Asylum seekers, citizenship and reality TV in the Netherlands: quizzing refugees in jeopardy

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Asylum seekers, citizenship and reality TV in the Netherlands:
quizzing refugees in jeopardy

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This article interrogates a Dutch jeopardy style TV show, *Weg van Nederland*,featuring young, well-educated asylum seekers about to be deported. The TV program,devised in collaboration with the advocacy group ‘Defense for Children,’ performedthe paradoxes resulting from the ‘inclusive exclusion’ of asylum seekers. Yet, itsstrategy of inscribing the contestants into the space of citizenship by highlighting their‘rootedness’ through the quiz format also lent support to the exclusivist, essentialistunderstanding of national belonging that is produced in contemporary Dutchcitizenship and integration law. Moreover, the show’s focus on successful, thoroughlyintegrated and career driven young adults, while pragmatic from the perspective of theshow’s (limited) political objectives, also reproduced the preferred template ofneoliberal citizenship, which drives the European migration regime and its policy ofselective in/exclusion. These contradictions expose the possibilities, as well as thelimitations, of humanitarian appeals working within the contemporary media regime,including reality TV, which imposes its own generic terms (and ideological inflections)on the justice claims launched within its public arena.

**Keywords:** asylum; citizenship; integration tests; borders; media/reality TV;the Netherlands

In September 2011, the progressive, left of center Dutch television (TV) station VPRObroadcasted a game show in which five young adults, all rejected asylum seekers,competed for a cash prize of 4000 euro, roughly $6000. The show’s punning title, *Weg van Nederland*, which can mean both ‘crazy about the Netherlands’ and ‘away from theNetherlands,’ signaled the show’s cynical take on the plight of this demographic. This wasemphasized by a typically kitsch game show background, which revealed a mock-up plane cabin to which, in the course of the show, two blond assistants dressed in law enforcementuniforms escorted the show’s ‘rejects’ clutching their consolation prizes (a ‘trendy’ flak jacket decorated in traditional Delft Blue pattern, a shoe shine kit for a new career, a bag oftulip bulbs ‘to make your country of origin “cozy” and also edible in case of famine,’ asurvival kit). 1

Accompanied by cheesy well-known Dutch tunes (*I love you, my Netherlands*) and anenthusiastic flag-waving studio audience, a disembodied voice introduced the contestants,whose live image appeared as a cropped identity photo embedded in an airmail envelope,on which, in red ink, the stamped text ‘exhausted all legal procedures’ was superimposed ontheir respective biographical details. The biographies revealed a range of refugee profiles, which included the 24-year-old Blessing, who fled Cameroon at the age 15 toavoid an arranged marriage; the Kurdish Gullistan, who fled Armenia with her family 11

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years earlier after the murder of her brother; Suleyman, a pharmacology student originally from Syria, whose family escaped after his father disappeared; Mathu, from Sri Lanka; and Sabina, in the Netherlands for 11 years, almost finished with her degree in Slavic Languages, and about to be deported back to Chechyna, a country with which the European Union has no regularized diplomatic ties.

The slick, blond show host explained the rules of the game. The refugees were to be quizzed on their knowledge of Dutch language, culture, history, customs, popular culture, and the royal family, questions for which, as the host remarked, they were well prepared, because years spent in asylum procedures had given them ample opportunity to become thoroughly embedded in Dutch society. And as he cheerfully reminded the audience, ‘In this show there are no losers because everyone gets a one way ticket to his country of origin, whether they want it or not.’ Viewers at home, meanwhile, could win a return ticket to Curacao (a former Dutch colony in the Caribbean, now a constituent country of Dutch Kingdom) by texting or answering the questions online. ‘We will start immediately, because you guys can be deported anytime,’ the host quipped sardonically before embarking on the first question.

Asylum seekers all come here to profit from our wealth; a better name for them would be ‘gold seekers’. That’s the opinion of many Dutch. However the Dutch themselves also often emigrate. Which is the country that the most Dutch move to?

The right answer turned out to be Germany. The reasons, the host illuminated, included cheap housing and lower taxes.

The first one to be booted off the show was Blessing. Her departing message to the Dutch people, before being escorted into the airplane, was that she hoped that ‘in the future I get a chance to show what I can offer the Netherlands.’ The prize money for the finalist went to the Kurdish Gullistan. Yet, the sum would be disbursed upon her deportation, because otherwise, as the host explained, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (IND) would cash it in – a subtle reference both to the restrictions placed upon asylum seekers’ earnings and to the various cash incentives promised to (ex)asylum seekers who voluntarily return to their country of origin.

This, then, was not your typical publicity campaign on behalf of asylum seekers and refugees. Indeed, given its tongue in cheek game show format, a cross between reality TV series such as the (originally Dutch) hit show Big Brother and the popular Dutch quiz show I Love Holland, it is not surprising that Weg van Nederland was widely condemned by humanitarian organizations, such as Amnesty International, for what was seen as its ‘exploitation’ of the plight of asylum seekers (Sparks 2011). But this blurring of boundaries between entertainment and ‘the real,’ between entertainment and politics, and, to some extent, between ‘victim’ and ‘celebrity’ was part of the intended ‘shock’ value of the show. As Holland’s Refugee Support Group spokesman Wouter van Zandwijk puts it, ‘The programme is sick, but, let’s face it, the reality is sick too’ (Sparks 2011).

