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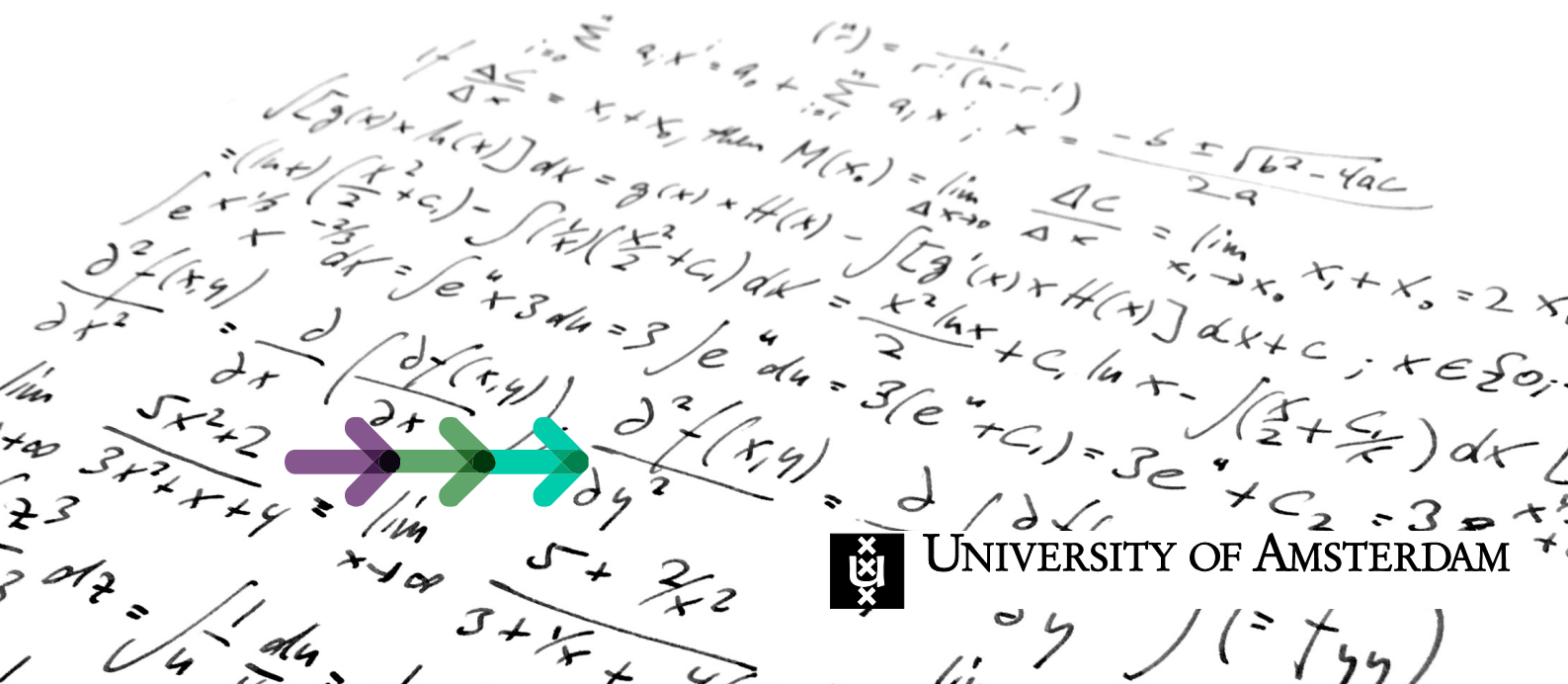
Thinking, seeing, and doing like a kingdom: The making of Caribbean Netherlands statistics and the “native Bonairian”

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Francisca Grommé

University of Amsterdam

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Francisca Grommé

University of Amsterdam

gromme@essb.eur.nl

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Introduction¹

In 2011, the Caribbean Netherlands was for the first time included in a Dutch census: the ten-yearly population count of the European Netherlands. Before the constitutional changes of 2010, which made Bonaire, Saba, and St. Eustatius (together known as the BES islands or the Caribbean Netherlands) “special municipalities” of the European Netherlands, the island residents were counted as part of the Netherlands Antilles, not as an integral part of the European Dutch population. For the 2011 census, Statistics Netherlands (SN, Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (CBS) in Dutch) published a separate chapter on the Caribbean Netherlands, in which it compared the BES islands with the five Frisian islands: “The Frisian Islands (in the North Sea to the north of mainland Netherlands) were chosen as reference regions, because of similarities in both geographical characteristics and population size” (CBS 2014, 64).

Benedict Anderson (2006, 163-186) showed how the census, together with the map and the museum, shaped in what way the colonial state imagined its dominion. He also argued that these “institutions of power” provided anticolonial nationalists with the categories and techniques to imagine their own national communities. Through classification and enumeration, among others, people could be imagined as related to each other, even though they would never meet. Importantly, Anderson referred to the resulting national communities not as fabrications or fantasies, but as very real. Whether political actors and

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citizens identified with them or used them instrumentally, their adoption and circulation made identity categories and the numbers attached to them into lived realities. Category names, moreover, were often taken from informal usage or from local administrations, even though their uptake was sometimes random or changed its original function or meaning. In other words, statistics do not only represent national communities but they help to bring them into being in conjunction with other administrative and social practices.

