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Explorations | Exploraciones

Imagining the Nation in the Classroom: Belonging and Nationness in the Dutch Caribbean

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Abstract:

This Exploration focuses on ideologies of belonging and feelings of nationness on the Dutch Caribbean islands of Sint Maarten and Sint Eustatius. The new constitutional framework that came into effect within the Kingdom of the Netherlands on 10 October 2010 conferred a new political status to these islands, thereby affecting the complexity of political subjectivity, nationness and belonging within the context of Caribbean nonsovereignty. The article presents primary schools as important ethnographic sites to study the (re)construction of ideologies of belonging and senses of nationness. Here susceptible minds can be moulded into internalizing ideologies, through which children might be socialized into dividing their fellow citizens or citizens-to-be into those who belong and those who do not. Preliminary to extensive ethnographic field research, the authors assume transmigrancy and diasporic religion respectively as central features that might challenge current fictions of modern secular sovereignty. *Keywords:* belonging, nationness, Dutch Caribbean, nonsovereignty, classroom ethnography, children.

Resumen: Imaginando la nación en la clase: Pertenencia y nacionalidad en el Caribe Neerlandés

Esta Exploración se enfoca en las ideologías de pertenencia y en los sentimientos de nacionalidad (*nationness*) en las islas caribeñas holandesas de Sint Maarten y Sint Eustatius. El nuevo marco constitucional que entró en vigor en el Reino de los Países Bajos el 10 de octubre de 2010 confirió un nuevo estatus político a estas islas, con lo cual afectó a la complejidad de la subjetividad política, de la nacionalidad y de la pertenencia en el contexto de la no soberanía caribeña. Este artículo presenta las escuelas de primaria como lugares etnográficos relevantes para estudiar la (re)construcción de las ideologías de pertenencia y los sentimientos de nacionalidad. En las aulas se pueden moldear las mentes susceptibles para que interioricen ideologías, a través de las cuales se podría socializar a los niños para que dividan a sus conciudadanos o a los ciudadanos en ciernes en los que pertenecen y los que no pertenecen.

Previamente a la investigación de campo etnográfica extensiva, los autores asumen que la trans migración y la religión diaspórica son aspectos fundamentales que podrían desafiar las ficciones actuales de la soberanía secular moderna. *Palabras clave*: pertenencia, nacionalidad, Caribe Neerlandés, no soberanía, etnografía en clase, niños.

The dissolution of the Netherlands Antilles on 10 October 2010 (commonly referred to as 10-10-10) has given new impetus to debates on belonging, identity, sovereignty, and citizenship in the Dutch Caribbean. The recent constitutional reforms have substantially reshaped the structure of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Curaçao and Sint Maarten have become ‘autonomous countries’ within the Kingdom, achieving the same status as Aruba, which gained autonomy in 1986. Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba, collectively known as the Caribbean Netherlands or the BES islands, have become overseas ‘special municipalities’ directly administered by The Hague, the seat of government in the Netherlands. With this new constitutional order comes the need for the inhabitants of these islands and, particularly, their politicized elites to reconstruct ideologies of belonging and to explore their new relationship to the Dutch nation, and, at a more abstract level, to push against the epistemic limitations that current discourses of Westphalian sovereignty represent (cf. Bonilla, 2013a).

In a world of nation-states, ideologies of belonging are often still framed in nationalist terms, or in anti-nationalist terms as a reactive narrative to imperial narrations. However, in the case of most Caribbean societies, these ideologies cannot be conventionally defined within strictly territorial boundaries or customary discourses of sovereignty and statehood (Duany, 2000). Like other places in the ‘nonsovereign Caribbean’ (Bonilla, 2013a), the Dutch Caribbean islands fall outside of the traditional definitions of either independent states or official colonies, defying hegemonic ideas – even if just a myth – of a clearly bounded nation defined by a distinct land, people, and state. Island ‘nations’ are, simply, *not* always imagined as inherently limited and sovereign political communities, as the much-cited Benedict Anderson (1983) once put it. In regard to the Dutch Caribbean, firstly, they are still part of the ‘extended statehood’ of the Kingdom of the Netherlands (Kruijt & De Jong, 2005). Secondly, they are characterized by a continual influx and outflow of people, including many il/legal residents travelling back and forth (within the region or from the islands to the Netherlands and vice versa). Sint Maarten, now a constituent country of the Kingdom, and Sint Eustatius, since 10-10-10 a special municipality, are especially emblematic cases. They are characterized by high influxes of migrants and unceasing flows of people, goods, ideas, et cetera, which have greatly affected their past, present and possibly future politics of belonging (see e.g. Guadeloupe, 2009). Under the new constitutional arrangements, however, Sint Maarten has greater self-government, whereas Sint Eustatius (known to locals as Statia) falls completely under the jurisdiction of the Netherlands. Yet, the citizens of both islands retain Dutch passports. These conditions, of course, challenge the obvious anchoring of identification and belong-

