

#ZWARTMANIFEST

IN OUR COLONIAL KINGDOM, #BLACKLIVESMATTER TOO

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**THE BLACK MANIFESTO
'ON THE ROAD TO BLACK EMANCIPATION'**

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ZWART MANIFEST – OP WEG NAAR ZWARTE EMANCIPATIE

In June 2020, more than 50,000 people took to the streets in all provinces of the Netherlands during the #BlackLivesMatter protests. Over the past ten years, the anti-Zwarte Piet movement has made a significant stand against institutional and anti-Black racism. There is a growing understanding that the Netherlands is finally struggling with the legacy of its colonial past, and that past and present injustices must at last be addressed.

THE BLACK MANIFESTO

The Black Manifesto emerged from this movement and this moment. It is a “living document” with concrete advice and demands from and for Netherlands Black communities on tackling racism and inequality in various sectors such as education, the labor market, and arts and culture.

The fight to break through deep-rooted structures of inequality is a multifaceted one, extending to all fields of civic life. What is the role of artists, creatives, and writers in bringing about change? As one way of keeping the movement going, the exhibition Black Manifesto presents a series of artistic and research-based ways of resisting and insisting on sustained momentum.

Manifesting the manifesto

Selected artists Chimira Obiefule, Rossel Chaslie, and duo Jonathan Hoost and Youandi here give expression to the manifesto in their own visual, creative ways. Writers Akú Anan, Bart Krieger, Jillian Emanuels, Mungoyende Helene Christelle, Phaedra Haringsma, Princess Attia, and Sherilyn Deen write from several different perspectives about Black communities in the Netherlands. The project is the culmination of the open call Manifesting Systemic Change Through Creative Waves, organized by Nederland Wordt Beter, New Urban Collective/The Black Archives and Black Queer & Trans Resistance NL (supporting organizations of KOZP) in collaboration with BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht.

27 October, 2021 to 4 March 2022, the exhibition Black Manifesto: is on view at OSCAM in Amsterdam Zuidoost. Additionally there will be several programs, workshops, and other opportunities to experience the movement and the manifesto.

IN OUR COLONIAL KINGDOM, #BLACKLIVESMATTER TOO

Caribbean Dutch citizens have fewer social rights than European Dutch citizens – and the government has taken no issue with it.

When the #BlackLivesMatter protests of 2020 spread across vast swathes of the globe, it seemed as if years of hard work paid off and a tipping point was reached. Nonetheless activists and the politicians whose attention they non-violently captured would be wrong if they thought this was the moment to sit back and relax. The inequality protested by the activist community does not just manifest itself in the Dutch educational system, our traditions, or our everyday language, but also in our laws and corresponding policies. Until this day, Caribbean Dutch people continue to reap the acidic fruits of these persistent inequalities.

From day to day

"You'd encounter a lot of things if I put you in a rocket and launched you into the air, *dushi*. Maybe some aliens, but no God," sighs Wilfred, who had just repaired my broken scooter. I get into his dusty pick-up truck to go to the nearest ATM. I'd never been to Bonaire, and I didn't think of having enough cash at hand to pay for the repair. He would not allow me to transfer it to his bank account or pass by his shop another day. "I live from day to day, and if you have to transfer it from a Dutch account it will take a few days for the money to get here."



Wilfred and his truck

Spending the lockdowns in my mother's comfortable single-family house in a residential area of Amsterdam, I hadn't realised that there are Dutch people who live from day to day. People for whom a lockdown poses a larger threat than the coronavirus itself, because they struggle to get by when they miss as much as a day's salary – I didn't associate this with the Netherlands. At most, this would be irregular migrants, I thought. The fact that this is a daily reality for some Dutch citizens on the Caribbean Dutch islands hadn't crossed my mind even once.

Poverty is not an isolated phenomenon, and in this case it's a symptom of the built-in deficiencies of the structure of our transatlantic society, created and sustained by power relations stemming from our collectively-inherited colonial history. Side note: the term 'colonial history' is somewhat misleading, because it suggests that coloniality belongs to the past. That's not true. The Kingdom of the Netherlands has been assembled around an artificial colonial construction – a colonial skeleton, wrapped in promises about equality and mutual assistance.

Recap: constitutional arrangements

On October 10, 2010, some Caribbean Dutch citizens witnessed the form of state under which they were governed transform for the third time, when the Netherlands Antilles were dissolved and Bonaire, Saba and St. Eustatius (the BES islands, or, the Caribbean Netherlands) became 'public bodies' of the Netherlands. Curaçao and St. Maarten became separate countries within the Kingdom, like Aruba already was. On those islands, the Netherlands roughly carries the responsibility to provide help and assistance when local governments risk to fall short of their duties.

