

Aruban, Bonairean, and Curaçaoan Writers between the Caribbean and the Netherlands

Sara Florian

The Concept of “Nation”

The concepts of nation, nation-building, nation-branding, and cultural heritage are at the heart of today’s mass migration movements, virtual connections, and creolised and creolising multiculturalism. In this chapter I argue that the sense of cultural displacement is part of the formative processes of nation-building. By delineating the framework within which I expect to be writing this chapter, I would like to define the above-mentioned terms.

UNESCO’s definition of cultural heritage is important in contouring intangible and tangible examples of cultural heritage, such as the ABC islands’ “*kuentanan di Nanzi*” (African-derived Anansi stories) or “*kantikanan*” (folk songs):¹ “Cultural heritage ... also includes traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants ...”² It is therefore seminal to broaden the literary lens to include other forms of cultural expression to this analysis, such as songs, art, or videos. However, language is at the core of a literary discourse on nation-building and nation-branding.

The etymology of “nation” is linked to “birth” as the word originates from the Latin *nascor* (I was born)³ and in its turn from the Greek γεννάω (*gennao*, to beget, to generate).⁴ During the European Enlightenment period, as a consequence of the decline of the Dutch Republic in the eighteenth century, the Dutch language became a seminal component in the process of nation-building.⁵ Nonetheless it seems that the Dutch colonisers did not attempt or manage to infiltrate their European language in the national creoles of their Caribbean territories (although the case of Suriname might differ) as much as it happened in the case of the English, the French, the Spanish, or the Portuguese. George Lamming attributed the origin of the word “creole” to the “Spanish *criar*, which means ... to nourish, to nurse ... and to indigenise.”⁶ The origin of the word “creole” and its maternal/feeding connection are thus intimately linked to the idea of nation as a place of birth, of origin.

Many Diaspora writers from the ABC islands still opt to publish either in Dutch or Papiamentu/u. Languages that are often hybridised or Caribbeanised in a polished form become vectors to communicate with the nations of their former

masters, yet disarranged from their rigid grammatical perfection to claim new “native” voices. These new expressions of culture were defined in sociological terms as an intrinsic response to power, which Stuart Hall described as “a space of weak power but ... a space of power ... in the contemporary arts.”⁷

Quoting Frantz Fanon’s “On National Culture” Homi Bhabha claimed that it is neither from a fixed historicity nor from a special crystallisation that a national discourse can be delineated, as it is the product of a cultural splitting, for it is from an “instability of cultural signification that the national culture comes to be articulated as a dialectic of various temporalities—modern, colonial, postcolonial, ‘native.’”⁸ The “here/there” binomial that incorporates the conceptual and imaginary space of the Dutch Caribbean varies and helps to define nationhood. In speaking of “imaginary” I also refer to the imagined space of home that Dutch Caribbean and Surinamese writers expressed. For instance, in his essay “Het eind van de kaart” (1980) Albert Helman admitted to being attached to Suriname as an “idea.”⁹ This is one of the reasons why I chose to analyse the following authors: Cola Debrot, Frank Martinus Arion, and Quito Nicolaas, as they witnessed this cultural splitting *in fieri* and explored its imaginary implications. Debrot mainly wrote in Dutch, Arion in Dutch and Papiamentu, Nicolaas in Dutch, Papiamentu, and occasionally Spanish.

The Caribbean is probably one of the geo-political and conceptual spaces in which globalisation had an impressive historical impact at a deep cultural and linguistic level. Creoles are a strong element which advocates for an underpinning of nation-building and nation-branding. On the islands of Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao the creoles spoken are Portuguese-based. In the case of Bonaire and Curaçao’s Papiamentu a phonological orthography is employed. Aruba’s Papiamentu instead embeds an etymological orthography, hence the differences between Papiamentu and Papiamento.¹⁰ Both are a unique amalgam of Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, French, English, Taíno/Arawak, and African languages, plausibly from the Upper Guinea region.¹¹ In the Bonairean/Curaçaoan writer Cola Debrot’s metaphor, the shards forming the Caribbean mosaic are part of a crystal’s facets¹² and represent many aspects of nation-building and Caribbean identity.