ing to a single, bounded territory, government and citizenship. Moreover, they expose how the residents of these nonsovereign islands, through very different civic and political realities, construct alternative forms of political subjectivity and seek a language from which to imagine a sense of belonging outside conventional terms and categories.

Scholars that examine such a search for alternative forms and languages in the nonsovereign Caribbean usually focus on collective projects emerging among political parties, social movements and more specifically labour activists (Bonilla, 2013a; see also Lewis, 2013). By understanding nationness and citizenship both as processes of becoming and the ability to participate fully, we also consider the classroom as a crucial site of study. Consequently, in this Exploration we will stress that primary schools are important civil institutions in turning children into political subjects and citizens, and hence pivotal in the understanding of politics of belonging and feelings of nationness. Using the classroom as a lens will highlight some central features of the island 'nations' discussed in this article, which might contribute to the rethinking of much-used notions such as nationness, a cultural concept that binds people on the basis of shared identifications or feelings of belonging, and citizenship, a political concept deriving from people's relationship to a state. In the case of the 'autonomous' country Sint Maarten, we question in what ways high influxes of migrants influence ideologies of belonging and nationness that are taught and created in primary schools. With regard to Statia, where all primary schools are religiously run, we will explore the role of diasporic religion in structuring feelings of belonging and imagining Statianness in a process of imposed Dutchification of the education system. We will conclude this Exploration with a brief coda stressing Dutch Caribbean notions of belonging and nationness that might advance critical discussions on the persistent 'fiction of modern secular sovereignty' (Bonilla, 2013b).

Turning children into citizens

Hegemonic ideologies of belonging to Sint Maarten and Sint Eustatius are differentiated and hierarchized along ethnic, racial, class, gender, and religious lines. Such distinctions are primarily understood in relation to the continuing impact of the (former) motherland, the influence of resistance movements and postcolonial nationalism. This has resulted in the dominance of very specific notions of identity formation and belonging; in particular, ethno-racial (Creole, Black) conceptions for imagining the island 'nations' have dominated much of the research and writing on identity formation, belonging and nationness in the Dutch Caribbean (see e.g. Oostindie, 2000; Oostindie & Klinkers, 2001). Some scholars argue for a more complex reading, as these dominant and essentializing categories fail to comprehend more nuanced, processual ways in which identity and belonging are negotiated on the ground in daily life (De Koning, 2011; Starink-Martha, 2013), and/or in transborder lives and through transna-

tional meshworks or social fields. Even when, for example, discussions of diasporic identifications are explored, many studies often fail to account for the complexity of mobility and movement.

We therefore urge post-10-10-10 research to challenge conventional studies of the Dutch Caribbean islands that hold on to ethnonationalist perspectives, taking political subjectivity to the imagined community of the Kingdom of the Netherlands as merely instrumental (Oostindie, 2000; Oostindie & Klinkers, 2001). In lieu of these, we propose to explore how politics of belonging and feelings of nationness are negotiated and contribute to new forms of 'islandian sovereignties' or alternative forms of political subjectivity stressing past and contemporary dynamics within the region, and, specifically, the impact of current transmigration on the construction of everyday demotic, open-ended discourses and ideologies of belonging and nationness. Here we consider schools, as privileged institutions for the transmission of formative beliefs and principles, to be ideal ethnographic sites for studying the paradoxical relation between dominant, hegemonic, essentializing ideologies of belonging on the one hand, and demotic, everyday, open-ended discourses on the other hand.