How then, do we understand this interfacing of immigration politics and reality TV? What is it in the format of reality TV that could lend it to becoming a platform for launching humanitarian appeals? How do we analyze the particular discursive and activist strategies of Weg van Nederland within the broader context of reality TV, as well as within the context of the politics of human rights and citizenship? Moreover, how does the contemporary reshaping of borderscapes, characterized by differential in/exclusion, influence the particular justice claims launched during the show (Mezzadra and Neilson 2012)? And how are those justice claims, in turn, inflected by the structural demands of the reality TV genre, and the ideological bias it contains?
In this article, I draw on studies of the genre of reality TV, as well as theoretical discourses on citizenship, democracy, borders, human rights, and sovereignty, to argue that *Weg van Nederland* exploited the typical format of reality TV – a genre that thrives on social conflict transposed to, or engineered within, the microcosm of the show itself – in order to mimic the paradoxical ‘inclusive exclusion’ of asylum seekers within the national territory (Agamben 1998, 8). Its rhetorical strategy hinged on reframing the social legibility of young, educated asylum seekers from foreign and abject, to ‘quintessentially Dutch.’ In doing so, it co-opted the language of Dutch integration law and its emphasis on ‘Dutchness.’ Moreover, in its critique of arbitrary sovereign law, the show exploited the populist bias of the reality TV format by appropriating for itself the voice of the ‘demos’ – the people. However, in its focus on young, career-oriented, self-driven, thoroughly integrated individuals, the show did not stray far from the neoliberal orientation of the genre. *Weg van Nederland*, then, points to us to the potential as well as the limitations inherent in humanitarian discourses seeking to advance their causes through an alliance with contemporary media regimes, including reality TV, that are shaped by neoliberal ideology and therapeutic concepts of self (McCarthy 2007; Orgad 2012).

**Reality TV, neoliberal citizenship, and civic action**

Media scholars have noted that reality TV, a format that responds to the imperatives of cheap and portable programming in the era of digital TV and live streaming, derives its popularity from its exploration of social issues in microcosm. Thus, in the *Big Brother* format, for instance, the artificial creation of ‘real time’ communities allows for concrete meditations on the ‘conflict’ potential of issues related to gender, class, race, and ethnicity (Volčič and Andrejevic 2009). For most scholars, however, these meditations conform to the logic of what Buden (2005) calls the neoliberal *culturalization* of political relations, by which he means the dispersal and disarticulation of political struggles and social antagonisms from the ‘traditional’ political arenas of party politics, legal procedures, and the parliamentary system to the field of privatized and depoliticized ‘cultural options.’ To the extent that reality TV does speak to issues of democracy and governance, most scholars agree, it does so through its alignment with the contemporary crisis of democratic representation and the populist momentum that is pervasive in the political arena, and its subscription to a neoliberal template of selfhood and citizenship based on the autonomous, competitive, self-correcting, self-governing individual.

Reality TV’s tendency to reduce abstract, complex social issues to the realm of the personal and the emotional reflects the populist distrust of the political ‘system’ and its impatience with the cumbersome nature of political debate. This disaffection, in turn, has given rise to new forms of popular civic participation that have come to be characterized as the direct democracy of ‘push button’ and ‘cyber’ citizenship. Reality TV, which gives audiences a ‘vote’ in selecting winners and losers, responds to this populist momentum with its simulation of ‘plebiscitary,’ direct democracy (Hartley 2008; Kraidy and Sender 2011; Ouelette and Hay 2008; Palmer 2003; Volčič and Andrejevic 2009). Indeed, Hartley considers this conflation of entertainment and popular democracy, for which he coins the term ‘democratainment,’ a signature feature of the neoliberal era (2008).

The format of self-testing and self-improvement so characteristic of reality TV, meanwhile, resolves the inherent tension between the selfishness of consumerism and the public good by proposing a model of citizenship that includes the actualization of the self through consumer culture and (individualized) social responsibility. As such, the genre serves as a conduit for the diffusion of ‘neo-liberal commonsense’ and as a tool for
neoliberal disciplinary techniques of ‘governance at a distance,’ which require enterprising individuals to take charge of their own well-being, without relying on state intervention (McCarthy 2007, 17; Ouelette 2004, 2010; Ouelette and Hay 2008; Palmer 2003; Rose 1989). In that sense, Ouelette (2004, 2010) argues, the rise of reality TV, which coincided with neoliberal market liberalization, deregulation, the digital revolution, and the post-welfare attack on the public sector, reflects both on the shrinking of the public service role of TV and the outsourcing of its civic function to the private sector, and on the neoliberal transformation of the model of ‘good citizenship’ itself.

Most critics, then, see little space for optimism with regard to the potential for reality TV to function as a democratic public space for critical debate and reflection on the social ‘realities’ it constructs. While Jonathan Bignell detects in the often self-conscious tone and delivery of reality TV narration a ‘reflexive recognition of the form’s conventions and a potentially critical resource,’ Nick Couldry finds little or no occasion within reality shows for such reflexivity on the interface between the ‘reality’ the shows perform and the lived daily realities of neoliberal capitalism, even though trauma is the genre’s common currency (Bignell 2005, 77; Biressa and Nunn 2005; Couldry 2008). For Laurent Berlant, the neoliberal appropriation of intimate experiences, of which reality TV can be seen as an example, amounts to an even more sinister weakening of public discourse, and a compression of citizenship to the private, familial sphere (Berlant 1996; McCarthy 2007, 17).

Ouelette however emphasizes the ‘residual, emergent and sometimes contradictory logics’ of the genre, particularly in the growing ‘market for virtue’ which allows media conglomerates to cash in on marketing trends such as corporate social responsibility (2010, 69–70). For instance, the pastoral ‘can do’ attitude of reality TV not only finds expression in the ‘compassionate citizenship’ of such programs as Extreme Makeover Home Edition, which intervenes directly in social life by finding private (volunteer and branded) resources to revamp houses of ‘deserving’ poor families. It is also present in the reality TV-based cable channel Planet Green, which operates as (branded) forum for environmental conscious citizenship and problem solving (Ouelette 2010, 69–70); and in the show Random 1 (2005) which postured as a nongovernmental organization, with host (‘caseworker’) John on the lookout for targets he can assist or rather help to help themselves (McCarthy 2007, 23, 32). While these programs conform to the culturalizing and privatizing logic of neoliberal concepts of civic life and modes of governance, they might point to a space where everyday trauma, pain, and suffering – the unresolved core experiences that reality TV exploits – can be re-politicized (McCarthy 2007, 37).