Even though labels and categories were relevant to imagining a people, according to Anderson, “the real innovation of the census-takers [...] was not in the construction of ethnic-racial classifications, but rather in their systematic quantification” (Anderson 2006, 168; original emphasis). Quantification is relevant for Anderson, because a single number can capture a heterogeneous collection of people as a single group of which the members are horizontally related and comparable. Additionally, the bird’s-eye view convention of modern maps created a “logoization” of land that made it possible to understand a given territory as a clearly delineated entity belonging to a particular people, which formed in turn a powerful emblem for anticolonial nationalisms (Anderson 2006, 170ff.). And so, the colonial state created a grammar that provided emerging postcolonial nations with a powerful tool: the ability to express that it is this (we, our country), not that (they, the former colonial rulers).

To this very day, we see that statistics are central elements of nation-building. This is because statistics play, among others, a role in applications for (international) aid, the distribution of government funds, and claims for political and civil rights. When we turn to the Caribbean Netherlands, we see that present-day statistics, for instance on population size and inflation, play a crucial role in political discussions and policy development regarding the standard of living, as poverty is one of the most pressing issues (Commissie Spies 2015; Tuzgöl-Broekhoven et al., 2020). At the same time, interlinked quantification, visualization, and categorization practices may contribute to the constitution of varying notions of population and nationness.

As mentioned in the opening of this introduction, statistics about the Caribbean Netherlands are since 2010 produced by Statistics Netherlands (SN), the central statistical office in The Hague, the Netherlands, that collaborates with a field office in Kralendijk, Bonaire. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in both locations, this essay recounts how the Caribbean Netherlands was imagined through statistical practices between 2010 and 2020, the eventful years following the constitutional changes in the Kingdom of the Netherlands. I particularly ask what happens when standardized statistical techniques informed by Westphalian notions



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are applied to non-sovereign territories for which the independent nation-state is not the self-evident organizational form of social and political life.

I will argue that although the BES islands are technically part of the European Netherlands nation-state, the nation-state and its characteristics are in practice not conceived and utilized as the sole methodological underpinnings for the production of statistics about the Caribbean Netherlands and its island societies. Nevertheless, “methodological nationalism” is still the main recognized practice (cf. Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002; see also next section), and, thus, we have to ask ourselves how the discrepancies, frictions, and adjustments that arise with respect to the centrality of the nation-state relate to how non-sovereign populations and communities are imagined and formed through statistics. The aim of this essay is therefore not only to critically examine the effects of standardized techniques in the production of Caribbean Netherlands statistics, but also to identify other conceptualizations of population and territory as part of alternative bureaucratic practices that arise in the making of statistics.

In what follows, I will first elaborate on the historical role of population and economic statistics, after which I will present a conceptual framework based on insights from Science and Technology Studies (STS). I will introduce Helen Tilley’s (2011) notion of “thinking like an empire,” which I apply to the situation of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to address the heterogeneous and multi-interested practices in statistics through which population, belonging, and the state are imagined. Next, I will set out the scenes of my multi-sited fieldwork in the European and the Caribbean Netherlands, in particular The Hague and Bonaire.² In the subsequent empirical sections I will discuss actual statistical practices regarding 1) population statistics, attempting to answer the question “who are we?” that gained increasing relevance for politicians, policy makers, and citizens after 2010; and 2) economic statistics, seeking an answer to the question “how are we doing?” that was relevant for, among others, policy makers in The Hague. In the conclusion, I suggest that the statistical practices discussed in this essay can be considered as a version of a “non-sovereign politics” (Bonilla 2015). However, in this case, it is a politics that plays out in data collection, verification, and categorization, and revolves around notions of origin, population size, and the establishment of flows and movements.

² Another statistical office of SN in Heerlen, the Netherlands, is also regularly involved in the production of statistics about the Caribbean Netherlands. However, this was not the case for the examples discussed in this essay.



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Thinking, seeing, and doing like a kingdom

In their essay “Visualizing Sovereignty: Cartographic Queries for the Digital Age,” Yarimar Bonilla and Max Hantel (2016) demonstrate the significance of the use of techniques and conventions for imagining non-sovereign futures. The authors share their experiment of producing alternative maps of the Caribbean region. By using varying coloring patterns and animations, and by manipulating scale, they visually convey the history of the Caribbean as a site where different forms of postcolonial administration have been practiced. For instance, using similar colors for islands with ties to the same European state (the former “motherland”) breaks with the convention of assigning a different color to each island. Even though the change is simple, it is significant. Whereas the former suggests relations and shared historical ties, the latter suggests “insular sovereignty,” an imaginary of social and political life in which the sea is, moreover, seen as a barrier (instead of a connector) for all social relations (Bonilla and Hantel 2016; cf. Baldacchino 2008).