Work twice as hard

Irrespective of the status of a Dutch public body, government-provided social security on Bonaire is much lower than the social minimum¹ and the minimum wage is a lot lower than in the European Netherlands. In 2018, the Dutch policy research institute Regioplan calculated the price of social minima in the Caribbean Netherlands. A person living on their own on Bonaire needed at least \$1,010 each month to fulfil their basic needs, assuming they would do their utmost best to save as much money as possible. That means this \$1,010 is a conservative estimate. The Dutch government itself set the amount at \$1,363 for 2021.² At the same time, the minimum wage consists of a mere \$5.48 and social security is \$350 per month. So, while in the European Netherlands social security is slightly lower than the social minimum, in the Caribbean Netherlands that's not the case.

Put differently, there's a huge gap between the social minimum and the sum to which an unemployed Caribbean Dutch person is entitled to, both regarding social security and minimum wage. In practice, that gap looks like this: a Bonairean on social security runs short of \$1,000 each month. Besides that, a single Bonairean³ on a local minimum wage of around \$5.48 must work 248 hours per month to make a living. In comparison, a single European Dutch citizen on minimum wage (€9.82) has to work 126 hours to earn as much as the social minimum of €1,289.

	Bonaire 2021	Netherlands 2021
Social minimum	\$1.363	€1.239
Minimum wage (per hour)	\$5,48	€9,81
Social security for a single occupant (monthly)	\$350 ⁴	€1.024,76 ⁵

1 A social minimum is the bundle of resources that a person needs to lead a minimally decent life in their society.

2 Rijksoverheid: 'Voortgangsrapportage ijkpunt bestaanszekerheid Caribisch Nederland 2021', p. 23 and 24.

3 Rates differ for people with children or living with a partner.

4 Rijksdienst Caribisch Nederland: 'Indexering minimumlonen en maximumdaglonen Wet Ziekteverzekering BES 2021 van Ministerie Sociale zaken en Werkgelegenheid voor Saba, Sint Eustatius en Bonaire'

5 Rijksoverheid: 'Uitkeringsbedragen per 1 juli 2021'

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On the island, people need little encouragement to speak up when I tell them I'm writing about inequality within our Kingdom. Some make a wry face, others laugh cynically. Airsa, who runs a beauty salon, shakes her head as she starts to fade my hair. "I'm not going to lie, it's not easy." She returned to Bonaire after spending eleven years abroad – first in the Netherlands and then in Mallorca, where she ran a successful salon with her partner. When the pandemic hit, the family of six was forced to return to Bonaire, move in with Airsa's mother and rebuild their life from zero. Indeed, no easy task considering the difference between wages and price levels compared to Europe. Even though most other hairdressers on the island do not match her braiding skills, Airsa's customers would stay away if she raised her price. She sighs. "Paying for groceries causes stress every week."



Airsa, her partner and two of the four children

Rebuilding their life in the Caribbean Netherlands without a European salary requires a collective effort from the family. From morning to evening Airsa, her partner and her eldest daughter work in the salon. Whoever doesn't have a customer looks after the youngest family member, who is just learning how to walk. Simultaneously, Airsa's partner does construction work in their new home (they now got rid of the bats). Some eleven hours after I first set foot in their new salon, the scene remained unchanged – he fixes a customer's locs, his shoes speckled with white paint, Airsa's daughter helps yet another customer while Airsa tends to the infant child.

Deliberate policy

The Dutch government seems to find it justifiable that a Caribbean Dutch citizen should work a lot harder to fulfill their basic needs, compared to a European Dutch citizen. It's important to note that this inequality is no unforeseen consequence of poorly formulated policy. Instead, policy was deliberately created so that it would be impossible for Caribbean Dutch citizens on social benefits to make ends meet.

When the BES-islands became public bodies in 2010, it was reasoned that minimum wages and social security benefits could not be comparable to the European Netherlands, in order to avoid large socioeconomic differences between the Caribbean

Netherlands and the rest of the Caribbean region. It was feared that European price levels would attract many migrants from neighbouring countries. Experience has shown that, even with a minimum wage of \$5.48, Bonaire still is a popular destination for Latin American labour migrants. When it substituted the local Antillean guilder for the U.S. Dollar, the island became more attractive for these migrants, who in their home country are frequently subject to erratic currency fluctuations. Yet, generally, the primary reason for Latin American immigrants is that the average wage on Bonaire is a lot higher than that of its neighbouring countries, as most employers already pay more than minimum wage to attract qualified employees. A report from 2020 states that most companies on the island will therefore be able to overcome an increase in the minimum wage, noting that there will always be companies that will experience difficulties when statutory minimum wages increase.⁶