This argument is supported by the fact that, precisely because of reality TV’s imbrication of entertainment, intimacy, citizenship and politics, nongovernmental and civic action organizations have also jumped on the reality TV bandwagon. Faced with, on the one hand, compassion fatigue and apathy on the part of the citizenry and, on the other, a political apparatus increasingly captive to the emotionally evocative phraseology of populist parties, they see in reality TV a potential new platform to mobilize citizen’s interests and, particularly, their emotions. Thus, one show widely seen as a precursor of Weg van Nederland was The Big Donor Show, a ‘win a kidney’ game show, broadcast on Dutch TV. It purported to feature a terminally ill woman who, with input from viewers’ text messages, in the course of the broadcast would select the recipient of her kidneys from a pool of three candidates all desperately in need of a transplant. The show was revealed at the end of the broadcast to be a hoax, designed to raise awareness of organ donation (Hooghiemstra 2011; Walker 2011).

Weg van Nederland itself was conceived, and its contestants selected, in close collaboration with a publicity campaign launched by ‘Defense for Children,’ an
international advocacy group for children’s rights, in an effort to seek publicity for the fate of the approximately 15,000 children of asylum seekers in the Netherlands, about 2000 of whom, the show’s editor Frank Wiering commented, had been living and attending Dutch schools for years (Allen 2011; Corder 2011). The campaign called for ‘rootedness’ exemption for children who arrived in the Netherlands as minors before the age of 12, and, after residing in the country a minimum of eight years, had become thoroughly embedded in Dutch society (ECPAT 2011). This particular demographic had recently received widespread publicity as a result of a number of pending deportation cases.

Weg van Nederland (broadcast as a stand-alone episode, leaving open the possibility of repeat performances), then, was highly self-conscious in its co-optation of the jeopardy/elimination style game show format as a strategy to highlight and politicize the contingencies structuring the daily reality of young adult asylum seekers and the paradoxical state of (non)belonging they inhabit. The show’s website, for instance, reads: ‘An asylum seeker’s life is like a game show. Before you even realize, you’re out’ (Huffington Post 2011).

**Weg van Nederland and the performance of asylum**

The strategy of the show, Frank Wiering explained, was to change the public’s perception of asylum seekers by ‘humanizing’ them and by highlighting their absolute ‘Dutchness.’ ‘We don’t present sad stories, we want to show who these people are, and that it is a shame to let them go,’ he explained.

Up until now, we only knew these people from pitiful news stories. . . . These are children of mostly well-educated professionals like professors and journalists. . . . They speak perfect Dutch and are working towards careers, but then their applications are rejected and they are sent away. (Allen 2011; Corder 2011)

Indeed, in its performativity, the TV program was more akin to the project *Auslander raus!* by the Austrian film and media artist Christoph Schlingensief, than to reality TV per se. *Auslander raus!* was an installation/performance that responded to the surge in xenophobic sentiments that in 2000 enticed the Liberal Austrian government into a coalition with the far right populist Austrian Freedom Party, led by Jorg Haider. In the installation, Schlingensief used the voyeurist *Big Brother* reality TV model as the meta-frame for a performance piece that provoked right and left to confront the aporia of asylum as a condition of rightlessness, precisely because of asylees’ externality to the nation-state (Perkovic 2012).

Like *Auslander raus!*, Weg van Nederland, too, responded to a sharp right-wing turn in national politics, a result of the upswing of electoral support for the right-wing populist, anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, anti-Europe Party of Freedom (PVV or *Partij voor de Vrijheid*) led by Geert Wilders, during the 2010 parliamentary elections. In practical terms, this translated in the formulation of harsh government objectives regarding immigration and asylum, which included proposed restrictions on family reunification, mandatory participation in civic integration programs for non-EU immigrants and refugees (upon approval of their asylum claim), fines and prison terms for illegal residents, deportation of alien criminals, and ‘streamlining’ of asylum procedures with the dual aim of sharply reducing the number of asylum claimants and speeding up deportation of those whose claims were rejected upon review (Nu.nl 2011).

Broadcasted by the VPRO, a public station with a long-standing civic mission and a reputation for creative, thought provoking and often transgressive programming catering to a loyal audience base composed of an urban creative class, left leaning liberals, and
intellectuals, *Weg van Nederland* was not only less constrained by ratings than strictly commercial Dutch broadcasting stations, but also assured of a highly media literate audience that could easily decipher the meta-codes of its critique. This accounts for the fact that, while in the foreign press the program received widespread, and often critical, attention, in the Netherlands itself reactions were mostly muted.

Both *Weg van Nederland* and *Auslander raus!* honed in on what Agamben has characterized as the ‘inclusive exclusion’ that characterizes the location of refugees and asylum seekers vis-à-vis sovereign law (1998, 2005). Until their status as refugees is officially recognized and legally ‘regularized,’ asylum seekers exist in a suspended state of liminality, subjected to sovereign power and law, yet without recourse to civic rights which are extended only on condition of being granted (temporary or permanent) access to the biopolitical community of the nation-state. The ‘inclusive exclusion’ of asylum seekers thus illustrates, as Hannah Arendt already pointed out, the paradox of liberal democracy. The asylum seeker, who should have been the embodiment of the universal principle of the rights of man, is instead deprived of rights, on grounds of the sovereign right of the nation-state to safeguard its borders and determine the conditions of access (Agamben 2000, 18–19; Arendt [1951] 1979). Indeed, Agamben has argued, the asylum seeker, the stateless person, and the refugee, for Agamben the exemplary human rights subjects, live in effect in a ‘state of exception,’ a ‘point of indistinction between violence and law,’ existing both in and outside of sovereign law (Agamben 1998, 32, 2005; Hoover 2013, 9; Lechte and Newman 2012, 524; Tyler 2006). In *Weg van Nederland*, this ‘inclusive exclusion’ was performed by way of the jeopardy format, which mimicked the format of the popular celebrity quiz show *I Love Holland*. But, by putting trivia questions about famous Dutch TV series, popular songs, Dutch celebrities, language and idiom, history or topography to a group of young asylum seekers facing deportation, rather than Dutch celebrities, *Weg van Nederland* raised the stakes of the game considerably.