On the ABC islands the moment of contact between Europeans and locals goes back to the fifteenth century, when Spanish and Italian sailors such as Alonso de Ojeda, Juan de la Cosa, and Amerigo Vespucci reached Bonaire and Curaçao. The territories were alternatively conquered by the Spanish, Dutch (first half of seventeenth century), and British. Each island had a different historical development, but the common economic denominator was the Dutch West India Company, founded in 1621. Emancipation in the Dutch Antilles came only in 1863, long after the 1795 Curaçao slave revolt led by Tula Rigaud and Bazjan Karpata at the Landhuis Knip/Kenepa. The Curaçao Slave Revolt arose on the wave of the 1791 Haitian Revolution, an extraordinarily important landmark in world history, as it was the

first victorious case of a slave insurrection which led to the creation of the first Black Republic in the world. Almost three hundred years after the takeover by the Dutch West India Company a new form of capitalism was established on the islands with the institution of oil refineries on Curaçao in 1915¹³ and on Aruba in 1924. On Bonaire a few plantations and salt pans made the island resemble Saint Martin. The three islands had different outcomes in the twentieth century: Curaçao seemed to take the lead in the former colonies of the Dutch Empire as its territory became and continued to be the axis of the late colonial government.

After World War II and until 2010 the former colonies were grouped in the geo-political denomination of the Netherlands Antilles; Suriname and the Netherlands Antilles became autonomous in 1954, and Suriname became independent in 1975. In 1986 Aruba obtained a much sought-after *status aparte*. In 2010 Bonaire became a special municipality and Curaçao became a constituent country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands.¹⁴ From 1900 to today the three selected writers witnessed these socio-political changes as part of a transition from colonialism to a partial decolonisation: Debrot by promoting an interracial coexistence of all components of Caribbean society; Arion by focusing on the emancipation of Afro-Curaçaoans and on an exploration of their roots; Nicolaas by including the indigenous populations in his reflections on nation-building.

A Bonairean Writer: Cola Debrot (1902–1981)

Like Frits Ruprecht, the main character of his long novella *Mijn Zuster de Negerin*, Nicolaas “Cola” Debrot was born in Bonaire in 1902—the same year of the eruption of Mount Pelée in Martinique. At the tender age of two he moved to Curaçao with his father of Swiss-French descent and his mother of Venezuelan descent. At the age of fourteen he went to the Netherlands to study and there he would pursue an education in law and medicine. Debrot’s own writing inspired his travels and was inspired by them: like Frits he would also move back to the Caribbean, but Debrot did so in the 1940s, when he instilled new energy into the cultural life of the islands. Debrot was an important diplomat and politician. He rose to the position of governor of the Netherlands Antilles in 1962 and served until 1970, thus facing the May 30 rebellion in Curaçao in 1969. He was a prolific writer, who mainly wrote in Dutch, despite his polyglossia (Dutch, Papiamentu, Spanish, French, English). In this section I will analyse the concept of nationhood in his novellas *Mijn Zuster de Negerin* (1935) and *De Vervolgden* (1982; posthumous).

The long novella *Mijn Zuster de Negerin* was published in the interwar period, when the European empires had not yet ended and, both in the northern and southern Europe, racialised ideas were gaining traction in the form of dictatorships



Bust of Cola Debrot
by Pieter de Monchy
in Plasa Gobernador
Cola Debrot, Curaçao
(photo Rita Merkies)

and totalitarianisms that were sinking Europe into a deep cultural regression. Indigence led to mass migration.

Despite several scholarly mentions concerning incest,¹⁵ by depicting a familial relationship which disrupts the pattern of domination by a white man over a black woman, Debrot shed new light on the relationship between individuals as a novel sense of nationhood, achieving much more than reflecting on what was socially unacceptable. In his pages the concept of empire had already changed and revisions of the colonial system were requested in Curaçao and Suriname. This solidified in the form of national party movements such as the *Nationale Volkspartij*, founded by Moises Frumencio da Costa Gomez in 1948, which Debrot joined. Debrot depicted a moment of political changes, aimed at founding a new, more inclusive society. In that kind of Caribbean society the identitarian schizophrenic element of Frantz Fanon's works *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) can be perceived in the way the characters do not accept one another's evolution: Frits is repulsed by the invitations of the notary who would like to include him in the Europeanised lifestyle on the island, while Frits himself is not welcomed by the district warden Karel, his childhood friend. The topical characterisation of *chiaroscuro* elements is a constant, appearing as a foil to the nostalgic sunset-like feeling that Debrot portrays as a background to the story.¹⁶ The encounter is, however, not

dichromatic, as the distant lacklustre Europe adds nuanced hues of colour to the oxymoronic perception of identity and nation. The sunset on the unnamed island is the sunset of an empire.

