghorashi 2010). But much like the problems of post-racism and plurality it is the particular narration of freedom that counts.

When we deepen our historical view somewhat, it becomes clear that the current emphasis on individual freedom, enjoyment and expressiveness – symbolised so evocatively by the ‘gay man’ (Dudink 2011) – is more like a variation on an already established theme than a clear break with preceding narratives of national particularity. What matters in not so much freedom – the absence of tyranny – but autonomy – the cultivated ability to life properly without an imposed morality (cf. Krol 2007). We might say that the substance of the good life in narratives of Dutchness has rather dramatically changed during the postwar period, but what endures is the idea that the good life is formed from inner moral capacity (Kruithof 1980; De Regt 1984; Derksen & Verplanke 1987; Rath 1991; Schinkel 2008).

Exceptionally Dutch liberalism is represented most convincingly by those acts and practices that are understood to emanate from deep within the personal intimacy of the individual and express its self-orientation: religiosity, sexuality, loyalty, identification, attachment, conviction, speech, reflexivity, enjoyment. In pessimistic discourses about the influx of not-yet-emancipated newcomers, the mere acceptance of the rule of law is not nearly enough: actual integration is only achieved when the aspirant-citizen demonstrates an authentic desire for the substance of the law. Saying that you detest homosexuals but you denounce any extra-legal action against them demonstrates a lacking integration in Dutch society and the failure on the part of policy.

In the context of citizenship politics the problem of autonomy presents a rather daunting paradox: how will entry into the nation be made possible if external moral imposition is antithetic to the very moral autonomy that sets the Dutch apart? Again, the problem of autonomy does not predetermine any one policy approach: one might conclude that an indefinite patience – ‘tolerance’ – with the moral incompetence of newcomers is in order, just as one might conclude that the capacity for moral self-guidance should be closely and punitively monitored. Moreover, the very act of publicly debating Dutch citizenship tends to
performatively affirm public expressiveness as a core element of what it means to be Dutch. Contradicting the imaginary of dialogical Dutchness is almost impossible when the means of contradiction – free, open and self-confident disagreement in public – are themselves part of that narrative: the orthodox imam calling for jihad with the infidels appears always already to be operating within the horizons of distinctly Dutch freedoms, albeit that he appear confused about what those freedom afford him. His speech is thereby rendered out of place precisely by being afforded space.

As soon as one contradicts alarmist discourses about the demise of national identity and the problems with newcomers, one has already begun to enact one of the core performances of Dutchness. This, again, helps explain why opponents of anti-immigrant and neonationalist movements have hardly been willing or able to dislodge the idea that access to citizenship should involve an adaptation to exceptionally Dutch freedoms. Declaring that there is no such thing as Dutch freedoms to which we may demand assimilation evokes a performative contradiction as such declarations are a focal performance of autonomy.

The perils of nativism

Through juxtaposition with other ways of particularising national citizenship, we might sharpen our view of what may be particularly problematic about Dutch citizenship politics. Here, I think ‘France’ and the ‘United States’ offer helpful contrasts for sharpening our understanding of a Dutch inflection.

We may say that the Dutch particularity of post-racism lies in the peculiar way in which racism tends to be related to Dutchness. In short: True Dutchness appears already post-racist. True Dutchness is time and again projected at the horizon of post-racism, whatever that is deemed to entail. On the one hand, there appears a contrast with the way in which group differences tend to be related to French typicality (see Amiraux & Simon 2006): groups are most certainly to be named and identified by state institutions, while the natives are at once a group among others (‘autochthones’) and the projected goal of integration by which groups dissolve into a post-racist community. The recurring problem is not so much how to communally project a universalism before difference – ‘citoyenneté’ –, but rather the engineering of a post-racist society of different groups – ‘bevolkingsgroepen’. On the other hand, there appears a contrast with American typicality as group identifications and the policies associated with them do not appear in the horizon of a national legacy of racism, national unification and civil struggle for equality. Dutch emancipation is not primarily a redress of injustice born out of a rupture in the life of the nation but a paternalistic incorporation into
an already just society. There appears a narrative disjunction between Dutch legacies of racism, conceived to be in the past or passing (Bosma 2013, Boehmer & Gouda 2012; Jones 2012; Weiner 2014), and the contemporary efforts to incorporate newcomers associated with labour migration, EU-integration and asylum seeking.