First, scholars such as Gellner (1983) and Anderson (1983) have commented on the formal educational system as one of the principal means through which the shared cultural values of a nation are transmitted to individuals. More recently Bauman (2004, p. 2), exploring the role of the school in practices of fashioning citizens, argues that '[w]ithout state schools, there would be no nations as we know them in north-western Europe, no national *conscience collective*, and no effective means of inculcating and rehearsing the conventions of the dominant political culture'. For these authors, state-supervised schooling functions both explicitly and implicitly as a quintessential instrument through which nation-states turn children into citizens, and individuals into political subjects. Within the Dutch Caribbean context of extended statehood, 'quasi colonialism' (Kruijt & De Jong, 2005) and the recent formation of special municipalities, such instrumentalist approach renders both ideological and practical difficulties, for example with regard to language policies. Recently, the research group on the language of instruction in Sint Eustatius concluded that the Statian education system is 'in deep crisis' which is rapidly escalating into social problems. According to the research group, the persistence of The Hague in 'the use of Dutch [a foreign language on the island] as the language of instruction and of Euro-centric approaches, methods and materials has alienated St. Eustatian students from their own language [Statian English], culture and community, with increasingly corrosive effects' (Faraclas, Kester & Mijts, 2013, p. 11, 16). Many stakeholders in this research have stated that negative attitudes toward the Dutch language, the Dutch school system and 'all things Dutch' have increased since 10-10-10. These tendencies expose the politicization of schooling and its consequences for the civil enculturation of children.

Second and more broadly, schools transmit ideals and preferred styles of belonging and nationness to the next generation; they promote ideal roles of

‘the good citizen’ and provide and rehearse ‘rules of the game’ for participation in civil life and the wider, future society (Mannitz, 2004b). Primary schools in particular are pivotal institutions here, as supposedly susceptible minds can be moulded into internalizing hegemonic ideologies, through which children might be socialized to divide their fellow citizens or citizens-to-be into those who belong more, those who belong less, and probably those who are said or believed not to belong. In addition to school curricula, educational programmes and teaching material, teachers – more or less bound by governmental and other structural regulations – play an important role in negotiating how children learn to engage these ideologies. However, instead of solely stressing the role of schooling and pedagogical practices in children’s learning, we consider children themselves as the focal agents in the process of negotiating and contesting ideologies of belonging. This means that the school and its classrooms are sociocultural arenas in which children along with teachers, parents and/or other caretakers constantly make, unmake and remake ideologies of belonging in terms of nationness (or other markers of identification). Classroom ethnography involves, then, the examination of subjective feelings of affiliation, commitment and emotional attachment that are not only about ‘who one is’ or ‘who one should be,’ but ‘how one does’ (Baumann, 2004, p. 3). The latter requires an approach that theoretically and methodologically uses and develops analytical tools which go beyond examining narrative practices and competences only (that is: how one thinks, speaks and argues); rather it entails a conceptual framework and set of data-gathering techniques that seek to thoroughly inquire (non-verbal) performance and play as well.¹ The examples of Sint Maarten and Sint Eustatius given below spur explorations of which flows, ideas, ideologies and feelings are important in understanding the negotiation of belonging and nationness among established as well as newer islanders and their school-going children.

Imagining islandness

Thanks to the work of Anderson (1983), and in particular to his perspective on the origins of national consciousness and Creole pioneering, few scholars contest that the imagined community of the nation is a product of migrants. However, this early movement is often understood, especially in contemporary populist discourses, as having produced a finished and fixed end product: *the nation or nation-state*, with which (present-day) migrants have to contend. The latter become newcomers or in more essentialist terms allochthons – belonging to another soil – that need to assimilate or integrate into what already exists (Ceuppens & Geschiere, 2005). Nationness, in that sense, is implicitly rendered as colonized by the imagined community of the nation and nation-state arrangements of the firstcomers or autochthons. Hence, to paraphrase Peter Geschiere (2009), belonging is a perilous affair; contemporary nationalist discourses and politics of belonging are more often than not exclusionary, with

newcomers usually on the losing hand and (self-proclaimed) firstcomers anxious about their primordial status. The island realities of Sint Maarten and Sint Eustatius challenge this conceptualization and dominant thinking.

Sint Maartenness: nationness as transmigration

Contrary to what 10-10-10 suggests, Sint Maarten is not an autonomous country. It is an autonomous country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Although the island, just like the other internally autonomous countries, is allowed to develop its own nation-building project in an effort to strengthen social cohesion, this must not be mistaken for nationality. All citizens of the Kingdom carry the same passport and have but one nationality, namely Dutch. Nationality then refers to the legal relationship between, in this case, Sint Maarten citizens and the Kingdom of the Netherlands. However, since the Kingdom consists at the same time of multiple nations (the distinctive islands and the Netherlands), nationness as a cultural construct has multiple or layered meanings, and is symbolic of everyday practices and feelings that are much more inclusive than having the passport, the legal residence permit or even ancestry – whatever that might mean.