Maria, the female protagonist of *Mijn Zuster de Negerin*, does not show a capacity for rebelling against Frits at the onset and she is not an example of self-fulfilment—her mother has no name—, hence her similarity to the female characters in Arion's *Dubbelspel*, who are often subjected to men. The racialised characterisation of Maria as “*negerin*” still highlights a linguistic inability to accept diversity without judgement. The embroilment between the Europeans and the islanders reveals the fading colours of an empire and sketches a passage to self-determination. The colonial full-rigged three-masted ship is now sitting inside a bottle in the Ruprechts' house (70). The new negotiation of power relationships is particularly evident in the exchange between Frits and Karel, as the latter accuses the former of having strolled around the cities of Europe, while Frits replies he believes that his friend is “overestimating” the continent (my translation, “overschat,” 61). The tropical people are still given a stereotypical appearance with straw hats and pith helmets (50), while Maria is dressed in a white shirt and black skirt and local women are mythologised into fleeing Black nymphs (59).

I perceive a longing sense of homesickness, or “*heimwee*,”¹⁷ and melancholy whilst reading the novella. Homecoming counterposes the *locus amoenus* of the unnamed island to the *locus horribilis* of Europe. In this dichotomic space Debrot shows what Fanon would have defined as a post-colonial “neurotic society” derived from colonisation, as Octave Mannoni (1956) would have also argued. But the setting is not as innovative as one may think; in fact, Van Kempen points out that the Surinamese Albert Helman had already published *De stille plantage*¹⁸ in 1931, almost seventy years after the abolition of slavery in the Dutch colonies, in 1863. The plantation house and its inhabitants coming and going from Europe had already been the setting chosen to discuss changing societies in the overseas Dutch colonies.

Frits Ruprecht's dilapidated “*koenóekoe*” (51) is a house on top of a hill (31) where Frits grew up. It carries memories of their common father, Alexander Ruprecht, who allowed Maria to get an education as a teacher. The dark *cunucu* house, which is inspired by Debrot's father's plantation house, becomes a territory that is redrafted also owing to the elderly overseer Wantsjo, who is the one revealing to Frits that Maria is his half-sister. Frits opts to live in the *cunucu* house and not in the Dutch-style gabled buildings that are common on the island. However, when Frits reaches the island, he is lonely but feels “glory” and longs for “blackness and affection” (my translation, “heerlijkheid ... zwarteheid en aanhankelijkheid,” 53).

Koch observed how the Miraflores plantation represents for Frits both a funerary monument and the African literary motif of the ark,¹⁹ but he also noticed how the “symbolism of the attic” connects and acts as “the subconscious.”²⁰ This

reminds me of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and the groundbreaking yet complex exploration of creoleness. The comparison with Rhys also comes to mind when Frits sees the local flora and fauna (agave, cacti, palm trees, tamarind tree, "anglo"/"wanglo," hummingbirds) and feels "intoxicated with memories" (my translation, "zich bedwelmend aan herinneringen," 55), a sense of intoxication that is also conveyed in the Jamaican sugar plantation by Antoinette Cosway's story in *Wide Sargasso Sea*.²¹ Frits is "endlessly intoxicated" by Maria (my translation, "de vrouw die hem eindeloos bedwelmd," 83). After the secret relationship is revealed, Frits lulls Maria to sleep like his late mother would have done with him, in the darkness. This text contributes to the concept of nation-building by portraying a lonely, homesick individual who learns to live in a fraternal relationship with the "Other."

This is particularly relevant as I read the novella *De Vervolgden* (1982), which deals with miscegenation as a crime to be punished. In this novella, in order to counter racial discrimination and colonial supremacy, the governor, who respects his own national symbols such as the flag and the language, still strives against hierarchy and unreasonable supremacy. He kills Padre Rojas, who defended the criminal concept of ethnic cleansing, "*limpieza de la raza*," and who aimed to disclose the culprits to the inquisition (369). Several analyses of this novella revealed the historical references and the true-to-life inspiration behind the character of the governor. Debrot might have been inspired by Lázaro Bejarano—son-in-law of the Spanish slave-dealer Juan Martínez de Ampíes²²—by a projection of his idea of tolerance and "humanism" on a Romanticised version of Bejarano,²³ or by himself.²⁴

On the fictional island of Curaçam/Bonaire,²⁵ the native Caiquetíos (the "persecuted") try to find refuge in the caves that surround a blooming forest of *kibrahacha* (yellow poui), believing that the Spanish arriving on board the ship *Infanta Combita* will be discouraged by the inhospitable vegetation. It is the mestizo Alonso who explains how there used to be noxious plants on the island. Local vegetation is compared to human tolerance and to the long path ahead toward reciprocal inclusion that needs to be followed: as the governor cleansed the land of infestant plants (335), he now plans to do the same in order to build a better society. In this aspect, the sense of brotherhood was explored in Debrot's novellas: in *Mijn Zuster de Negerin*, as one of the components of nationhood, beyond ethnicities, stereotypes, or even kinship itself; in *De Vervolgden*, as his idea of racial harmony in the aftermath of the May 30 rebellion in Curaçao.