A day at the salon

⁶ Report by Ecorys: Loonruimte minimumloon CN, p. 67

The other argument commonly put forward is that Caribbean Dutch citizens would not have an “incentive to work” if minimum wages and social benefits would not be kept very low, states a prominent 2015 report of an evaluation committee headed by Dr. Spies. To preserve this “incentive”, the sum of social benefits was “decoupled” from the Dutch law regulating its amount and the government allowed those entitled to it to work and earn money, as long as their total income would not exceed statutory minimum wage.



Airsa watches as her 17-year-old daughter Anouschka helps a customer

This is also how Wilfred gets by. We’re sitting at a Chinese restaurant, where I watch, slightly embarrassed, how he pulls out the \$50 bill I just got from the ATM and orders: two spring rolls for me and a beer for himself. He is on social security and receives \$350 each month, just enough to cover his rent outside Kralendijk, the capital of Bonaire. He works in the informal sector, repairing scooters, to close the remaining gap in his income.

It’s obvious that social security benefits should not be higher than minimum wage, because in that case it would not make sense to work. With the regional economy in mind, it is also understandable that the statutory minimum wage and social security could not be instantly levelled with their European Dutch counterparts in 2010. However, what remains impossible to justify, is why the Dutch government has waited eight years before it started researching how much money inhabitants of the islands really need to make ends meet. Only during the autumn of 2021 did it begin to explore how to abolish the ‘extra income scheme’ for Caribbean Dutch citizens on social security.⁷

⁷ Rijksoverheid: ‘Voortgangsrapportage ijkpunt bestaanszekerheid Caribisch Nederland 2021’, p. 3

Responsibility: a hot potato

It seems to be a Dutch tradition by now, that responsibility for the injustices on the Dutch islands is quickly passed onto local governments – even when The Hague is to blame. In 2019, during a visit of Prime Minister Rutte to Bonaire, he was asked by a journalist why the Netherlands hadn't managed to eradicate persistent inequality and poverty on the BES islands. The prime minister replied that poverty eradication policy is always “a joint responsibility”, but that poor people are better helped by a job than social security. “And getting a job is not something that we can arrange from The Hague.” Regarding a possible raise of social benefits Rutte said that “what might be needed for this is being investigated.”⁸



Nolly rests for a moment after carrying heavy boxes and grocery bags at the food bank

Rutte's replies completely missed the mark (pun not intended), because with monthly social benefits of \$350 and a minimum wage of \$5.48 per hour it doesn't matter if you do or don't have a job – both sums are insufficient to fulfil one's basic needs. More so, it is indeed true that the public bodies are responsible for poverty eradication policy in terms of finance and practical execution,⁹ but the local governments of the BES islands do not determine the amount of minimum wage and social benefits their inhabitants are entitled to. For the past eleven years, that responsibility has been with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (SZW¹⁰) in The Hague.

⁸ Caribisch Netwerk, 2019: 'Rutte op Bonaire: Beter baan dan hogere uitkering tegen armoede'

⁹ Staatscourant 2021 nr. 7347 (February 16) p. 6

¹⁰ SZW is the Dutch acronym for the Ministry.

For a large group of inhabitants it's indeed difficult or even impossible to "financially make ends meet", as stated in the report by the Spies Committee in 2015. Moreover, the percentage of working poor has been steadily increasing.¹¹ In the meantime, Regioplan concluded that it's not uncommon for people to combine two or three part-time jobs with different employers, "or in exceptional cases even two fulltime jobs in a totally legal way."¹²

Who pays the price of policy?

To get to know more about those who get the short end of the stick, I meet with Nolly Oleana, head of the Caribbean department of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science,¹³ Deputy Lieutenant Governor of Bonaire and one of the founders of the Bonairean food bank.

Originally an educator, he spent fifteen years in political functions – as a representative, minister, and member of the island council – and knows Bonaire's political landscape like the back of his hand. Despite the early hour on a Saturday morning, the first clients are already standing in line for their grocery bags. Nolly noted that everything became more expensive after Bonaire obtained the status of public body.

That everything became more expensive after the dissolution of the Netherlands Antilles is not merely a gut feeling.



The pandemic quintupled the number of families dependent on food aid

¹¹ Spies et al., 2015, p. 71

¹² Regioplan, 2018, p. 10

¹³ The Dutch government also pays its employees differentially. Nolly's salary is a lot lower than that of an official in the European Netherlands doing the exact same job.