The contestants in the show faced three rounds of questions, each of which was concluded by a ‘skill’ test. The questions themselves tended to focus on controversial aspects of Dutch history and culture, and often were preceded by short newscasts or Saturday Night Life-like comedy bits spoofing Dutch beliefs, habits, and hypocrisy. In between questions, the show host entered into sporadic good-natured banter with the contestants, often using their answers as lead-ins to new questions. While the camera mostly switched back and forth between host and contestants, offering static, medium-range views of both parties, the personal banter would be accompanied by close-ups of a particular contestant. ‘Suleyman, in what are you typically Dutch?’ the host asked. ‘In my sense of sobriety,’ Suleyman answered, referring to a stereotypically Dutch character trait. That interaction was followed by a question in which contestants were asked to identify which of the products generally considered typically Dutch (mills, liquorice, or tulips) were actually invented on Dutch soil. The answer was ‘none.’ Similarly, a question about Dutch songs led up to the host’s quizzing of Gullistan. ‘Gulistan, do you have a favorite Dutch singer?’ ‘Are you taking his cds’s with you when you leave?’ ‘No’ was Gullistan’s reply. ‘I don’t want to go back.’ ‘Well, the law is the law,’ the host quipped in response.

Occasionally, the camera panned across the contestants’ faces, registering their expressions when they were confronted with a particularly outrageous comedy bit, such as the spoof introduction of a ‘new’ board game, entitled *The Asylum Seeker Game*. (‘Can you get into the Netherlands? ... You’re almost there ... ! No, genocide is not recognized in your country! Go Back to “Start!”’). That spoof was followed by a question about the most popular board game in the Netherlands, which turned out to be ‘Settlers of Catan,’ a predilection rhyming well with Dutch colonial tradition, as the host pointed out.
'Suleyman, you have waited for a while for your asylum decision – how long exactly?' the host questioned Suleyman. A smiling Suleyman answered that he had been in legal procedures for 13 years, and was studying to become a surgeon. ‘If you want to become a surgeon, you could use some more time – but we don’t know if that is in the cards; there’s a big chance it’s not,’ the host continued, before segueing into the next question. ‘But the Dutch government thinks that unnecessary waiting should not be allowed. In fact, after how much delay can you ask the National Railway to refund your train ticket?’ (The answer: 30 minutes.)

Another set of questions highlighted the inconsistencies of Dutch tolerance, asking for the name of the organization carrying 450,000 slaves to the Americas, and taking aim at the xenophobic Party of Freedom, led by Wilders:

The Netherlands is known for its tolerance. Jews, Huguenots, they were all welcome. The tolerance of Geert Wilders extends even beyond that, to animals. What was the name of the Party of Freedom politician who made sure we now have 500 animal cops?

The quiz also addressed the situation of asylum seekers directly. One question asked for the name of the Dutch royal who during WWII sought refuge in Great Britain. Another intoned:

Asylum seekers have an insecure future and often don’t know the whereabouts of all their family members. The Dutch also want to know their future and connect with faraway relatives; some even use mediums to contact deceased family members. Which reality tv show does not fall into that category?

At the end of the first round, knowledge of Dutch geography was tested by the cheese-carving skills of contestants who had to reproduce the shape of the Netherlands out of a slab of Dutch cheese. The second skill test at the end of the second round was introduced by the host thus: ‘In this country we’re accustomed to say whatever we want, even if it offends entire segments of the population. In the countries to which you will return, that is likely to be different. Let’s rehearse that, so that you will be prepared.’ (The words to be avoided were ‘yes,’ ‘no,’ and ‘uh.’) The third exercise replaced the regular chairs in the Dutch chair dance game (in which the number of chairs is always one short of the people competing for seats) with airplane seats, in order to eliminate one of the last three contestants.

Once eliminated, and escorted to airplane to the sound of the well-known Dutch jingle It’s about time, the disembodied game show voice summed up the losses of the contestant about to be ‘deported,’ to the accompaniment of a side show of photographs and videoclips showing the daily life of the contestant in question.

There goes Suleyman, back to the very unruly Syria where his father disappeared and never returned. He loves to play soccer and celebrates Queensday just as enthusiastically as everyone else. No more parties, Suleyman! He will miss his friends, studies and fiancée. One dossier less to worry about, the IND (Dutch Immigration and Naturalization Service) will say.

**Reality TV and immigration politics**

In its use of a reality TV show format to explore the problematics of immigration and asylum, *Weg van Nederland* is not as idiosyncratic as one might think. The political horizon of reality TV, with its orientation toward the (microcosmic) exploration of social issues and its interest in the relation between the individual and social groups, self-evidently encompasses citizenship, the ethics of communal coexistence, and the boundaries of (national) belonging. Moreover, reality TV tends to feature more social, ethnic, gender, and racial diversity than other mainstream programs, drawing on ethnic
and racial diversity as markers of ‘authenticity’ and as a marketing strategy (Bignell 2005). Immigration, a socially and politically controversial global phenomenon, in that respect, would seem to be a ‘natural’ fit for the genre, and indeed has made its way into reality TV in recent years.