A Curaçaoan Writer: Frank Martinus Arion (1936–2015)

Frank Martinus Arion was born in Curaçao but moved to the Netherlands in his teen years in order to study. The year of Debrot's death, Arion moved back to his native island where he became the driving force behind the Curaçao Language Institute, promoting Papiamentu. In 1987 he co-founded the first Papiamentu school in Curaçao, the *Kolegio Erasmo Skol Humanista na Papiamentu*,²⁶ and in 1988 he founded the pro-independence political party KARA (*Kambio Rápido*).

Arion wrote poems, novels, and essays and I will analyse mainly his novel *Dubbelspel* (1973). More than Debrot and Nicolaas, Arion focused his literary production on a recognition and promotion of the Africanness and Afro-Caribbean identitarian component in Curaçaoans, without neglecting the indigenous stem. Nonetheless, he was also greatly inspired by European literary figures such as Dante and Petrarch.²⁷

The importance of language *for* the people and *of* the people is an ancient idea: since Plato's dialogues *Protagoras* and *Alcibiades* the master/teacher of language is the people.²⁸ The love of languages and the intellectual need to explore one's roots are evident in Arion's PhD thesis, *The Kiss of a Slave*, which investigates the syntactic and morphological relationships between Papiamentu and West African languages. Since the 1950s Papiamentu has inspired the *Simadán* poets, such as Pierre Lauffer—who published *Di Nos/Our Heritage* (1971), the first anthology in



Frank Martinus Arion

Papiamentu—and in the 1960s the *Watapana* poets, such as Henry Habibe, to write in their native creole.

Arion's most successful novel, *Dubbelspel*, was written in a "creolised" Dutch.²⁹ The world Arion describes in his novel is a less explored Curaçao, which also inspired the 2017 movie *Double Play* by Ernest R. Dickerson. As the director explained in an interview, Curaçao is also a character in the film, and women have a seminal part to play.³⁰ Dickerson acknowledged having been inspired by the Italian director Sergio Leone, as the unusually round domino table that appears in the film mimics the round arena of the Spaghetti Western genre, becoming a metaphor of life and of perceived relationships.³¹

Dubbelspel has been discussed and analysed by many scholars,³² but I will focus on how the writer portrayed the concept of nationhood. Van Kempen observed how the three initial quotations in *Dubbelspel* (in Dutch, English, and German) represent the "Caribbean schizophrenia,"³³ a feature one can observe in Debrot's work as well. In an imaginary suburb of Willemstad called Wakota the four domino players—Manchi Sanantonio, Janchi Pau, Boeboe Fiel, and Chamon Nicolas—are all Black Caribbean men who represent different social classes during a game of dominoes at Boeboe's house on a Sunday afternoon in a 1970s Curaçao, shortly after the May 1969 riots.

The Dutch word "*dubbelspel*," which is close enough to "*dobbelspel*" (a dice gambling game), indicates both the elements of gamble and "double"; its ambiguity explains the coexistence of white and black on domino tiles. A tile whose two sets of dots or pips are identical in number is called a "double tile." The duplicity and double match is expressed in many ways and its etymology finds roots both in Europe and Africa. Despite its linguistic affiliations, the game of dominoes was conceivably created in China in the Middle Ages and subsequently reached Europe. The Latin word *duplus* (double) came to Middle Dutch via the French verb *dobler* (to double):³⁴ two of the novel's characters are married and two of them have an affair with the former characters' wives. Doris Hambuch also reflected upon the similarity between dominoes and the Latin words *dominus* (master, Lord) and *domus* (house, home).³⁵ What they are playing is not only a game but an attempt to conquer money, social status, or love; in fact, the reader realises that there are a couple of criss-crossed relationships that will lead to a murder. The Yoruba god Shango/Chango is characterised by a double-headed axe that shows how love and war are interconnected.³⁶