As a result, the daily social reality of Sint Maarten constantly undermines the concept of a nation as a rather fixed entity creating a divide between supposedly autochthon firstcomers and allochthon newcomers. The reason for this is that being or becoming a Sint Maartener is inconceivable outside continuous migratory and other transborder flows. Not only the constant movement of people, ideas, goods, and capital affects the inhabitants of Sint Maarten, but also drastic climatological events such as hurricanes. But then hurricanes also affect, for example, the French side of the island, Saint Martin, thereby rendering the administrative boundary less significant. Recognizing this leads one to experience and also to appreciate that a sense of Sint Maartenness emerges through these constant flows, which exceeds the island boundaries and, at a more abstract level, Dutch colonial ties or history. Overall, there exists a sense of nationness as Sint Maartenness among all sections of the population whereby movement and migration is inherently part of the process of imagining and narrating ‘the nation’ (Guadeloupe, 2009). Moreover, following the work of Eduardo Glissant (1997), mobility is conceived as ongoing and not solely related to human beings, since what can be distinguished as, for example, the environment and humanly produced objects are inseparable from human actors and, consequently, a sense of belonging.

Even when limited to humans, the statistics and dynamics are nothing short of remarkable: more than 1.4 million tourists enter Sint Maarten annually compared to a population of 37,000 inhabitants, of which 70 per cent is newcomer, that is, born outside the island. As a result, the ethno-, finance-, techno-, media-, and ideoscapes are as transnationally oriented as can possibly be. It is our thesis, therefore, that Sint Maarten and Sint Maartenness can only be conceived as

a *constant transaction* or ‘*Relation*’, to put it in Glissant’s (1997) words. Put another way, nothing is fixed as everything – people, goods, capital, ideas, and the environment – is constantly emerging and reproducing that which has to be imagined as ‘a whole’. Thus nationness refers to belonging as a less codified experience and, again, one that is inconceivable outside continuous transborder flows or transmigrancy.

Such an approach is in line with Caribbeanist research and anthropological work on transnationalism and may as such revise studies and research that still depart from the conventional, even predictable outcome of nationalism as currently being a phenomenon primarily characterized by anxiety and/or clear-cut distinctions between firstcomers and newcomers. More importantly, nationness as transmigrancy encourages us to include in transnational theorizing an open, chaotic relationality that invites entropy as well as a continuing newness, and asks us to embrace a full sense of what it means to ‘consent not to be a single being’ (Diawara, 2011, p. 8). Stressing this idea of open relationality, primary schools may be exemplary of nationness as transmigrancy, since here processes of becoming as well as abilities to participate and belong are both learned and contested on a daily basis. More specifically, children, often newcomers themselves, are – regardless of passport, permit or background – invited to both acquiesce to hegemonic ideologies and produce alternative imaginations. Additionally, due to a shortage of skilled staff, many of the schoolteachers are also newcomers. The latter prompts questions as to how both pupils and teachers, who are demographically speaking a majority, respond to particular hegemonic ideologies concerning who belongs, who belongs less and who does not belong.

Statia: learning the nation through diasporic, religious meshworks

Similar to Sint Maarteners, many Statians are part of a ‘multiple-displaced diaspora’ or a ‘diaspora of a diaspora’ (Cohen, 1992). Such diasporic formations have resulted from a long history of (forced) displacement and resettlement of peoples from Africa, Europe, and East Asia in the Caribbean. Transmigratory populations, especially from other islands in the region, further complement these groups. The majority of Statians today, including children, was not born on the island. Furthermore, born-and-bred Statians have themselves moved to other places, mainly the Netherlands, but often maintain strong ties to the island – frequently moving back and forth.

Statia can therefore be seen as not just emerging out of diasporic formation, but one that is continually being remade. Such remaking suggests an instability in fixed points of origin, which means that one cannot locate the ‘diasporic’s home’ in a clearly defined ancestral homeland (see Tölölyan, 2010). Neither there is finality in points of destination, which undermines the basic idea of diaspora-nationalism or long-distance nationalism that assumes the connection of people living in various fixed locations (the so-called host lands) of a specific territory with what is seen as their ancestral or natal home. As in other forms

of nationalism, scholars of diaspora- or long-distance nationalism presume the nation as this pre-existing, pre-defined stable whole (Baumann, 2004) consisting a people who share a common territory and a collective myth of an ancestral past.