Behind Bonilla and Handel’s experiment lies a critique of “methodological nationalism,” or “the assumption that the nation/state/society is the natural social and political form of the modern world” (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002, 302). Just like in many other parts of the social sciences, in statistics the nation-state has become, implicitly or explicitly, the “container society” that “encompasses a culture, a polity, an economy and a bounded social group” (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002, 307), whereas provinces, regions, counties, and cities are all imagined as sub-units of this container society. In addition, methodological nationalism is often accompanied by related notions, such as a “sedentary bias,” assuming that people’s lives are fixed to a single location (Sheller and Urry 2006; cf. Malkki 1992). And increasingly, the notion of country of birth as an approximation of ethnicity is adopted in European population statistics, based on the implicit notion that nation-states have “original populations” defined by their connection with the soil (Geschiere 2009; Simon 2012). It is through varying combinations of these and other assumptions that statistical techniques imply the notion of the Westphalian nation-state: the idea that territory, population, and the state map onto each other.

But what happens when standardized statistical techniques informed by Westphalian notions are applied to non-sovereign territories for which the independent nation-state is



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not the self-evident organizational form of social and political life?³ To answer this question, I propose to examine statistical methods as socio-material assemblages, instead of fixed sets of standardized techniques, that “travel” in this case from the European Netherlands to the Caribbean Netherlands. Yet, before elaborating on this conceptualization, it is helpful to first briefly expand on the role of statistics in constituting the nation-state in the period of postcolonial independence.

The dominance of the nationally bounded population in official statistics is not surprising given the development of statistical methods, techniques, and standards in the service of nineteenth century statecraft (Desrosières 1998; cf. Anderson 2006). In this era, statistics, in conjunction with the social sciences and humanities, managed to establish populations as pre-existing and contained entities characterized for example by quantifiable birth and death rates, and mobility patterns (Curtis 2001; Foucault 2009). Populations thus became measurable and manageable. This was both a technical and social accomplishment, as argued by Alain Desrosières (1998) who showed how modern statistics have been inextricably linked with the power and knowledge of governments. One result is an improved capacity for government control and exclusionary politics and policies (Nobles 2000; Leibler and Breslau 2005). At the same time, statistics can contribute to the social, political or economic empowerment of less powerful groups in society (Kertzer and Arel 2002; Appadurai 2012).

Many techniques and indicators, such as sample surveys and national income statistics, were developed and employed as part of imperial administrations. After post-war independence they not only continued to be significant in postcolonial nation-states, but also in the reinvention of post-imperial European nation-states (Savage 2010; Steinmetz 2013). Next to population statistics, economic statistics became increasingly relevant. The national economy, Timothy Mitchell (2002, 5) states “did not come about as a new name for the processes of exchange that economists had always studied. It occurred as the reorganization and transformation of those and other processes, into an object that had not previously existed.” He describes how this required interventions, such as determining and standardizing street names, assigning ownership, homogenizing variations in agricultural activity, and gaining access to national accounts, in order to make statistics representative

³ In general, a critical take on this issue might also avoid persistent reifications of stateness and other political collectives in studies of the state (see e.g. Bierschenk and Sardan 2014). See also work in island studies that argue for an epistemological move away from methodological nationalism (e.g. Baldacchino 2008; Gillis 2009).



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of the national economy as an “objective culture [...] with solidity and substance of its own” (Mitchell 2002, 103). Seen in this way, economic statistics both serve and represent the national economy or the state’s control of “the circulation of money within a defined geographical space” (Mitchell 2002, 6; my emphasis), and as such occupy a large part of our national consciousness (cf. Kalpagam 2000; Karabell 2014).

Statistical methods used in new postcolonial (or neocolonial) settings were and never will be exact copies of those used in the former metropolises, and their application has never been without difficulty or friction. This is also the case for the Caribbean Netherlands. As suggested in the introduction, national communities do not exist separately from the application of statistical and other techniques. To learn more about nationness, it is therefore of interest to closely examine the transfer of methods from the metropolitan center in the European part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to the non-sovereign territories in the Caribbean part.

My point of departure for studying statistical methods is that they can be understood as assemblages of bodies of knowledge and technologies held together by their advocates and their aims and interests (Law, Ruppert, and Savage 2011).⁴ This approach, which is developed in Science and Technology Studies (STS), focuses on the everyday practice of statistics-making and taking, and incorporates two important aspects: first, the (in)stability of methods as they travel across sites and are adapted to new circumstances (cf. De Laet and Mol 2000); and second, the role of material and knowledge infrastructures, such as digital registers and classification systems, as well as ideas, concepts, and interest that might or might not facilitate the adoption of a method, technique, or formula (see e.g. Van Heijster and DeRock 2020). Whether a statistic is produced in the same way at a different site depends, among others, on whether and how actors at that particular site adapt themselves to so-called “immutable mobiles” travelling from place to place (Latour 1990).⁵ However, it is of equal importance to understand the more fluid practices, as local administrators may adapt particular methods to their own needs. When focusing on adaptations, statistical methods can also be considered as “mutable mobiles” (Mol and Law 1994). I therefore

⁴ For instance, the consumer price index (CPI) has become a proxy for the standard of living, because policy makers (their advocates) can use it to calculate how much social benefits should increase.