The problematic of pluralism has inflected citizenship politics, because it has introduced the spectre of a ‘failed model’ to get away from. Here, we see a contrast to French and American contexts most clearly: the national model – whatever it is deemed to be – is still something to aspire to, not to get away from. Failure appears as the inability to implement the model in the right way, not the failure of the model itself (Bertossi 2012; Foner 2012). As discussed elsewhere, the idea that citizenship politics should get away from a ‘failed model of accommodation and recognition’ (pillarisation, anti-racism, multiculturalism, pragmatism, etc.) has been articulated from the early 1980’s to this day (see also Ministry of SZW 2011, 2013). The peculiarity of pluralism in such debates, however, is that each proposed evasion of the failed model of recognition will tend to highlight, once again, a valuation of pluralism as a defining element of Dutch citizenship (Van Reekum & Duyvendak 2012). Escalation has been the main result.

With respect to freedom, the contrast with Anglo-American narrations of citizenship is rather pronounced. Such narrations revolve around the question of freedom from artificial, political institutions (Somers 1995b). Freedom indicates the prerogative to impose morality in the privacy of the family, community and the private corporation. The ability to impose onto others – children, women, believers, employees, etc. – is precisely the point of having freedom (see also Robin 2011). In contrast, the centrality of individualised autonomy seems to resonate closely with struggles over exceptionally French citizenship. In both contexts, the assertion that certain newcomers are not equipped for autonomous life has become quite important in citizenship politics (Akan 2009; Bowen 2009). Yet, there is a crucial difference here. Whilst autonomy appears as a matter of cultivated ability in the Dutch context – something to be learnt and thus potentially imposed –, the idea of potentially imposing such an ability seems to sit uneasily in narration of Frenchness. The mere contact with French culture should elicit the autonomous individual from within the immigrant (Bonjour & Letting 2012). The idea that a newcomer will have learned how to be French seems to defeat the purpose as it present Frenchness not as the underlying universal humanity of each individual but as a particular cultural competence of a particular group of people in history. This more decidedly essentialist notion of autonomy (as an ability that lays dormant in each human being) resonates more strongly with Frenchness when it is presumed to
emerge without guided cultivation. Civic integration courses in the Netherlands are meant to *instruct* how to be free, while in France they are deemed to *reveal* the always already free individual. Consequently, the idea to make such courses mandatory and conditional for citizenship is far less problematic in relation to Dutchness.

Instead of conceiving of post-racism, plurality and freedom as *characteristics* of Dutch citizenship politics, it is imperative to reconstruct them as *problematics*. They are not underlying self-evidences or building blocks of a hegemonic consensus. Rather, they constitute problems that will not go away, that persist, that keep on involving participants of citizenship politics as they try to figure out what is national about national citizenship. Instead of creating a consensus, these problematics have been at the heart of extensive disagreements. Moreover, it is precisely by evoking disagreements that they have inflected citizenship politics towards an increasingly protectionist mode that justifies an intense bordering of the national community. Dissensus is itself the occasion for protection. What recurs across these disagreements and enables participants to grapple with the problematics, is a specific mode of nativism. How do I conceive of this nativism and why is it dangerous?

I’ve distinguished the post-2002’s debates on civic enculturation and the historical canon by suggesting that they constitute an instrumentalisation of Dutchness. That is, these policy measures were discussed not merely as being about Dutchness or as gearing towards an eventual inclusion into Dutch society, but as ways of turning Dutchness itself into a policy tool, as using Dutchness to make people Dutch. I’ve provided a perspective onto these debates that deliberately undermines the idea that something like a ‘turn to culture’ has thereby taken place. Instead, what has taken place from the 1970’s onwards is the emergence, deepening and escalation of an *identitarian logic* that, through an anxious flight from characterology, seeks national identity in public, in public imaginations, in what the public appears to think, feel, remember, identify, discuss and debate. Curiously, publicness thereby became the very exceptionalism that marks out nationhood, on the basis of which protectionist measures of bordering have been justified and undertaken. Once more Foucault: the *public* must be defended.