Mostly, however, issues relating to immigration, asylum, or ethnic identity are addressed surreptitiously. The first season of So You Think You Can Dance Canada, for example, regularly included former refugees and immigrants, to celebrate Canada’s multicultural makeup (Boyd 2012; Livio 2010). A number of reality TV shows, however, explore issues of (im)migration, asylum and ethnicity, and questions of belonging and coexistence more directly. Not surprisingly, most reproduce the neoliberal template of citizenship and appeal to the individual as a responsible, competitive, self-improving, and self-correcting consumer subject, who transcends suffering and trauma as well as the social bonds and strictures imposed by nationality, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, social class, or race (Boyd 2012, 264; Livio 2010). Thus, in the Balkan reality TV show To Sam Ja (‘That’s Me’), the communal living experience of a group of individuals representing various ethnic communities of the former Yugoslavia took the shape of a social experiment intended to prove the possibility of ethnic coexistence when the ‘individual’ and individual responsibility are allowed to take precedence over identification with atavistic ethnic identity (Volčič and Andrejevic 2009).

The same trope of self-improvement and self-transformation serves as a metaphor for ‘integration’ in shows that deal with the subject of (regularized) (im)migration as a problematics of ‘inclusion.’ Various reality TV formats readily lend themselves to such an approach. In the USA, for instance, the pilot for a prospective show entitled Who Wants to Marry a U.S. Citizen? envisioned it as The Dating Game with a twist, featuring a US citizen selecting a possible date from a pool of three legal immigrants (CBS News 2009). In Israel, a proposed (but never produced) reality show entitled Ha’olim or ‘The Immigrant’ adjusted the Apprentice format to exploit the challenges faced by (Western) immigrants to Israel (Jeffay 2008). In Bulgaria, the show Welcome to Bulgaria (Dobre doshjl v Bjlgariya) followed the jeopardy format to select Bulgaria’s most ‘worthy’ immigrant and reward him/her with the keys to a new Bulgarian home (Romeyn and Stoilkova 2012).

The format of shows dealing with irregular migration tends to borrow from security-themed reality TV shows that typically follow ‘professionals’ on their daily jobs. In Homeland Security USA (2009) and the Australian docuseroap Border Security (2004–present), for instance, a neoliberal model of disciplinary citizenship is combined with the performance of sovereign decision-making on in/exclusion (Andrejevic 2011). The occasional show that does problematize irregular migration primarily does so in order to exploit the topic’s conflict potential. The Australian Go Back Where You Came From (2011–2012), for instance, repackaged the plight of asylum seekers in Survivor format, sending six native born Australians with differing political views on immigration on a perilous voyage to gain first-hand experience of the hardships faced by asylum seekers barred from finding refuge in their country. Here, the suffering angle and the self-transformation trope apply not to the refugee, but to the occasional contestant who, after suffering through hardships in Kenyan refugee camps, escaping in leaky boats, experiencing immigration raids in Malaysia, and facing mortal danger on the streets of Mogadishu, Somalia, adjusts his or her personal views on the issue (Siegel 2011; Walker n.d.). It is fair to conclude on the basis of these examples that most reality TV shows broaching the topic of (legal or irregular) (im)migration studiously avoid any analysis of the political context, or implications, of border protection policies and the securitization of immigration (Hughes 2010; Mezzadra 2010).
Narratives of belonging and un-belonging

In addition to exposing the cracks in the self-conception of Dutch society as (historically) tolerant and color-blind, Weg van Nederland’s contest format critically juxtaposed two dominant Dutch narratives about asylum seekers, citizenship, and belonging. The first narrative defines citizenship in terms of ‘core values’ and ‘cultural competencies,’ which in turn are verified by obligatory integration ‘tests,’ fittingly mimicked by the show’s quiz format. The second narrative centers on the ‘asylum crisis,’ and stipulates that the refugee, assumed guilty until proven innocent, is deprived of recognition and rights until he/she has been ‘quizzed,’ and his/her claims have been ‘tested’ and validated.

Technically, these two narratives, and the legal domains to which they refer (citizenship and asylum/human rights law), are separate. Operationally, however, the two domains and categories are conjoined, confronting each other in what Arendt called the paradox of liberal democracy, which recognizes the limits of human rights in the sovereign imperative with regard to the securitization of borders and territory. This paradox, and the intersection of legal regimes it represents, is most obvious in the functioning of the refugee as a ‘limit case’ where the boundaries of the polity and the terms of national belonging are decided – as Weg van Nederland astutely realized (Agamben 1998, 32; Arendt [1951] 1979, 295–297).

In its title, Weg van Nederland not only puns on the double meaning of the Dutch word ‘weg’ (meaning ‘away,’ as well as ‘crazy about’), but also obliquely calls up the title of the video course To the Netherlands, a government issued language and citizenship program designed to prep aspirant migrants (‘newcomers’) for the civic integration test they are required to pass as precondition for access to citizenship status. The requirement of mandatory integration was stipulated in the Civic Integration Act (first passed in 2005) and was based on the notion that ‘Dutch society and its values should be central to integration policy’ in order to ‘prevent fragmentation and segregation in society.’ With this legislation, the Dutch government proclaimed its distance from ‘the relativism embedded in the model of the multicultural society’ (Government of the Netherlands 2011).

This ‘culturalisation’ of borders and migration policy, a transnational European phenomenon, is informed by a nativist, ethno-nationalist discourse that has always been present on the far right but has moved mainstream, and that presents the nation as a natural community based on common values, a common culture, and a common past (Moulier Boutang 2006; Žižek 2010). It borrows elements from communitarian models of citizenship in its emphasis on the importance of cultural cohesion, republicanism in its support for the law as a mechanism to protect what is narrowly defined as the ‘common good,’ and (neo)liberal citizenship models by treating migrants as individuals in charge of their own integration (Dahlgren 2009, 62–64; Guild et al. 2008; Shafir and Peled 2002).