⁵ In this case, statistical offices serve as “centers of calculation” that organize and standardize local circumstances so that (ideally) a method can be applied without any adaptations.

Between 2010 and 2013 consumer prices rose by 12% on Bonaire, 14% on Saba, and 22% on Sint Eustatius (Statistics Netherlands 2013).



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examined how certain statistical methods (on, for example, population numbers, origin categories, and price measurements) were both taken up and adjusted or translated to the everyday production of statistics (cf. Callon 1986; Akrich 1992) and how this consequently (re)made self-evident denominators such as population and economic activity.

I follow Helen Tilley's (2011) conceptualization of knowledge practices in empires to follow statistical practices as outcomes of interactions between different actors across the Atlantic, in which actors at both sides can exert agency. Her notion "thinking like an empire" helps to understand not only what changes in terms of statistical practices, but also how this (former) empire operates. The expression "thinking like an empire" (or, in this case, thinking like a kingdom) stresses, first, the fact that the space of knowledge production in imperial configurations (cf. Stoler 2006) can be considered as neither national or international. Instead, they are "interstitial." Second, it acknowledges that to produce knowledge in order to facilitate centralized control or to "see like a state" (Scott 1998) is not only to simplify and decontextualize. On the contrary, actors may also seek to place something in a particular context and diversify the knowledge they produce, for example with the purpose to represent local interests or to critique metropolitan rule. Finally, the types of knowledge produced, methods used, and interests satisfied are part of a constant negotiation process revolving around the question of what is "good" knowledge. This question has no bite-sized answers. Rather, it raises more questions, such as: does "good" knowledge include the cultural specificities of different people and should their wellbeing be measured differently at different locations? These and other issues lie at the very heart of the statistical practices I studied at different sites of the Atlantic.

Making statistics across the Atlantic Ocean

The statistical office of the Caribbean Netherlands does not directly fall under the supervision of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate Policy of the central government in the European Netherlands, but is part of a new governmental structure, the Rijksdienst Caribisch Nederland (RCN, National Office for the Caribbean Netherlands), that came into existence after 10-10-10. The Caribbean office is located in Kralendijk, Bonaire, the most populated island with about twenty thousand residents that serves as the administrative center of the Caribbean Netherlands. As such, it functions as the central point for data collection and publication of statistics for all three BES islands, including the smaller islands Saba (1.9 thousand residents) and Sint Eustatius (3.1 thousand residents)



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located 800-900 kilometers (500-560 miles) north-east of Bonaire. As part of the larger Statistical Netherlands (SN) office, the office in Bonaire executes together with statisticians in The Hague and Heerlen a statistical program (that is, the description of core statistics to be produced and their underlying methods) designed as a “copy” of the European Netherlands program.

I started fieldwork in The Hague in 2015, as part of a larger project on the production of statistics about European populations. In the course of this project, I attended a number of meetings about the Caribbean Netherlands, where several things caught my attention. First, the Caribbean Netherlands were considered as part of the European Netherlands statistical office, but were not included in European regulations as determined by Eurostat (the statistical office of the European Union). Nor was the office in Kralendijk affiliated with regional regulatory organizations, such as the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). As a consequence, statistics need to adhere to European Dutch quality standards, but not to standards set by Eurostat or CARICOM. Second, the need of policy makers for statistics became more urgent in the light of reports of continuing poverty and rising prices.⁶ The question of whether and how prices should be more regulated and benefits increased was in the air, and would develop into the demand for a “social minimum” (a formal guideline for the income needed to maintain a minimum living standard) by politicians in the Caribbean Netherlands and The Hague.

Following these observations, I increasingly focused on the production of statistics on the Caribbean Netherlands, in particular population and economic statistics. My fieldwork in The Hague continued, but moved also to Kralendijk, including video conference meetings between the respective offices. Fieldwork in The Hague took place in an organization of over two thousand employees and involved a changing configuration of research participants. It was organized in eleven visits spread over two years (ranging from two days to three weeks), which allowed me to follow topics over a longer period. At the time of writing, fieldwork at Statistics Caribbean Netherlands in Kralendijk was still ongoing. In this essay, I draw on a fieldwork visit of a month in 2018 and three weeks in 2020. During these visits, I became familiar with the everyday work practices of four Bonairian statisticians, who are supported by fieldworkers on Saba and Sint Eustatius. The empirical material I discuss here is predominantly about Bonaire, complemented with examples from Saba and Sint Eustatius. At both field sites, I followed statistical practices by observing meetings, joining casual

⁶ Between 2010 and 2013 consumer prices rose by 12% on Bonaire, 14% on Saba, and 22% on Sint Eustatius (Statistics Netherlands 2013).