In this mode of citizenship politics the imagination of the native public ought to be enabled and cultivated, not contradicted or corrected. The legal residence and access to citizenship of certain categories of persons deemed morally incapable of succeeding without rights or assistance are to be prevented, discouraged and minimised. Indeed, racist, orientalist and culturist discourses are used to make sense of which categories and differences are relevant and why. Yet,
the importance of *malleability* – the ascribed proclivity to take individualised responsibility for one’s fate instead of depending on others or referring to systemic injustice outside of one’s self – ought not to be reduced to any of these. The norm of malleability at play in civic enculturation questions not whether one *is or is not* one of ‘us’, but whether one *is able to become* the right kind of person (Mezzadra & Neilson 2013: 115). It is this capacity that is attributed to the natives: persons that are equipped with an individualised, moral capacity to be different. The norm of malleability envisions natives to be independent of collectivity and capable of succeeding through individual effort without collective guidance or social assistance. Most basically, citizenship becomes narrated as the privilege of those who have demonstrated to be able to do without it. Moreover, it is granted in reward of such effort.

Insofar as malleability is used to make sense of and regulate the borders between natives and newcomers, we are dealing with a grammar of alterity (Baumann & Gingrich 2004; Ehrhardt 2012) that is qualitatively different from, although often entangled with racist, orientalist or culturist discourses. As malleability is given to the natives, we may call this grammar nativist. What such nativist discourses suggest, against the essentialist impossibility of ever actually crossing boundaries, is that everyone can become native *if only* they made the individual effort and where not hampered by well-meant yet distracting forms of assistance and recognition. Everyone is potentially included on the basis of the idea that everyone potentially has the capacity to adapt to new circumstances, new surroundings. Nativism works, then, not by mirroring the positives and negatives of self and other, what Baumann calls *orientalising* (Baumann 2004). Rather, it articulates an universal norm of malleability to measure the extent to which people have made an effort to adapt, while giving the propensity of malleability to the natives. At the heart of this nativity lies not some essential characteristic that contrasts with others but precisely the tendency to mould characteristics to whatever life in liberal society demands. The fact that this nativist measuring of individualised effort is in many cases entangled with quite starkly drawn mirror lines that set up Dutch liberality as an essential characteristic of ‘us’ over and against ‘their’ essential illiberality and backwardness should not bring us to reduce nativism, in all its moments, to nothing more than racism-without-race.

Let me be clear, nativist discourses can be and often are racist – with or without race – employing descent and territorial belonging as ways to hierarchise and exclude (see in particular Yuval-Davis 2011) while conceiving of nativity through a purported modernness/whiteness/European-ness/judeo-christianity. Yet, when malleability is in play nativism can also be *more than* racisms as becoming
like ‘us’ is not only deemed possible but teleologically already the case. It is precisely by ascribing malleability to the other – she can change – that it becomes possible to explain non-inclusion out of the lacking effort of the newcomer – she did not change yet. Holding out potential inclusion for the future is thereby a way of responsabilising non-inclusion in the present. Nativism, conceived in this way, narrates national society as a distinctly open, liberal and pluralistic place wherein inclusion is merely a matter of time and effort of its aspirant inhabitants. In time, ‘they’ will learn. So while substantial and consequential discord can emerge over whether newcomers have or have not gone through ‘time and effort’, such contestation tends to affirm that inclusion is to be measured in this way.

This is also why it is important to distinguish nativism from other grammars of alterity. Nativism performs an encompassing logic by suggesting that the universal possibility of inclusion is protected and guaranteed by those who have already been included: the natives. It is thereby qualitatively different from other grammars of alterity such as orientalising and segmenting. We may argue that a discourse of ‘eventual integration’ through pragmatic and instrumental recognition of difference has increasingly and quite successfully been challenged by succeeding discourses of ‘impatient integration’ through demanding and prioritising participation in and alliance to national identity. These critiques of the pragmatic status-quo could only emerge through shifting power balances in integration politics (Uitermark 2012). Self-proclaimed monoculturalists did actually interrupt the politics of citizenship and were able to redirect the governance of citizenship in substantial ways. It took very real ingenuity and politicisation to do. What they have challenged, however, is not and never was an all-too-multicultural hegemony that was enamoured with the difference of the other and blinded for the ‘problems of immigration’. As this study demonstrates at several places in this process, what was challenged was a nativist, encompassing narrative that articulates this society to be exceptionally liberal and pluralistic and therefore inclusionary par excellence. What was contradicted, was the idea that inclusion was over time inevitable and could already be forecast. In short: that inclusion and difference need not be politicised as the future was secure.