However, Statian practices of hyper mobility, diasporic experiences and border-crossing identification predate these conventional assumptions. They require us to understand diaspora as a subjective and affective condition marked by the multiple experiences of displacement, movement and place-making. And, above all, they illustrate that nationness and belonging are imagined and brought into being in a *real yet imagined diasporic community* that cannot be placed in one single home or territory.

Taking the exploration of Statian diasporic experiences and migratory movements, both on and off the island, one step further, we must include religion, as it plays an important role in structuring feelings of belonging and political subjectivity. ‘European’ general principles of secularization and religious freedom – the supranational heritage of Enlightenment representing modernity (Mannitz, 2004a, p. 88) – do not necessarily form part of Caribbean people’s ‘cultural stuff’ and dynamics of boundary construction. Religion (the Christian religion) is often considered an important value system that might be strongly linked with feelings of belonging, nationness and other cultural characteristics. Particularly the place of religion in school evokes certain questions. For example, is religion a legitimate ethical source; what should be learned about religion; is it considered important to obtain particular religious instructions or to teach a plurality of different beliefs (Mannitz, 2004a)? Inquiries into the relations between schooling and religion might tell us about the normative interpretations and assessment of religion(s) (Mannitz, 2004a) as well as the ways they contribute to a sense of nationness, belonging, and a common bond among citizens and citizens-to-be within the imagined community – especially in the case of Sint Eustatius, where all four primary schools are religiously run schools.

Specifically, the power of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (SDA Church) on Statia seems to lead to very religious conceptions of belonging. This relates to both the established, ‘indigenous’ population and the newcomers, who also intermarry and thus structurally form a transnational network within the entire Kingdom and beyond. Similar to transnational Pentecostalism, it might be argued that the SDA Church has the capacity to embody the open-endedness of a global network of movements and flows, ‘yet offering at the same time a stable collection of narrative formulae and well-organized structures’ (Corten & Marshall-Fratani, 2001, p. 3). In the first place, and historically, Statian Seventh-day Adventists maintain strong ties with Dutch SDA (International) Churches and believers, allowing for new possibilities that go beyond local cultural repertoires and rendering transnational, diasporic modes of identification. Secondly, as a global imagined community, the SDA Church offers symbolic and normative orientation points and action frames that bind Statian islanders, in-

cluding those who do not (permanently) stay at the island. This also concerns education of children and, both directly and indirectly, how nationness is 'learned'. Especially SDA eschatology forms a strong common denominator. The belief that the end of times is near relativizes the popular, secular notion of nationness as something eternal, referring to an alternative 'fatality', to use Benedict Anderson's (1983) terms: Statia is temporary because of the belief of end-times. And this has implications for how islanders – adults and children – deal with newcomers, which may be sublimated in a pan-Caribbean feel, whether on or off the island, that differs from, for example, European models of nationness. Theoretically, this challenges ideas of nationness that are built on the insights of Benedict Anderson and others, who favoured the ability of imagining the 'empty, homogenous' time of the modern nation over a sacred 'messianic' time. Following the work of Eisenlohr (2006), we suggest, however, that the temporalities of imagining a large-scale community (that is a community that exceeds face-to-face relationships) are always plural (Eisenlohr 2006, pp. 10-11), and that religion might play a significant role in mediating between them.

Coda

The constitutional order that came into being following 10-10-10 encourages a rethinking of notions of nationness and related concepts within the context of a nonsovereign Caribbean. Because of the reshuffling of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, the Dutch Caribbean islands are in a process of (re)constructing existing and novel ideologies of belonging and nationness attentive to both their specific internal dynamics and their current and past connections to the wider globalized world. An approach of open relationality would be fruitful in analysing further how such notions and ideologies are taught, learned and lived by young school-going children. Building on Glissant's Poetics of Relation, this means the exploration of Relation in all its senses – telling, listening, connecting, the parallel consciousness of self and surrounding, a totally diversity – as a transformative mode 'prompting the knowledge that identity is [not] completely within the root' (Glissant 1997, p. 18) and, hence, contesting Western, Westphalian categories of secular sovereignty and exclusionary politics of belonging and nationness. Expanding on this, it is our premise that such an approach would also erase the rigid divide between autochthons and allochthons, so that firstcomers and newcomers would be understood not as fixed categories, but as constantly evolving. In that sense, plural and inclusive modes of belonging would be further developed.

* * *

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Note:

1. Further description of such an approach is beyond the scope of this article, but includes for example, photo elicitation, photo voice, techniques from the arts (theatre and film) and tools from critical pedagogy.

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