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conversations, interviewing, collecting documentation (for example reports and manuals), and following digital fora such as e-mail lists and Facebook. I also learned about software and methods that were used and I conducted interviews with statisticians and other civil servants on the infrastructures relevant to statistical practice, mainly the population register. This led to insights about different practices: verification in counting populations, the use of categories in making statistics about origin, and data collection as part of price measurements. Let us see what this looked like.

“Who are we?” Counting people

Consider the following conversation:

Statistician: So, what do you say when someone asks what the aim of the survey is?

Fieldworker: We are collecting data to make statistics and solve problems.

Statistician: It's not about what SN is. Also, it's better not to refer to things like “making statistics about income inequality,” a lot of people will not be interested. What works much better is explaining that it is about “who we are,” for instance, about how many people live on Bonaire, how many men, how many women, which languages, how many people speak Papiamentu [the language spoken by most residents], how many people are religious. People are preoccupied with this now. So that way you can play into what people find interesting.

The tête-à-tête above took place during an interview training at the statistical office in Kralendijk. Statisticians working for this office collect data partly from secondary administrative sources and partly through surveys conducted by fieldworkers. The conversation, first, points out the relevance of the question “who are we” on Bonaire after 10-10-10. The issue of Bonairian identity and belonging became more salient when the island's population increased by more than 3.5 thousand residents between 2011 and 2016, with most of the population growth accounted for by people moving from the European Netherlands to



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Bonaire (CBS 2016). Second, the conversation suggests that the “we” in this question is not necessarily a pre-existing, demarcated entity. Incorporating respondents in a survey by using the plural personal pronoun “we” implies a communality between the interviewer and respondent in terms of the community they belong to, whether or not they know each other (cf. Anderson 2006). Below, I will further explore this question and its implications for notions of belonging by focusing on the role of research methods and statistical procedures. Central to this exploration are two population statistics: population size and nativity.

For the Caribbean Netherlands, SN introduced the use of secondary administrative data as the basis of population statistics. Instead of a door-to-door count, the total resident number and their main characteristics (sex, age, marital status, etc.) would be based on records in the digital population register. This register contains basic information about residents and is updated when people notify the authorities of births, deaths, address changes, and so on. It is also an important record for the government to collect taxes and distribute benefits. The register, called the PIVA (Persoonsinformatievoorziening Nederlandse Antillen en Aruba), is modelled after the municipal population registers in the European Netherlands, the BRP (Basis Registratie Persoonsgegevens). Interestingly, the use of an already existing, secondary source; that is, the “(im)mutable mobile” of the population register, replaced the door-to-door enumeration that was an important data source until 2010. What is more, the population numbers are largely produced by statisticians in The Hague, who receive a version of the PIVA records. This has two implications. First, the resulting statistics always need to be verified, as the original records may contain errors. Part of this work consists of a “plausibility check.” When I asked how one knows whether population numbers are plausible, statisticians responded that this is known from the “mass and the flows,” i.e. the knowledge accrued over the past years about gradual population changes, including regular fluctuations, such as increased death rates in winter. Second, notable changes in numbers were understandable in terms of “national happenings,” such as the locally highly mediatized influx of Venezuelan refugees in 2015. These types of regional events may have a major impact on the demographic situation of the individual islands.

Verification of population numbers ran into problems, precisely due to a lack of customized and localized approaches and knowledge. As one statistician stated: “A death rate can rise from ninety to 115. If this were the [European] Netherlands, you would be alarmed if the difference between two years is more than five percent” (interview October 5, 2016). In this case, the statistician “had little to go by,” as his regular techniques did not work with regard to smaller numbers, which are often accompanied by more erratic fluctuations. For some



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statisticians such difficulties, accompanied by a larger error rate in population register records, caused them to express their concern about setting up a statistical program on a population that has, compared to the European Netherlands, the “size of a small municipality.”

The production of reliable population statistics thus depended on the implementation of informal and formal techniques based on large numbers and a sedentary population, which did not apply the Caribbean Netherlands. Some of the resulting problems were resolved when stories and facts that explained fluctuations started to circulate from the Caribbean to The Hague. Saba, for instance, is the site of an international medical school and therefore a relatively large number of foreign, North American students. The island’s population register has recently been cleaned up, removing these students among others, which led to a sudden drop in the number of residents. Similarly, Sint Eustatius is home to a relatively high number of seasonal workers working at the NuStar Oil Terminal. A number of them recently left the island, because their contracts were terminated, which affected populations numbers significantly. Such circulating stories help to check numbers. Moreover, they show the limitations of the reliance on large, supposedly stable numbers of a predominantly sedentary population. The Caribbean Netherlands case shows, in contrast, the importance of knowledge about local circumstances and events in the context of both small and very mobile populations. Without such knowledge, fluctuations in numbers are hard if not impossible to understand.