Integrating, or inburgeren, however, is precisely what asylum seekers are legally not allowed to do (Vluchtelingenwerk 2013). Only when an asylum seeker is granted temporary residency and official refugee status, is he/she to seek work, move out of the supervised housing provided by the COA, the Central Organ for Asylee Reception, and start the active process of becoming integrated into Dutch society. The assessment of the credibility of asylum claims in the Netherlands, meanwhile, falls entirely under the provision of the IND. During the review procedure, the asylum claimant is interrogated (‘quizzed’) on two occasions to establish ‘credibility,’ verify identity, travel route, and reason for asylum request. Obviously, the interview process leaves ample room for arbitrary decisions. Moreover, an overburdened legal system and a cumbersome appeal
process mean that finalization of status, resulting in either a refusal (and deportation order) or an admission on a temporary basis (with or without the possibility of extension) is a process that can span years, during which the legal status of the asylum seeker is kept in abeyance (Fekete 2005; Jongesla 2007).

Meanwhile, within the terms of the discourse of a refugee ‘crisis’ that casts the refugee as deceitful (filing bogus asylum claims in order to gain economic access) and a potential security threat, the asylum seeker is increasingly criminalized, dehumanized, and placed outside the sphere of national belonging and biopolitical life (Benhabib 2011, 95; Tyler 2006). As Agamben argues, it is through this repetitive staging of the asylum seeker as an abject, external threat to ‘our’ culture and ‘our’ way of life, that a normative ground of national belonging is articulated and provided with an aura of solidity (Agamben 2000, 23; Tyler 2006, 188–189). Moreover, this reconfiguration of the relationship between state, citizen, and security, which William Walters terms ‘domopolitics,’ points to the fact that citizenship – the legal sign of belonging to the ‘homeland’ – plays an increasingly central role in border control. It legitimates the increasing militarization of the state and the violent abjection of those who are relegated to positions outside the sphere of an exceedingly narrowly defined conception of ‘home’ (Tyler 2010; Walters 2004, 241).

The legal and discursive ‘exceptional’ status of the asylum claimants assumes an exceptional/conceptual isolation, which is matched by their enforced spatial and social segregation. Practically, however, in the course of legal procedures sometimes lasting years, asylum seekers often live in close proximity to, and engage in social relations with, legal migrants as well as citizens. And while this ‘inclusive exclusion’ functions as an ‘instrument for the refusal of recognition’ (Butler 2002, 24), the conceptual blurring between internal and external, legal and illegal, law and violence, that is characteristic of the liminal status of asylum seekers, also produces limit cases in which the inclusive, integrative principle of the immigration/integration discourse is harnessed to contest deportation orders of asylees whose claims have been rejected after years of judicial review.

This is exactly what happened in the Netherlands in response to a number of pending deportations involving the demographic of ‘integrated’ (‘rooted’) children of asylum seekers. One of these cases involved the 14-year-old Sahar Ibrahim Gel, from Afghanistan, who arrived with her family in the Netherlands at the age of 4 and fought her impending deportation to Afghanistan with the argument that after 10 years growing up in a Dutch environment, she had become so Westernized that a return to Afghanistan could put her in grave danger.3 Manuel, an 18-year-old Angolan boy who had become a warden of the state nine years earlier when he arrived as an unaccompanied minor in the Netherlands, became another test case when his asylum request was rejected, and he faced deportation orders upon reaching maturity (ECPAT 2011). So did the case of a nine-year-old Eritrean boy named Yossef, who had lived in the city of Alkmaar for eight years. The local newspaper protested:

It’s about a boy who has lived his entire life in the Netherlands. Who asks him mother to leave the door of his bedroom open because otherwise Black Pete [‘Zwarte Piet’, the blackfaced helper of St. Nicolas] won’t be able to enter. Who eats peanut butter and pink cookies [a typically Dutch treat]. (Lautenbach 2011)

And while anti-deportation campaigns invoking broadly humanitarian principles increasingly stumble upon public indifference, grassroots anti-deportation campaigns that highlight the ‘integration’ of specific asylum claimants slated for deportation seem to receive broad popular support.
Reality TV as a new democratic space?

*Weg van Nederland* followed the same rhetorical strategy, deploying ‘integration’ as norm of ‘belonging.’ It used the ‘internal externality’ of young adult asylum seekers to claim their political legibility as insiders and potential ‘good citizens’ on the exact terms, competences and cultural values proposed by integration law as criteria for inclusion. It performed, in reality TV style, the ‘blurring’ of boundaries that the state of exception produces. Not only did the show mimic this ‘inclusive exclusion’ by declaring a winner in what ultimately was a ‘losing battle,’ it also called attention to the presumption of guilt of asylum seekers, by suggesting the unfair (legal) playing field faced by the contestants, which contrasted starkly with the ‘rules of the game’ (show) to which they subjected themselves willingly and with good humor and sportsmanship.

The questions and tasks on which the contestants were ‘tested,’ meanwhile, in their mimicry of the (arbitrary) questions on integration tests, served to articulate the gap between ‘de jure’ and ‘de facto’ membership, as well as the gap between the (supposed) protections provided by universal human rights, and the rights that come with being a recognized member of the particularist demos. While the xenophobic discourse on asylum seekers casts them as alien, opportunistic ‘goldseekers’ undermining the nation’s ‘Dutchness,’ *Weg van Nederland* sought legibility for its contestants not on the basis of abstract cosmopolitan human rights norms, but much more concretely, as *de facto* fellow ‘citizens’ exhibiting quintessentially ‘Dutch’ qualities and skills.

What the show simultaneously made visible was the extra-judicial space in which asylum seekers, who often are long-term residents, exist, as well as the violence of sovereign power that is visited upon those excluded from membership but not from territorial jurisdiction. This arbitrary violence was further simulated by the obstacles faced by those in the TV audience seeking to play along for a shot at an airplane ticket to Curacao. They were confronted with the additional challenge – meant to simulate the difficult verification process for asylum seekers – of repeatedly having to renew their participation or being disqualified and thrown out of the game completely, as a result of ‘failing to have read some, or all the general conditions for participation.’ For complaints, the audience was advised to contact the ‘Committee for Human Rights and Amusement’ of the VPRO, the media company broadcasting the show (Linnenbrink 2011).