Solema, Janchi's lover, is married to Manchi, the bailiff who is building a weekend house. Nora is married to Boeboe, a taxi driver and libertine who often visits Campo Alegre, the prostitute camp, but she also has an affair with the Saban Chamon. Boeboe dies from fighting with Chamon, who stabs him in the heart³⁷—a symbolic coincidence. Manchi commits suicide whilst playing the domino-like

black-and-white piano keys. The deaths caused by love in the novel may also recall the “boneyard,” that is, the draw pile on a domino table. Nora spends money on rum instead of on her son Ostriik’s shoes, privileging conviviality and social consideration over culture. The Portuguese shop selling rum may be a hint at the island’s colonial past. From these instances alone one can appreciate how love and violence are linked. Poverty is often associated with problems. Women have been oppressed and considered prostitutes to the extent that Solema has to pay her husband five guilders a night, like a prostitute. Janchi wins the game of dominoes and with Solema he will possibly be able to start building a new society.

The two pairs of men, the “husbands” and the “lovers,” represent the different attitudes of society, and probably the new socialist ideas engendered by Solema, a Curaçao teacher who previously studied in Europe and brings about change in the novel. Hinging on *Dubbelspel*’s cornerstones, Nicolaas envisages Arion’s novel as a dialectic reflection on the “poverty of culture” and consequently on a “culture of poverty,”³⁸ whilst De Roo argued that the novel inspires the building of a better and more gender-equal society.³⁹ When, during the game of dominoes, Janchi reveals that he wants to name the furniture factory “Solema,” he is disclosing both his secret love and his political ideals.⁴⁰ The fact that Janchi would like to hire locals and use the island’s trees⁴¹ to make furniture is a symbol of nurturing the nation’s seeds and enacting the “revolution” he aspires to, while at the same time recalling Nicolaas’s gardening metaphors, which I will illustrate later on. Even though Rutgers noticed how the omniscient narrator in *Dubbelspel* draws from the European Romantic tradition,⁴² as the novel won the Van der Hoogt Prize, parallels were also drawn with the South American literary tradition.⁴³

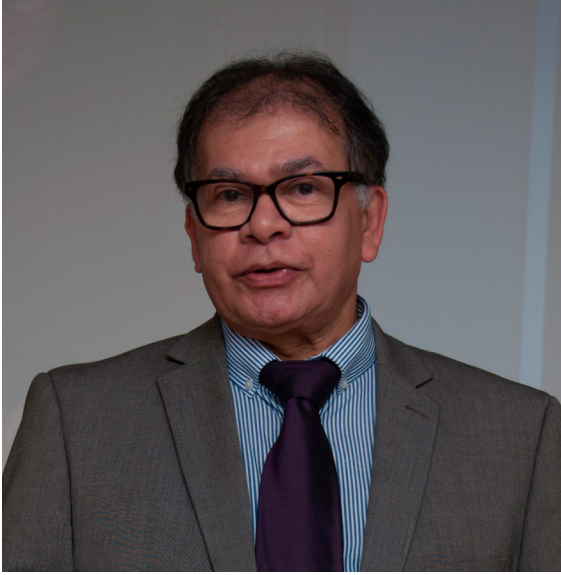
In Derek Walcott’s painting *Domino Players* the colours of the Caribbean, the quiet indifference of the players, the nosy neighbour at the window, the women in the room’s background reminded me of this novel. In *Omeros* Walcott wrote about dominoes while he was in the US: “And beyond them, like dominoes / with lights for holes, the black skyscrapers of Boston,”⁴⁴ yet in Ida Does’s documentary *Poetry is an Island*, Walcott confessed feeling disoriented when he was away from St. Lucia.⁴⁵ Arion chose his native Curaçao over Europe and his narrative is centred on his own island, heritage, and language, Papiamentu. Arion and Walcott wrote both in patois and in the coloniser’s language. The characters of Arion and Walcott need to reflect both languages. Walcott created a well-rounded Caribbean character, Shabine, who anatomises his DNA in the lines: “I’m just a red nigger who love the sea, / I had a sound colonial education, / I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me, / and either I’m nobody, or I’m a nation”; he, subsequently, adds: “I had no nation now but the imagination.”⁴⁶ In Arion’s *Dubbelspel* the character of Chamon, the only foreigner who has travelled within the Caribbean archipelago, may resemble Shabine as a wanderer in search of his own identity.