Hence, large numbers and sedentarism as part of an implicit methodological nationalism prove to be difficult to apply and were therefore, in the statistical practices I observed, adapted to identify trends and fluctuations in smaller, mobile populations. The latter was confirmed by a Caribbean statistician who highlighted the shortcomings of standardized methods based on default assumptions, such as a large national and bounded population, in representing what counts as a community in Bonaire: “This is not the right way of looking at it. This is us” (interview November 10, 2018). Thinking, seeing, and doing like a kingdom in this practice thus implied the application of contextual and anecdotal knowledge in order to include other types of population and living in the statistical system.

The “native Bonairian” and European Dutch

Besides counting, the question “who are we?” also involves the construction and use of categories that characterize people for example along the lines of ethnicity. Reports about



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the increasing immigration of “European Dutch people of Dutch origin” (CBS 2015), who moved to Bonaire to work for the newly instated government agencies, were accompanied by a public debate on immigration and its consequences for the identity and interests of Bonaire’s long-term residents (see e.g. Broere 2019). To be sure, these debates were not new, but rather common for a region in which transmigratory movements between the Caribbean islands, Latin America, and continental Europe are frequent, and where public resources may be scarce. Of interest to this essay, however, is how the notion of “origin” was operationalized to make statistics about “native Bonairians”—a category that had not been in regular usage before. For instance, in 2018 SN published that on “1 January 2017, nearly 40 percent of Bonaire inhabitants were born on the island (over 7 thousand).” This finding was supplemented with information and figures on specific locations of groups of residents: “Rincon is the neighborhood with the highest share of residents born locally (65 percent). There are also relatively large groups of native Bonairians in Mexico (53 percent), Amboina (51 percent) and North Saliña (48 percent).” “European Dutch” residents were reported to live throughout the island with concentrations in Lagun Hill (Statistics Netherlands 2018, 33–34, my emphasis).

For some years there had been discussion about making distinctions based on origin. One statistician expressed it as follows: “I would really like to apply the definition they use in the [European] Netherlands, just from our perspective” (interview February 3, 2015). He suggested to categorize residents in the Caribbean Netherlands not born on one of the islands as “foreign” in official statistics or “allochthonous” (from another soil), despite having been born in formally the same country.⁷ Using these categorizations, some statisticians thought, would also be an opportunity for SN to communicate figures on the exact proportion of “European Dutch people” as part of total number of migrants, and hence to refute all kinds of rumors. Moreover, “origin” should refer to island of birth, instead of country of birth. This would also replace “Antillean Netherlands” and “Caribbean Netherlands” as country of birth that, for many, are mostly administrative categories rather than places one identifies with. Whereas the production of statistics using these new categorizations was technically difficult on the basis of already existing surveys or the pre-2010 register system, an updated register enabled the production of these statistics. The latter included a new field that provided space for “island of birth.” It was now possible to

⁷ The term “allochthonous” has been criticized extensively for its stigmatizing effects and racialized connotations (see e.g. Yanow and Van der Haar 2013; Groenendijk 2007; Bovens et al. 2016). Currently SN has largely replaced the term with “from a migrant background.”



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produce statistics about eilandskinderen or yu di tera (“island’s children”), terms that circulated in the statistical offices.

The use of place-of-birth statistics, however, does not necessarily lead to “good” answers to the question “who are we,” as a statistician I worked with claimed. Even when not born on the island, one can still be a Bonairian, he argued. He referred to the many people who were born on Curaçao and grew up on Bonaire. Also, people who moved from the European Netherlands may say they are Bonairian, he remarked. Such considerations were lost in the production of statistics about “native Bonairians.” In any case, apart from this discussion, the above considerations about place of birth led, among others, to abandoning the limited categories of second and third generation migrants, because it was clear to the statisticians that they were not easily applicable in the Bonairian context. Accordingly, thinking, seeing, and doing like a kingdom included the reversal of exclusionary categories adopted from the Netherlands; a practice in which local statistician thwarted the implicit assumptions of methodological nationalism and made it increasingly possible to practice statistics outside the fixed container of the nation-state and related notions of scale and sedentarism. However, the “native Bonairian” as a local category also reifies particular (other) notions of identification and belonging; only the ones born on the island are to be considered “true” Bonairians, which excludes other residents from being Bonairian and gives a limited, territorialized interpretation to the concept of “origin.” Let us now move to the production of economic statistics, which is characterized by similar tensions between working within methodological nationalism, on the one hand, and countering it, on the other.