One could interpret *Weg van Nederland* and the civic action campaigns with which it was aligned in terms of what Benhabib calls ‘democratic iteration,’ in which the back and forth between the universal and the particular confronts the demos (state/majority) with questions about the ‘justifiability of its limits in light of the universal principles to which it subscribes’ (Benhabib 2011; Thomassen 2011, 138). For Seyla Benhabib, human rights function as a cosmopolitan norm of justice and a corrective to the self-determination of the sovereign polity. Such a correction, she argues, is embedded in the ‘jurisgenerative effect’ of contemporary human rights law, which means that, under its umbrella, ‘new actors’ (not only courts and legislatures, but also an array of social movements, civil society actors, nongovernmental, and transnational organizations) can enter the public sphere to stake new rights claims, develop new forms of justice, and expand the reach of law (Benhabib 2011, 15–16).

The entry of a reality TV show as a civic society actor within this field points to what Dahlgren (2009) and Van Zoonen (2005) have characterized as a drastic reconfiguration of the political. Recognizing that the sphere of the political has moved away from political party allegiances and ideological programs, they argue for an expansion of our notions of civic participation, the public sphere, and citizenship – which in their view remains...
tethered to a normative modernist political legacy emphasizing rational thought and action over the affective, the emotional, and the personal – to include an idea of citizenship as ‘affective intelligence,’ for which the mutual articulation of politics, passions, and entertainment in the contemporary media regime provides a breeding ground (Cardo 2005; Van Zoonen 2005, 66). Indeed, this reconfiguration of the political has given rise to what has come to be called ‘cultural entrepreneurship,’ a term that refers to social actors intent on changing belief systems and working within popular culture and the social media to shift opinions – a phenomenon of which Weg van Nederland can be seen as an example (Martin and Witter 2011).

The fate of the ‘rootedness clause’ championed by Weg van Nederland and Defense for Children, in the more conventional political arena of party politics, however, illustrates both the potential and the limits of the mutual imbrication of entertainment, passion, and politics on which the show based its appeal. The swell of grassroots support in favor of what in legal terms came to be known as the ‘Children’s Pardon,’ galvanized by the show as well as by localized and Internet campaigns (including the support of the mayors of 145 communities who threatened to invoke their right of noncooperation with deportation orders) ran up against the Geert Leers’ (Minister of Immigration, Integration, and Asylum Affairs) sovereign insistence on his ministerial prerogative of a ‘discretionary review of exceptional cases,’ rather than a full-blown pardon (EMN 2012; Vluchtelingenwerk 2012; VTU 2012). The political impasse was not resolved until parliamentary elections in June 2012 dealt a significant blow to the populist Party for Freedom and returned a parliamentary majority in favor of a ‘Children’s Pardon,’ which was finally approved in the fall of 2012.

The show also demonstrates one aspect of what Benhabib describes as the ‘paradox of democratic closure,’ which is based on the fact that, since democracies are bounded communities, they presuppose a principle of membership. Since the conditions for inclusion and exclusion can only be determined democratically, by those who are members themselves, membership is based on an unavoidable circularity (Thomassen 2011, 143). This results in the paradox that interventions on behalf of asylum seekers typically articulate their demands in terms of the dominant discourse, inadvertently lending credibility to a terminology that they at the same time contest, and that most likely contains an original, founding violence (Simmons 2011, 72–73; Thomassen 2011, 138–143; Tyler 2006, 196). This is evident in the strategy of inclusion of the show (and the broader civic action campaign with which it was allied), which grounded the claims of these young asylum seekers not in the universalist language of human rights law or/and children’s rights, but in a culturalist discourse of de facto (local) belonging (‘rootedness’), and validated this claim with a set of ‘typically Dutch’ trivia questions. This strategy runs the risk of being hijacked by the exclusivistic aspects of the Dutch discourse of immigrant integration, which is heavily invested in an essentialized understanding of Dutchness. The profiles of the contestants, not surprisingly, omitted any reference to transnational identities or multiple ties. In final analysis, the show, and the ‘rootedness clause’ for which it advocated, reconstituted citizenship firmly on essentialized, hallowed, and localized ‘Dutch’ ground.

In addition, while the show contested the criminalization of asylum seekers, presenting their presumed ‘guilt’ and ‘illegality’ as a product of law and the (arbitrary) rule of sovereign exception, its selected demographic consisted of young adults, all children when they arrived in the Netherlands. Children, of course, represent ‘ideal’ victims in the sense that their innocence (a trope that goes back to the Enlightenment rejection of the religious narrative of suffering as heavenly punishment for sin) and the arbitrariness of their
suffering are most likely to solicit empathy (Orgad 2012, 66). Yet, this proclaimed ‘innocence’ of young asylum seekers is directly linked to their lack of agency with respect to their parent’s decision/crime to seek asylum, leaving the presumption of guilt on the part of adult asylum seekers intact.

Moreover, in its strategy to reposition asylum seekers as subjects who matter, because they are ‘like us’ (i.e., essentially ‘Dutch’), Weg van Nederland selected a group of contestant who were not only ‘innocent’ but also ‘in a deep way legal,’ as Berlant calls it: not only thoroughly integrated but also expressing ‘a deep desire for the nation’ and, ultimately, on their way to becoming successful, educated, self-driven, future professionals (1996, 203). It is not surprising that in its search for a ‘face’ for its follow-up media campaign called ‘Innocently Condemned,’ ‘Defence for Children’ went for the ambitious, young Gullistan, a winner, in all senses of the word: thoroughly embedded in Dutch culture, slated for a career as a lawyer, and the winner of a reality show contest, to boot.