Challenges to nativist exceptionalism – ‘inclusion is inevitable’ – tend to foreground the need to explicate, shore up, codify and protect the nativity of natives. They tend to propose more demanding and responsabilised policies of integration and migration, to track, evaluate and enforce the ‘time and effort’ put in by newcomers. As such, they also tend to articulate not merely the assumption of native exceptionalism but its active and persuasive imagination in public. Critiques of the nativist narrative thereby reiterated it, albeit often by advocating bordering
measures that depend on racist, orientalist and culturist distinctions between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

In Somers’ Anglo-American citizenship narrative, the naturalistic distinction between private and public society tends to be re-iterated and favour those that seek to curtail the always already artificial interventions of the state. In the liberal-cum-pluralistic narrative reconstructed in this study, liberality and plurality are moral capacities of citizenship that can potentially be learned by everyone and need only be imposed on those who are not there yet. This narrative is re-iterated and favours those that seek to display their emancipation from moral imposition, thus qualifying themselves for imposing on the not-yet-included. As has happened, again and again, the defendants of a pragmatic integrationism are attacked for their collectively imposed apprehensions to display what they too agree is great and good about being Dutch: the freedom to be different. Little more could be mobilised against such attacks than the suggestion that, indeed, liberality and plurality ought to be protected, but not through such ‘harsh’ measures and with such ‘ruff’ words as that only hampers the learning process and could arouse violence and racism. Frankly, who wouldn’t want enemies like that?

As I have developed it here, nativism in its basic form states that everyone can potentially become native, that it is a matter of ‘time and effort’ on the part of the yet-to-be-included, that nativity is constituted by this encompassing propensity. The peril of such a citizenship narrative is that it is rhetorically disabled to deal with voices that claim to protect and defend nativity. Such a narrative merely offers the objection that making citizenship more demanding and exclusive is impractical, counterproductive or may legitimate native racism. It does not offer an antagonistic counter-challenge that contradicts protectionism. As long as the native public can be shown to seek protection such claims have merit and the native public is no less open-minded for making them. One can try to contradict protectionism through calls for a nativist encompassment of differences, but one will thereby have little to no space to develop effective antagonisms with one’s opponents.

My conception of nativism is therefore not so very important when it comes to understanding the discourses of the self-proclaimed defenders of the nation. In these instances we encounter many nativist claims, but they do little more than render boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ un-crossable. Here, the vocabulary of racism, orientalism and culturism suffices, even if we should take care in reconstructing how the native ground comes to matter for people (Geschiere 2009; Duyvendak & Erhardt forthcoming). However, by contrasting solid, essentialising, and substantive boundaries to fluid, transitory, and imagined ones, we risk attributing perils only to the side of essentialist and substantive difference.
Peril does not merely lie in the grounded substantivity of the autochthon. The perils of nativism lie precisely in the ways in which fluidity, transition and imagination can come to particularise national citizenship and inflect citizenship politics. So, when it comes to understanding the rhetorical disability of those seeking to contradict essentialising discourses, it becomes imperative to notice that these attempts at disagreement tend to work through nativist exceptionalism. They seek to shore up post-racism, plurality and liberty as exceptionally inclusive capacities of Dutch citizenship that will enable ‘us’ to encompass difference eventually. This entails a depoliticisation of difference, a fleeing of the field before the battle has begun. In more overtly normative terms: either one explicitly proposes an alternative program of national reformation (or deconstruction) that usurps the narrations of one’s opponents, or one accepts that one can only ever articulate a moderate version of what one’s opponents choose to fight for (cf. Laclau & Mouffe 1985). For all the disagreements that have enveloped citizenship politics in the last three decades, disagreement is still to come (cf. Rancière 2004).