As Arion gives an uncompassionate description of alcoholism, slums, prostitution, and the pristine beaches that attract many tourists, Walcott compares the Greek islands (“As John to Patmos”) to St. Lucia. The sense of nation-building and nation-branding that Arion portrays in his writing is very different from Debrot’s all-encompassing multicultural society. Even though Arion sketched a society made up of different mosaic tiles, he also outlined the elemental tensions that these tiles may encounter due to poverty, social discrimination, or stereotypes. One way to step out of this societal mold is by becoming cultured, culturalised, and acculturated. Walcott’s love for his people and his island allows for a comparison with a well-rooted intellectual like Arion, who was conscious and proud of his own and his people’s origins and preferred his native territory over the imperial metropolis. The aftermath of the May 30, 1969 riots in Curaçao was for Arion a spur to fight for equality between the ethnic components of society as well as for gender parity.

An Aruban Writer: Quito Nicolaas (1955)

Quito Nicolaas is an Aruban/Dutch writer. At the age of seventeen he went to the Netherlands to study law and political science and has been living there since. His sense of nationhood probably lies in the slash dividing “Aruban” and “Dutch”; in the “Introduction” to his latest poetry collection, *Argus*, I defined “displacement as a sense of belonging,” whenever “[t]he poet reflects on the distance between [t]he Netherlands, his elected dwelling place, and Aruba, the place of his heart” (13). Other Aruban writers who are based in the Netherlands, such as Giselle Ecury, Denis Henriquez, or the late Olga Orman, might be (have been) able to relate to a similar sentiment and sense of non-belonging, for Nicolaas defined “Caribbean migrant literature” as “still largely focused on the homeland.”⁴⁷ By writing in the new country’s language, migrant writers tend to focus on their sense of isolation and uprootedness. In his essays and columns Nicolaas comments on the economic positioning of Aruba, the cultural and historical heritage of Arubans, and segments of the island’s community that are often overlooked or forgotten, such as the Chinese. As Nicolaas points out, the Chinese reached Aruba after the fall of the Qing Dynasty; Arion even found linguistic “affinities” between Chinese and Papiamentu.⁴⁸

A strong sense of belonging to his Aruban origins can be perceived in Nicolaas’s oeuvre: poems, novels, short stories, essays, articles. Especially through the last, one can place his work in a post-colonial literary discourse that embraces not only the ABC islands and the Caribbean but also the Middle East, India, and South America. For instance, in his columns *Met Open Ogen* (2016), Nicolaas identifies as seminal to the nation-branding process the existence and nurturing of a well-educated



Quito Nicolaas

intelligentsia who develops new ideas and reflections in a positive cultural environment, tackling themes such as language policy and literary education. I will analyse Nicolaas's novel *Verborgen Leegte* and some of his poems.

Reality has many colours in the author's literary display. In the novel *Verborgen Leegte* Jakob, a Jewish character, abuses the Arubans, replacing the historical figure of the white master as a *shon*.⁴⁹ The setting shifts from an oil refinery in San Nicolas to the Netherlands and the US. The "hidden emptiness" mentioned in the novel's title refers to half-truths and flawed love relationships. The main character, Maureen, who studied in The Hague in the 1960s and later in Washington, meets the former governor of the island and discovers uncomfortable truths about her past. Similar to the situation in Debrot's *Mijn Zuster de Negerin*, Maureen finds out that her friend Rachel Boissevain is her half-sister. This way Maureen will be able to explain her lighter complexion and face the issues of immigration and identity in Europe, which are provocatively explored in this novel. Nonetheless, everything seems to stem from an anonymous note found in the San Nicolas library, which hinted at communion and unity. The importance of culture is also a key message for people to step out of their limited viewpoint and to embrace the "Other," to dig into history and understand its hidden truths. In fact, Maureen hopes for a holistic cultural development as she remembers being treated often as "someone coming from an island without history, culture and ambition" (my translation, "als iemand afkomstig van een eiland zonder geschiedenis, cultuur en ambitie," 143).