“How are we doing?” Measuring inflation

Before 2010, the costs of living were already high to the extent that many residents, both wage-earners and pensioners, could not meet the basic costs of living (Commissie Spies 2015; Straatmeijer 2018). Around 2010, however, several new developments caused an overall increase in prices: the transition to a dollar economy, the influx of wealthier civil servants from the European Netherlands, and the continuing high gas prices despite decreasing oil prices. Due to the constitutional changes, residents, politicians, and other officials now looked to the ministries in The Hague for solutions. To respond, The Hague required better and more statistics on inflation, employment, household income, Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and so forth. Central to this was the production of the consumer price index (CPI), which is often taken as an approximation of the standard of living. The CPI serves as a



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measure of inflation, and affects wage and benefits corrections, which makes the index relevant to Caribbean residents and European Dutch authorities alike. Until 2010, the CPI was composed by the Netherlands Antilles statistical office, and Saba and Sint Eustatius were not computed separately. After the dismantling of the Netherlands Antilles and the introduction of new political structures, methods from the European Netherlands were partly copied to the Caribbean Netherlands. This included aspects such as the categories of goods and services to be measured, the types of consumption to be included (for example only consumption by island residents), and sampling methods (exactly which prices to measure).⁸

Not only populations are constituted with statistics, but national economies are too (Mitchell 2002). I will demonstrate this by first following the constitution of a national body of consumers through sampling and data collection. Next, I will show how statisticians and fieldworkers managed two assumptions of methodological nationalism: sedentary consumers and a consistent supply of products (and thereby prices). My focus will predominantly be on the collection of retail prices.

To record prices consistently over time, fieldworkers are provided with lists containing all products to be inventoried in stores (including their type of packaging and weight); this is the sample. It is generally recognized, also by SN, that fieldworkers and statisticians base their choices on products they deem popular or representative; this is referred to as “purposive sampling” (UNECE et al., 2009). Such judgements can rely on other data sources, but also on tacit knowledge and hearsay. Setting up these lists, one statistician explained, requires “knowing what the economy looks like; you need to know whether supermarkets always sell the same brands and whether agreements have been made about the price of certain products” (interview April 5, 2016). Such knowledge, once acquired, needs to be continuously updated, for instance, when the packaging changes⁹ or a particular phone has been replaced with a new model. To keep track of price changes, Bonairian statisticians monitored policies, such as policies that determined the price of gas, and used the internet to take stock of prices for goods purchased abroad. But keeping up to date also involved consulting each other for example about where to buy goods. Everyday conversations at the office usually included small talk and exchanges about stores and where to purchase particular products. So, I

⁸ The copied methods concerned previously used methods and routines for data collection by fieldworkers, which have become obsolete in the Netherlands where stores now supply transaction data.

⁹ A small, but not irrelevant illustration of this is a change prompted by a supermarket manager who decided to cut a carton of twelve eggs in half.



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regularly witnessed seemingly trivial chats, such as: “So where do you buy your dog collar?” On learning the store name, the statistician who started the conversation, continued: “Is it busy, do lots of people go there? Should it be part of the CPI?” Even more, after the introduction of the new CPI measurements, some statisticians started to visit different supermarkets during their private shopping rounds in order to learn which products were sold and how business was going.

Gathering detailed information also required regular field visits and chats with shop owners and salespersons. When I joined a statistician during her yearly update of the list of products to be included in the sample, she initiated a conversation with a salesperson from a store selling mainly electronics and household goods. “Which lady shave sells best?” she asked. The salesperson seemed to weigh the options and then reached for three products behind the counter. “So, which one sells most? Do you know this?” the statistician insisted. According to the salesperson they sold equally well. The statistician was satisfied and took pictures of all three. Fieldworkers were encouraged to act like this statistician; that is, to actively inquire with shopkeepers about what people bought, in which quantities goods were bought, and why goods were not on the shelves anymore.

These efforts, it might be argued, involved not only a detailed stock-taking of a range of goods over time, but also the informal social analysis of a (particular) body of consumers within a defined space. This suggests an understanding of “the economy” as “a self-contained, internally dynamic, and statistical measurable sphere of social action [and] scientific analysis” as well as a product of “the collective imagination to place” alongside ideas of culture, society, or the nation (Mitchell 2002, 4). Accomplishing such an understanding not only relied on the statisticians’ knowledge of geographically bounded consumption, but also of their understanding of the actual interdependency of the island’s economy (in particular its supply chains). National economies are assumed to be continuous in time, and regular, high-volume price measurements assure prices can be observed to “move” in time.

However, in the Caribbean Netherlands measuring the prices of retail products was challenging, because shelves are frequently empty, for instance, when cargo ships from the Netherlands are delayed. Furthermore, prices and availability can quickly change because of volatile trading relations with Venezuela. This means that, in some months, there is no price to record. Updating the CPI not monthly but every three months to guarantee the uninterrupted “movement” of prices partly compensated for this. Additionally, the grip on continuity depended on the statisticians and fieldworkers’ experience of the actual



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interdependency of the economy: their knowledge of when cargo ships and flights could be expected, of retailers and supply chains, and of similar products from other countries and suppliers that could be measured instead. This knowledge enabled them to be at the right place and the right time and, hence, to come up with reliable information. Another aspect of an interconnected economy is consumption abroad. Many island residents buy a significant part of their clothing and electronics in Curaçao, the Netherlands or Miami (cf. Meinder et al. 2017). The reasons are that the range of available products is limited, considered of bad quality, and that many people have long-standing relations outside of the island and are used to travelling frequently. Statisticians managed this aspect of the economy by including some products and services in online price measurements. But this did not alter the fact that a large selection of locally available products and services are measured even though their popularity on the island is low.

