



# The Dutch American Identity: Staging Memory and Ethnicity in Community Celebrations

*Terence Schoone-Jongen*

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Each year, thousands of communities across the United States celebrate their ethnic heritages, values, and identities through the medium of festivals. Drawing together elements of ethnic pride, nostalgia, religious values, economic motives, cultural memory, and a spirit of celebration, these festivals are performances that promote and preserve a community's unique identity and heritage, while at the same time attempting to place the ethnic community within the larger American experience. Although these aims are pervasive across ethnic heritage celebrations, two festivals that appear similar may nevertheless serve radically different social and political aims. Accordingly, *The Dutch American Identity* examines five Dutch American festivals—three of which are among the oldest ethnic heritage festivals in the United States—in order to determine what such festivals mean and do for the staging communities. Although Dutch Americans were historically among the first ethnic groups to stage ethnic heritage festivals designed to attract outside audiences, and despite the fact that several Dutch American festivals have met with sustained success, little scholarship has focused on this ethnic group's festivals. Moreover, studies that have considered festivals staged by communities of European descent have typically focused on a single festival. *The Dutch American Identity* thus, on the one hand, seeks to call attention to the historical development and current sociocultural significance of Dutch American heritage festivals. On the other hand, this study aims to elucidate the ties that bind the five communities that stage these festivals together rather than studying one festival in isolation from the others. Creatively combining several methodologies, *The Dutch American Identity* describes and analyzes how the social, political, and ethical values of the five communities are expressed (performed, acted out, represented, costumed, and displayed) in their respective festivals. Rather than relying on familiar, even stereotypical, notions of "the Midwest," "rural America," "conservative America," etc., that often appear in contemporary political discourse, Schoone-Jongen shows just how complex and contradictory these festivals are in the ways they represent each community. At the same time, by placing these festivals within the context of American history, Schoone-Jongen also demonstrates how and why each festival is a microcosm of particular cultural, social, and political developments in modern America. *The Dutch American Identity* is an important book for sociology, performance studies, folklore, immigration history, anthropology, and cultural history collections.

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