Nicolaas's first two poetry collections, *Eclips Politico* (1990) and *Ilusion Optico* (1995), were written in Papiamentu, the language of his heart and of his beloved San Nicolas. There he grew up surrounded by people of multifarious nationalities—Venezuelans, Lebanese, Chinese, Jewish—and compared his island to a pearl in “Union y Desunion.”⁵⁰ In his poem “Tree Trunk” from the collection *Gerede Twijfels*, he reminisced: “Here, / I was planted, / ... I grew up, / among foreign workers” (28). Nicolaas's work shows the modern struggle in cultural heritage and sense of belonging. Having witnessed the transition of Aruba from the Netherlands Antilles to *status aparte*, he can relate to and recount a sense of nation-building.⁵¹

In the “Introduction” to *Eclips Politico* the poet had identified a sort of mental dependency of the inhabitants of the Netherlands Antilles to the former mother country, defining it as “neo-colonial,” which carries with it a “fear of independence.” The author points out how the title refers to an “eclipse,” as the waning of the moon and the sun in the colonial passages, for the individual is left in a “situashon skizofrénico”—which, again, echoes Frantz Fanon's writing—and of cultural alienation (“Criaturanan,” 26–27). Another reference to Fanon is made in the poem “Zwarte huid,” in which the poet ruminates on the passing of time and on the perception of the Self: “Zwarte huid, blanke masker.”⁵²

His collection *Bos pa Planta* (2011) was published in a trilingual edition (Papiamentu, Dutch, and English) on the twenty-fifth anniversary of Aruba's *status aparte*,⁵³ a moment described with symbols of a nation in “Status Nascendi”: “The flag was hoisted / ... A monument offered” (150). In his exploration Nicolaas does not neglect the devotion to the native Amerindian peoples. As the title suggests, the poet gives “a voice to the plant.” The consistent gardening symbolism relates the mother country to “mama tera,” in recurrent clusters of metaphors interweaving terrain, germination, sowing, and harvesting of truths found in the soil and uncovered, as the author forewarns in the “Introduction” (5).⁵⁴ In “Simia” a *wanglo* seed brought identity and dedication (11); in “Determinacion” the agave plant (*cucuisa/kukwisa*) has harvested a symbol in the poet's skin, witnessing a bloodbath at the Frenchman Pass (41). The sea waves breaking on the coast are a memory of the poet's inspirational voice (“Desampara,” 18), bringing about hope (“Soberania,” 30), a song for unity (“Un canto pa Union,” 34), and a sense of nationhood (“Nacion,” 35).

In *Argus* Nicolaas travels beyond Europe to many cities in the world, but it is in the Caribbean that the poet finds a sense of home, among the sounds of local birds and the blowing wind (“Tera Firme,” 56). His unified sense of nation at times uncomfortably clashes with his perception of a “second skin” (“No More Tomorrow,” 32; “Deceit the Kitchen table,” 64), “de tweede huid” (“Nooit meer morgen,” 33), “calligraphed deep into the soul” (“No More Tomorrow,” 32). This provokes a painful wound, a symbol employed by the poet to invite others to learn history, “a lamented tongue. / Headstrong wind, / descending on the Hooiberg mountain / to dismantle

the hurricane. / Open the book of history / so others can hear" ("En route," 28). In the last poem's Dutch version there are several references to language, such as "hadden ... gesproken" (would have spoken); "woorden" (words); "betreurde tong" (lamented tongue); "praten" (talk) ("Onderweg," 29). The Dutch word used for "lamented" is "betreurde," a past tense of the verb "betreuren," which means "to grieve" and, originally, "to mourn,"⁵⁵ so language is employed as a mourning lamentation.

The themes in *Argus* recall those in *Bos pa Planta*. The echo of a wounded soul reflecting on colonialism, emanating from the Hooiberg, the third highest point on Aruba, is also heard in the poem "Na caminda," in which the poet's voice is full of agony and nostalgia, is swept by an uncompromising wind to the Hooiberg.⁵⁶ Cultural and social mobility corroborate the dynamic aspects of Aruban society and history; people should learn to embrace society's mercurial nature to propel mutual understanding and progress. Nicolaas contributed to the discourse on the end of an empire from a multicultural diasporic perspective, one that may relate to other migrant transnational figures.

Conclusion

Debrot, Arion, and Nicolaas are three authors whose work can be seen as a reflection of the identitarian shift that first the Netherlands Antilles and later the Dutch Caribbean went through in the twentieth century, and who reflected on the concepts of nation-building and nation-branding in their works. Societies are complex structures, whose multiple aspects can be represented by the facets of a crystal, to use Debrot's metaphor. History is a critical aspect in the process of nation-building, especially as Caribbean nation-states were formed in the past century.

Human beings are complex combinations of DNA, cultural heritage, and life experiences. In this respect, due to constant and increasing waves of migration, as Rex Nettleford observed, the world is getting creolised,⁵⁷ in the sense of Glissantian rhizomatic mangrove roots. The world is also getting Caribbeanised, as the Caribbean has always been a place of encounter and miscegenation. With regard to this, Alejo Carpentier quoted A. J. Seymour who in 1949 spoke of "nación cultural multiterritorial,"⁵⁸ a novel concept of nationhood in which the Creole feels like s/he belongs to at least two places. This concept of a scattered nation "within and beyond the archipelago" was defined by George Lamming as "a transnational family,"⁵⁹ that is what Edward Said defined as "filiation" and "affiliation."