Overall, the practice of measuring the CPI first shows that the method itself is adaptable to circumstances all over the world, among others by allowing for purposive sampling. This is a well-known characteristic of economic statistics; that is, they are internationally regulated in such a way that they can be used in a wide variety of circumstances. In other words, they are “mutable mobiles.” But the final two examples, on the complexity of volatility of supply and consumption abroad, also show us something else: contextual knowledge is not only used in verification (as in the example of population statistics discussed earlier), it also shapes data collection. Fieldworkers’ and statisticians’ understanding of the interconnectedness of the economy helped to “smoothen” the volatility of product availability and prices, and it partly “domesticated” consumption. By doing so, statisticians managed the fact that island economies do not always adhere to the large numbers, relative predictability, and sedentary behavior assumed for larger nation-states. Concurrently, they were thinking, seeing, and doing like a state; that is, they served multiple interests simultaneously, namely producing statistics for metropolitan bureaucratic rule and demonstrating the high costs of living on the islands.

Conclusion

This essay set out to understand how statistical methods and techniques modelled after the properties of sovereign nation-states and national economies travelled from the European Netherlands to the Caribbean Netherlands. It showed that the nation-state and its characteristics are in practice not conceived and utilized as the sole methodological



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underpinnings to produce statistics. Statistical practices in relation to the determination of population numbers, origin statistics, and the consumer price index (CPI) showed that the assumed properties of nation-states (for example large population numbers and continuous price developments) were worked around to produce statistics about the island populations. Such adjustments to standardized methods can be assumed to take place in any statistical practice anywhere in the world. Nevertheless, the case of the Caribbean Netherlands, and Bonaire in particular, can teach us something about issues of non/sovereignty and belonging in our contemporary postcolonial era.

I have shown that, since the development of statistics is closely connected to the emergence and development of sovereign (particularly European) nation-states, current statistical methods and practices are still modelled and executed within a Westphalian paradigm. One of the consequences is that while practices can be adapted to local conditions and needs—allowing “a population” to be understood differently—they never entirely seem to escape the default assumptions of methodological nationalism. The case of the “native Bonairian” category is indicative. This new category in Bonairian census making locates “origin” in the island itself instead of the nation-state of the European Netherlands or its “sub-unit,” the Caribbean Netherlands. At the same time, however, it also reiterates the notion of a population characterized by and rooted in a fixed and bounded territory.

The case of the CPI, furthermore, showed that the methods to calculate consumer prices and the cost of living, including its underlying notions about a “national economy,” were “mutable” in the sense that the measurements both allowed for harmonization and local adaptation. Seen this way, statistical practices can be considered as a version of a “non-sovereign politics” playing out in statistical knowledge practices (Bonilla 2015). This is to say that statistical practices examined in this essay challenge the premises of methodological nationalism (for example a large sedentary population), but while they trouble these assumptions, they “cannot—or perhaps should not—be easily broken” (Bonilla 2015, xiv).

Finally, the statistical practices I described and discussed in this essay did not only show how populations and economies are imagined, but also who gets to imagine them through what kind of technical applications and, often, ordinary activities. Thinking, seeing, and doing like a kingdom provides us with an approach to observe the (re)making of statistics by a variety of actors. Statisticians and fieldworkers, I learned, do not only apply standards from the European part of the Kingdom (The Hague), but at times critique, implicitly or explicitly, metropolitan rule, for example by appropriating and reversing the use of exclusionary categories adopted from the European Netherlands (in the case of population



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statistics). I also showed the significance of ordinary local knowledge to imagine small, mobile populations (and the fluctuations in their numbers) in verification practices, and how that contributes to the question of what constitutes “good” data. Attention for contextualized practices and local knowledge can open up a discussion about the various epistemological positions that could be possible in the discipline of statistics and, more particularly, in the making of Caribbean Netherlands statistics. Of course, none of the practices examined here are settled, and more can be learned from knowledge practices outside the domain of the state. Nevertheless, they show the relevance of attending to spaces for improvisation, translation, and critique within standardized systems of measurements that travel across the Kingdom of the Netherlands.¹⁰ It is from these spaces that we can potentially learn about ways of thinking and imagining that allow for varying forms of belonging.

¹⁰ In the US, Canada, New Zealand and Australia, “data sovereignty” has been a guiding concept for discussions about statistics, colonial legacies, and sovereignty. However, such discussion cannot be directly applied to the Caribbean Netherlands. Insights into current data practices can however be a starting point to explore Caribbean futures and the role of statistics and other data practices.



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