Although the minimum wage increased in proportion to yearly inflation data provided by Statistics Netherlands (CBS¹⁴), the real income of the inhabitants of the BES islands have not, or not significantly, improved.¹⁵ The problem with the data of the CBS is that the measure used is an average, while some costs such as rents increased dramatically since 10-10-'10.



The pandemic quintupled the number of families dependent on food aid

Who pays the price of policy?

“Those with low incomes who can’t find social housing are thus confronted with a much higher cost of living,” concludes a report commissioned by the Ministry of SZW.¹⁶

Other factors such as the new tax system have also impacted the purchasing power of the Caribbean Dutch. Despite the fact that on the macro level this system generates the same tax revenue as the Antillean system of before 10-10-'10, a shift took place on the micro level: taxpayers who previously paid little or no taxes began to pay more, while those with higher incomes now pay less.¹⁷

Before the pandemic, Nolly recounts, the food bank served around 100 families, but since the pandemic effectively froze the tourism sector, this number quintupled. Clients can be roughly divided into the following three categories: Latin American immigrants and elderly and disabled persons.

¹⁴ Statistics Netherlands is the governmental institution that gathers data about the Netherlands. CBS is its Dutch acronym. The CBS uses the consumer price index (CPI). This is the price of a weighted average market basket of consumer goods and services purchased by households.

¹⁵ Report by Ecorys: Loonruimte minimumloon CN, p. 66

¹⁶ Idem, p. 10

¹⁷ Spies et al., 2015, p. 61

“The elderly relying only on their old-age pension, wow, they *definitely* can’t get by.” In 2015, the Spies Committee noted that the central government paid insufficient attention to groups “that cannot provide for themselves by working and to whom the incentive to work does not apply.” Yet, over the course of the last six years, this unequivocal condemnation has not led to a significant improvement of the financial situation of these hundreds of families.

The budget method

Local governments as well as the central government in The Hague have set small steps in the right direction during the last few years. Eight years after the dissolution of the Netherlands Antilles, Dutch research institutions modestly started to quantify structural inequalities between the European and Caribbean sides of the Kingdom.



Nolly's spouse Ann Leong works at the food bank on Saturday morning

The price of a bundle of goods needed to live a minimally decent life in the Caribbean Netherlands, conservatively calculated by Regioplan, appeared to be too high for the penny-wise commissioning authority, the Ministry of SZW. Rather than taking the social minimum as a guideline or goal, as in the European Netherlands, the ministry uses the so-called “budget method” to significantly drive down the minimum wage and social security in the Caribbean Netherlands. The method works as follows: the ministry offsets the cost reductions brought about by *future* policy – that is, policy that’s yet to be implemented – to calculate an ‘acceptable’ “benchmark”, which would equal a theoretical *future* social minimum.¹⁸

¹⁸ Rijksoverheid: ‘Kamerbrief voortgangsrapportage ijkpunt bestaanszekerheid Caribisch Nederland 2021’, p. 3

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In other words, the ministry sets the intention to formulate policy aimed at reducing the cost of living on the islands, for example by lowering rents and the cost of childcare. And because it has set this intention for the future, it deems it unnecessary to improve the social safety net to an extent that it's even remotely proportionate to the current social minima.

In April 2021, the Bonairean local government, employers, labour unions and the Dutch Chamber of Commerce reached an agreement on the minimally-necessary increase in minimum wage and social security such as childcare, unemployment benefits and cost reductions for the next four years.



'Boneiru Mi Dushi Isla' (Bonaire, my lovely island)

However, the by then outgoing Minister Koolmees of SZW did not make any commitments on the substance of the agreement and passed this on to his successor.¹⁹ Too little, too late, as usual. But at least, the budget was not exceeded.

¹⁹ Rijksoverheid: 'Voortgangsrapportage ijkpunt bestaanszekerheid Caribisch Nederland 2021', p. 2 and 3

The waning popularity of the Dutch

Since 10-10-'10, the Dutch have made themselves exponentially unpopular in some areas on the BES islands, shows research by Gert Oostindie and Wouter Veenendaal. On Bonaire, the most popular vacation and migration destination for the European Dutch, nearly three quarters of their respondents in 2015 agreed with the statement that too many Dutch people live on the island.²⁰

James Finies of the Bonaire Human Rights Organization (formerly Nos Ke Boneiru Bek, loosely translated as “We want Bonaire Back”) calls it a type of settler colonialism. Although he states not to have anything against the Dutch, he strongly criticises Bonaire’s status as a public body and the large numbers of European Dutch migrating to the island each year, threatening local customs and culture. Finies and his associates have been steadily advocating for years to place Bonaire on the Non-Self-Governing Territories list of the UN. Once on this list, a special committee monitors the decolonisation process and consults where necessary.