The presence of an ABC population in the Netherlands—which significantly increased after the 1954 Charter for the Kingdom, coeval with the Windrush generation moving to the UK—is shaping the European concept of nation and lifestyle.

In 1994 Rutgers calculated “some eighty thousand Antilleans and Arubans, about 25% of the total population, [to] have settled in the Netherlands,”⁶⁰ a statistic which had doubled as of 2020, just a quarter of a century later.⁶¹ The Netherlands has seen a new migration wave of Caribbean people that began in the 1980s, especially after the oil refineries in Curaçao and Aruba were closed down. These movements allowed for identities to be forged in new, complex ways.⁶²

In my analysis of selected works by the three authors, I focused on how they witnessed a shift from dependency to partial “independence.” The authors that I have chosen not only represent the three different islands of Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao, but also had a strong relationship with the Netherlands. In their work the concepts of nation-building and nation-branding comprise different aspects.

Cola Debrot, who was involved in the political and cultural life of the islands, courageously and provocatively possessed a vision of society that shattered cultural stereotypes. Debrot was one of the first writers to tackle the break with colonialism that emerged after the abolition of slavery in the Dutch colonies. The role that Debrot played as an agent for positive change in the Netherlands Antilles is supported by his witnessing the shift and remodelling of the Caribbean social fabric. In this new context and new concept of nation-building, the imperial past would not have been the societal model that dictated post-colonial cultural relationships. Future generations would be moulded by more inclusive and open connections and ground-breaking actions, as performed by some characters in his novellas.

Frank Martinus Arion, who was also involved in the cultural life of Curaçao and in politics, focused more on the *négritude* aspect of literature, digging into the African roots of his people but also cultivating a national language with pride. Arion placed the Afro-Caribbean element at the centre of his stories in a search for his own and his people’s roots and the affirmation of a linguistic identity and socio-political emancipation. Arion demonstrated his devotion to culture and his island when during the 1969 riots—a time when Debrot was governor of the Netherlands Antilles—he saved the Roman Catholic archives in the National Library of Curaçao, in Otrobanda.⁶³

Quito Nicolaas, a law consultant and political science expert, who seems to be torn between his native Aruba and the Netherlands, reflects on the migration of ABC-islanders to the Netherlands in his work. This also allows the writer to ponder his own role and the role of literature in the mechanisms of nation-building. In his writings Nicolaas explores the multicolour identity of Aruba and the Netherlands, probing the societal cracks that lead to reflections on nation-building and nation-branding.

Beyond literature, there are other examples of intangible cultural heritage that are equally important to express or seek national unity. In Aruba the cultural events that contribute to the development of nation-building are often performed

on important dates: on January 25 for Betico Croes Day and on March 18 for the National Anthem and Flag Day. Festivals related to local folklore might include the Bon Bini Festival and the song festival “Un canto na Aruba su Himno y Bandera.”

Caribbean carnivals, which have spread to Europe (e.g., Rotterdam Summer Carnival) may be another instance, as in Lasana Sekou’s “nation dance”: “s’maatin kannaval Village is de onliest place / where all Caribbean musics ... / mek i think of UNITYandNATION / ... and BUILDaNATION STRONG.”⁶⁴ In “seú from curacao” Sekou expressed the spirituality in this music.⁶⁵ The cultural manifestation of the Curaçaoan *tambú* or the Bonairean *bari* shows how drums have accompanied this dance ever since it was born during the slavery period.⁶⁶

The gardening metaphor and references to the land and soil seem to have been consistently explored by the three writers studied in this paper and by many other Caribbean writers. Island or city topography is another element that allows reflections on nation-building and nation-branding. In the ABC islands, waves of endogenous and exogenous migrations have worked differently than in the other islands owing to historical and economic reasons. As oil refineries were founded on Aruba and Curaçao, the islands’ population increased and was enriched by different migration channels. When the refineries eventually closed down, the migrants who remained enriched the islands, where they participated in cultural events, and those who left enriched the new countries they migrated to. New migrations redefine the “Caribbean nation” as an imagined space shaped by cultural and political developments, in a world in need of the open-mindedness and spirit of integration that all three writers expressed.