**Living on the liberal plateau**

Through a nativist logic, Dutchness is narrated as *life on a liberal plateau* (see also Wekker & Lutz 2001; Van Reekum 2009). On top, everything is flat, non-hierarchical, open, equal, diverse, provocative, ironic, and able to flow smoothly. Who wouldn’t abide there, who couldn’t be included in such a society? The slopes, by contrast, run up steeply. There is time and effort needed to reach the plateau and become native. While those on the slopes are still to achieve their inclusion, those on the plateau need not achieve anything but their well-being. For the included, there is no higher. On the slopes, one needs determination and discipline, to keenly know which way is up. As soon as one reaches the plateau and enters into nativity all of those skills become irrelevant. These capacities are what *brought* you up, but once included they may be discarded at will. At least, they can no longer be demanded of you. On top, it is precisely one’s playful unawareness of hierarchy and one’s aptitude to engage with others on an equal footing that displays one’s acculturation to the native ground. The story-line of a liberal plateau allows participants in citizenship politics to make sense of why it is that imposition is precisely what the natives do not do, while to become native on must be imposed upon. It explains how freedom and difference mark native life, while newcomers are not free from impositions and ought to give up their difference and become more like ‘us’.

So let’s return to Calhoun’s statement that was presented at the beginning of this study: ‘Nationalist rhetoric has generally stressed the essential similarity of
the nation’s members. It is rare to find comparable emphasis in the constitution of the national through the discourse of a public of highly differentiated members’ (Calhoun 1997b: 94). This study has demonstrated how an emphasis on a public of highly differentiated members need not entail and, in fact, may disable the construction of nationhood away from a politics of homely similarity. More specifically, such a national inflection of citizenship politics can create successive and escalating opportunities for protectionist claims that speak of liberty and plurality as the exceptional capacities that brought ‘us’ ahead of ‘them’. It can thereby normalise a politics that holds claims to be justified because they are voiced by the natives: if the public says so, it is right. Nativity becomes right in itself...by all means necessary. This yields a politics that grounds itself by claiming to listen to citizens, disabled as it is to articulate political visions otherwise. This could be called populism, but only if we forget that populism finds priority in the people not because what the people say is right but because the people ought to be the agent of democracy. Whether the people are right or not ought to be irrelevant. The people ought to be enabled nonetheless, enabled to begin to make its own mistakes. Strikingly, what counts for populism in Dutch politics is a politics that says the people are right. Its critics warn us that the people may have very bad policy proposals, that they may be right about their grievances but wrong about solutions for them (see also Schinkel 2013). What is all too often left unremarked is that this so-called populism is thereby yet another contender in the conflict over ‘good governance’ and ‘effective policy’. It is a prolongation of depolitical managerialism, albeit through an anti-establishment rhetoric and celebrations of the strong leader. The people are given the right to be right, but only in so far as it concerns the management of the state’s affairs.

For all of the rightful indignation that is ascribed to it, this people cannot go beyond its role in state management. This people is always synonymous with the population residing within the state’s borders. It is always a ‘bevolking’ – a residing population – consisting of ‘bevolkingsgroepen’ – culturally distinct segments of the population. The people are the ‘ingesetenen’. They are settled in. At no point does this nativist politics – even when it is devoutly inclusivist and holds that anyone can become settled in – actually begin to enact a people that claims space for itself apart from the state’s affairs and its territorial sovereignty (cf. De Haan 1993). It can only populate the state’s domain, it has no space for itself. For all the contention that has emerged over Dutchness the national people has not acquired any other prerogatives than to reside in and imagine their nativity. At no point does this people have devices of its own to make and remake what it is or wants to become. It is in so far as it is native to a territory. The nation is not a
public project of the people-to-come, but a governmental object for policing the
borders between the established and the outsiders. Therefore, the entanglement
between people and nation can only ever appear as a responsibility of the state, as
something for which better governance is needed. This is what we have seen quite
clearly and consistently in the Dutch context: the constant referral of the problem
of nationhood to the responsibility of the state, eventually to the point that
Dutchness became an instrument of policy itself. Government would – ‘finally’ –
use Dutchness in order to police the Dutchness of citizenship. Through all of this,
the national people retain a rather striking passivity. It may play a crucial role in
the state’s affairs – namely as the subject of grievances and the object of governance –
but is very far from an agent of democracy, very far from populist. Self-rule is out
of the question. In so far as it is a public agent engaged in articulating public
reasons, it appears as a native public. Its role is to publicly express its imaginations
about Dutchness and thereby orient, justify and evaluate the bordering practices of
government. Thus, Dutch culture is mangled, repressed and reduced to the
governmental bordering between those for whom it is assumed and irrelevant and
those for whom it measures their difference and upon whom it can be imposed.