I speak to him in his small office in the centre of Kralendijk. “We’re trying to achieve something structural,” he explains. He is frustrated by journalists who often only report on single issues such as poverty. “When they come to talk about poverty, they say nothing about the things I’m fighting for. I talk about the causes of poverty, but not about the issue itself. Fighting single issues is like doing nothing. You might fix one problem, but they create ten more in Holland.



James at the playground his organisation founded for Bonairean children

²⁰ Veenendaal & Oostindie, 2017: “Head versus heart: The ambiguities of non-sovereignty in the Dutch Caribbean” p. 39

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They decide, they make the rules and laws. That's why I'm trying to achieve something fundamental."

By placing Bonaire on the UN list, he hopes to have an impartial arbitrator that can review and evaluate Dutch policies. "Look for example at other countries, which have been independent for 50 years: they're talking about reparations only now." James thinks the time is far from ripe for that. Before speaking of reparations, the Netherlands and its former colonies should first reconcile and heal. He rubs his tired eyes. "The relationship is not right, because we didn't walk through this reconciliation and healing process. We pretend as if everything's normal, we act normal, but some things will take years and years."



A sign James' organisation installed along the main road of Kralendijk, Bonaire

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The Netherlands' attitude towards the BES islands shows that the tens of thousands of people protesting across the country were doing so for a reason. With local governments trapped in a colonial impasse, it remains child's play for ministers and other government officials to escape their duty of care²¹, while inequality steadily increases, aided by policy instruments like the budget method and the reformed, more efficient Dutch tax system.

This should end. We're fed up with the sophisms used time and again by The Hague to keep drawing the purse strings closed, even when that means that it's shamelessly differentiating between Dutch citizens that should be equal by law. Politicians can say what they want, but eleven years later there isn't a single way in which to justify inequalities like this. Because at this moment it's Caribbean Dutch citizens, and especially the elderly and the disabled, who are mercilessly forced to pay the highest price for archetypical Dutch colonial penny-pinching. In the Caribbean Netherlands, #BlackLivesMatter too.

UPDATE DECEMBER 2021

On December 15th, the new government coalition presented its coalition agreement, in which it pledges to structurally invest €30 million to strengthen the labour market, protect local customs and culture, and tackle poverty by lowering the cost of living on the BES islands and increasing social benefits.

Phaedra Haringma

- [1] A social minimum is the bundle of resources that a person needs to lead a minimally decent life in their society.
- [2] Rijksoverheid: 'Voortgangsrapportage ijkpunt bestaanszekerheid Caribisch Nederland 2021', p. 23 and 24.
- [3] Rates differ for people with children or living with a partner.
- [4] Rijksdienst Caribisch Nederland: 'Indexering minimumlonen en maximumdaglonen Wet Ziekteverzekering BES 2021 van Ministerie Sociale zaken en Werkgelegenheid voor Saba, Sint Eustatius en Bonaire'
- [5] Rijksoverheid: 'Uitkeringsbedragen per 1 juli 2021'
- [6] Report by Ecorys: Loonruimte minimumloon CN, p. 67
- [7] Rijksoverheid: 'Voortgangsrapportage ijkpunt bestaanszekerheid Caribisch Nederland 2021', p. 3
- [8] Caribisch Netwerk, 2019: 'Rutte op Bonaire: Beter baan dan hogere uitkering tegen armoede'
- [9] Staatscourant 2021 nr. 7347 (February 16) p. 6
- [10] SZW is the Dutch acronym for the Ministry.
- [11] Spies et al., 2015, p. 71
- [12] Regioplan, 2018, p. 10
- [13] The Dutch government also pays its employees differentially. Nolly's salary is a lot lower than that of an official in the European Netherlands doing the exact same job.
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- [15] Report by Ecorys: Loonruimte minimumloon CN, p. 66
- [16] Idem, p. 10
- [17] Spies et al., 2015, p. 61
- [18] Rijksoverheid: 'Kamerbrief voortgangsrapportage ijkpunt bestaanszekerheid Caribisch Nederland 2021', p. 3
- [19] Rijksoverheid: 'Voortgangsrapportage ijkpunt bestaanszekerheid Caribisch Nederland 2021', p. 2 and 3
- [20] Veenendaal & Oostindie, 2017, p. 39
- [21] Veenendaal & Oostindie, 2017: "Head versus heart: The ambiguities of non-sovereignty in the Dutch Caribbean" p. 39