On the one hand, this limited focus can be seen as consistent with the rather pragmatic, short-term goal of the show in the immediate context of the ‘Defense for Children’ campaign. This pragmatism itself can be understood as an example of the strategic response of humanitarian agencies to the dominant template of the contemporary media regime, including reality TV, which tends to focus on the self and on individualized experiences, rather than abstract intellectual constructs, to make sense of the world, specifically in relation to trauma and suffering. As Shani Orgad has observed, and studies of reality TV confirm, this media regime is ‘conjoined with and supported by the reign of consumerism, neoliberal ideology and therapeutic discourse.’ Within this template, sufferers are less represented as ‘helpless victims’ than as ‘active agents’ of their own survival, achieving empowerment through individual struggle and self-management (Orgad 2012, 75, 79). Humanitarian agencies have adjusted their strategies of representation accordingly, increasingly framing suffering through the lens of the self-transformation and agency of individual sufferers, rather than as a collective experience of vulnerability (Orgad 2012, 72–73). Moreover, following the dictates of the contemporary media environment, humanitarian and civic action groups increasingly favor a ‘“petite” ethics’ (‘click, donate and (possibly) forget’) of privatized, intense, but short-term engagements with a suffering other, rather than a commitment to a ‘larger intellectual agenda informing a humanitarian sensibility’ (Orgad 2012, 78). Reality TV, and shows like Weg van Nederland, represents a public platform in which such a ‘“petite” ethics’ could be played out.

As a public platform, however, reality TV comes with its own structural demands, and the neoliberal bias they contain. One has to wonder, in this regard, about the limitations inherent in the mutual imbrication of humanitarian politics and popular entertainment formats, as we similarly have to question the formal and structural restrictions these structure impose on the public arena in which such a re-politicization of social relations takes place.

One could argue that Weg van Nederland articulated its demands and its agency on behalf of asylum seekers performatively, at the limits of the terms of the prevailing (neoliberal) discourse, at once reproducing, and resignifying existing discursive structures. Its focus on acculturated young adults could be seen as an attempt to rearticulate the overdetermined figuration of ‘the asylum-seeker’ as an abject Other whose hyper-visibility contributes to his/her invisibility and concealment (a trend to which, as Tyler suggests, the work of Agamben inadvertently contributes) (2006, 199). Yet, as Judith Butler has argued, such counter-political strategies need to remain aware of the limits of their own ‘gestures of recognition,’ and simultaneously contest the ‘regimes within which the terms of
recognizability take place’ (Butler, as cited in Tyler 2006, 199). On that level, the reflexivity of the show fell short. Weg van Nederland’s focus on integration, embodied by young, exceptional, successful, enterprising, ambitious contenders, and its conscious sidestepping of the ‘sad stories,’ then, points not only to the gradual erasure of the political context of asylum status, but also to a certain complicity with the neoliberal dictates of the Dutch, and European migration regime, which is based on the selective inclusion of migrants with skills, and which ‘elaborates its technologies of domination under the guise of fostering autonomous subjects’ (Mezzadra 2010). The generic conventions of the reality TV game show format, in their complicity with these neoliberal dictates, imposed their own strictures and limits on Weg van Nederland’s attempted resignification. Despite its self-reflexive re-politicization of the genre, the show reproduced the neoliberal template of citizenship, as well as the ‘domo-politics’ of national belonging and differential borderscapes that this template implies (Mezzadra and Neilson 2012; Walters 2004).

In accordance with the ‘domopolitics’ of Dutch citizenship and integration law, the ‘Children’s Pardon’ was framed as a sovereign ‘exceptional exception’ when it was finally adopted by the Dutch Parliament in 2012 (NOS 2012). It remains to be seen whether the principle of ‘rootedness’ upon which it is based can be used to frame more extensive claims on behalf of integrated adult asylum seekers, and thus truly transform the extended indeterminate status of ‘inclusive exclusion’ into the basis for claims to citizenship rights for adults. Most likely, expedited asylum procedures and deportations will become the legal instruments to counteract that possibility, while the principle of ‘rootedness’ will be used as yet another sovereign cutting tool to shore up the illusion of an (ever-elusive) solidity of national belonging, and establish even tighter biopolitical limits of communal life. The 2005 Civic Integration Act mandates that once asylum seekers officially have been granted refugee status, they pass obligatory and punitive integration tests (Vluchtelingenwerk 2013). This aspect of integration law has been contested by human rights lawyers and activists, on the ground that it imposes integration as an additional demand on asylees, using their paradoxical ‘inclusive exclusion’ to subject them to ‘double jeopardy.’ Under these conditions, ‘the right to have rights’ is tested twice: once from the perspective of asylum law, against the universalist standard of human rights, and a second time, against the particularist standard of civic integration law. Weg van Nederland, however inadvertently, lent support to this double jeopardy (Van Wijk 2012).

Notes
1. Weg van Nederland broadcast transcript, originally airdate 1 September 2011, transcribed and translated into English by author on 2 March 2012. All quotations from the show in this article are taken from the transcript, unless noted otherwise.
2. The International Organization for Migration runs the Voluntary Assisted Returns and Reintegration Program (VARRP). The support offered under the VARRP includes assistance with obtaining travel documentation and financial support (£1000 per applicant) to cover the costs of the returnee’s travel expenses as well as costs for immediate arrival and reception. The scheme also allows for longer-term financial support for reintegration, for example, assistance with setting up businesses, vocational training, and education.
3. In 2011, in the face of active community support for the family, widespread media coverage, and pressure from the UNHCR, the Minister of Immigration, Integration, and Asylum Affairs, Geert Leers, invoked his ministerial discretion to grant the family a residency permit, and extended the same residency rights to other ‘Westernized’ Afghan girls between the ages of 10 and 18 who had lived in the Netherlands for at least eight years. As lawyers soon pointed out, invoking the criteria of ‘Westernization’ for girls raised only more questions. How would ‘Westernization’ be measured? And why would it be applied only to girls from Afghanistan, and not to children from other countries?
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