To be sure, whichever way one engages with Dutchness, it makes
differences. To imagine otherwise tends to reiterate a deeply problematic
exceptionalism that is, nonetheless, used to make differences. Considerable
progress will have been made when Dutchness is no longer understood through the
failures and successes of government – ‘how has our exceptionally Dutch self-
imagination prevented/equipped us in governing citizenship’ – but as narrative
resource and battleground for a politicisation of citizenship. To some extent, this is
precisely what the right-conservative and monoculturalist voices have already done
so effectively these last few decades. They have drawn on widely recognised and
often celebrated images of exceptional Dutchness to politicise citizenship. They
have staged a native rights movement. However, it has merely succeeded in the
state-led bordering of citizenship, not in any re-invention of Dutch democracy and
the prerogative of the citizenry. It has succeeded in escalating unjustifiable
bordering and differential treatment. Its main products are grief and anger.

Are alternative politicisations possible? Can contention over Dutch culture
be more than an occasion for state-led bordering, whether stringently exclusionary
or pragmatically inclusivist? Can the story-line of the liberal plateau be uprooted?
It would mean that the problem of Dutchness is no longer conceived as a lacking
coherence of public imagination, but precisely as its reduction to governmental
bordering. Despite the incessant focus on coherence, the national identity debates
of the recent decades have at least valorised the idea of dissensus. Of acting out of
character. What would it mean to perform debate over Dutchness differently? What kind of entanglements between nation and citizenship would such discourses begin to articulate? In thinking about these question we ought to appreciate the recurring tendency of the national identity debates of the recent decades: disagreement abounds, yet it is captured and annulled by becoming the demonstration of Dutch exceptionalism. Likewise, change became highly valorised, yet it came to imply the more coherent imagination of nationhood by a native public. Instead of heeding Ernst Kossmann warnings – that disagreement itself was consensus enough –, a more thoroughly coherent identity came to dominate the horizon of national identity debates. Thereby, it became all but impossible to deny that identity was not in crisis. ‘Out of character’ and ‘into crisis’ became the all-too-narrow dimensions of narrative possibility.

This way of debating Dutchness thereby also has its performative limitations. As the governmental attempts to police difference appear to continually fall short, so do the public’s attempts to imagine Dutchness coherently. This is what drives the conversation machine and keeps the suggestion of an embattled Dutchness afloat. However, it also leaves space to interrupt the performative flow of national identity debates and turn them into the occasion of a different politics. Instead of exceptionalism the failure of imaginative consensus may also come to imply something very different. Firstly, it may demonstrate what should be obvious: that Dutch culture is a thoroughly fissured terrain and its significance for citizenship is not to outline the Dutch citizen so that government might retrace the public’s imagination with borderlines. Secondly, however, dissensus over Dutch culture may not come to enact a search for identity in public debate at all, however post-characteristic, but rather the possibility that Dutch culture cannot be occupied by any one public, that a native public itself diminishes rather than guarantees Dutchness. We would then begin to approach Calhoun’s promise of public plurality.

As I have argued, this is a tall order in the Dutch context as it would presumes that citizenship is not grounded in the territory of the state, is not envisioned to be an eventual autochthony. It would involve the politicisation of Dutch culture not for the sake of identitarian clarity but precisely because Dutch culture is recognised to make differences. It would also involve a new way of remembering and assessing the recent past: not as a (failed) search for identity by a native public but as the gradual emergence of veritable disagreement, however narrowly inflected and normatively problematic, about how Dutchness matters. Indeed, this study presumes to go some way in the direction of such a memory of the recent past by analysing the notion of a native public, the specificity of
nativism that goes with it and the performative effects of public disagreement. Yet, can disagreement do more than enact an identity crisis? Only if disagreements are not taken up as an indication of crisis but, conversely, as an involvement in Dutchness. Only when disagreements begin to indicate that participants in those antagonisms are making Dutchness differently, instead of drawing different borders around it. Then the enrolment of native and newcomer could be usurped and a horizon of possible agreement and eventual inclusion become more and more irrelevant. Inclusion would not be something that eventually might happen through a contentious process of debate, but something that is being realised right here and right now.

Despite the fact that succeeding governments have stayed the course and, in fact, constructed even more borders around Dutch citizenship, there is also reason to believe that public discourse is beginning to entertain the kind of disagreements described above. Strikingly, race and racism have been at the very centre. A succession of public debates about the figure of Zwarte Piet, particularly in 2013, seemed not to be performed through the repertoires of the preceding national identity debates as they have been reconstructed in this study. The contentions over Zwarte Piet could not be entirely assimilated to those repertoires.

I will not pretend to even begin to unpack what took place in these final remarks. Zwarte Piet is a highly complex cultural figure. Central to the debates was the critical assertion made by antiracist writers, activists and artists that Zwarte Piet is a form of Dutch racism associated with the yet-to-be-confronted legacy of colonialism and white supremacy. They thereby presented, in a number of different ways, a perspective on Dutch society that discovered at the heart of Dutchness the out-right celebration and public promotion of a racist fantasy and a regressive attachment to colonial imaginations. Moreover, the fact that many said to cherish the figure, deemed the figure to be harmless or could not see how it was racist was effectively antagonised as precisely part of the problem, namely a blatant incapacity to recognise, to imagine, to recollect the racism from which Dutchness was and is constructed.

In quite general lines, I want to suggest that what took place could not be entirely contained within the established bounds of disagreement-as-identity-crisis. The problematic that seemed to be articulated did not present Dutchness as the public’s problem, nor did debate become a mere search for identity. Instead, antagonists confronted the ways in which the pageantry and performance of a cultural figure, Zwarte Piet that is inextricably tied up with Dutchness, could have vastly different memories, affects, meanings and consequences for different publics. Participants in these debates may have tried to mobilise the well-
established repertoires of nativism – ‘they’ don’t understand yet that ‘our’ Zwarte Piet is not racist –, thereby often enabling and normalising ironic and not so ironic racism. What could not be denied, however, was that the critics of Zwarte Piet and the publics they successfully mobilised were engaging intensively with Dutch culture and making it relevant for citizenship. The power effects of calling certain publics native while excluding others was effectively put up for discussion. The very idea of a native public became problematic even if only because it was explicitly defended. Thus, a disjunction of publics was deemed to be engaging with Dutch culture and coming up with antagonistic positions and accounts. This was something new. Along this perspective, which was probably not the dominant one, Dutchness no longer appears in crisis. Quite the opposite, it appears to matter greatly to a whole variety of participants, yet these same participants thereby confront deeply antagonistic ways of grasping, valuing and living it. This was not crisis but involvement. Dissensus could not entirely be reduced to the exceptionalism of a native public. Dutchness did not merely appear embattled. Rather, while certain publics appeared to seek protection for their particular fantasies, other publics appeared to desperately express their memories and meanings.

For me, the debates surrounding Zwarte Piet indicate that, along with the incessant reduction of disagreement into exceptionalism, concerns over Dutchness can also appear to be the particular involvements of particular publics. That is, disagreement over Dutchness can proceed in ways that disable any one public from claiming a native priority or even pretend that such a public ought to be assembled to begin with. It does take considerable performative agility to innovate upon the routinised ways in which Dutchness is politicised. I think it is no coincidence that such innovation is now taking place with respect to race and racism. As I have argued, the flight away from characterology was accompanied by a nullification of race and racism. The notion, well established in a variety academic discourses, that racism is a societal phenomenon, configured along the very relations of sociality, has not begun to do the work it could and shall. In any event, it seems to be one of the directions into which the mythology of living on a liberal plateau can be displaced and around which a more thorough politicisation of Dutchness can begin. To contradict the narrative of the liberal plateau, including wholly illiberal claims about ‘our’ essential characteristics, could become one way to be a citizen. At least, there would be something to reach for. Citizenship politics would no longer be the protectionism it tends to be today. It wouldn’t be a matter of bordering something that is always already there, but the struggle for what is still to be achieved and yet to be realised. This is also what remains irreducible and valuable in rhetorics of
nationhood: the description of a dignity that is as immediate and unconditional as it is shared and primordial. Citizenship politics ought to become struggles over what is almost completely uncertain and implausible: common dignity. One last time Foucault: society should not be defended, dignity must be won.