

# Troubled Taxonomies and the Calculating State: Everyday Categorizing and “Race-Ethnicity” – The Netherlands Case

Dvora Yanow

*Wageningen University*

Marleen van der Haar

*Institute for Management Research, Radboud University Nijmegen*

Karlijn Völke

*Independent Researcher*

**Abstract:** Tabulating population demographics, including “ethnicity,” “nationality,” and “race,” has long been a mark of the modern state. Achieved through its statisticians, this requires the designation and operationalization of relevant categories. Such category-making practices are commonly “invisible,” as is, consequently, their role in making up race-ethnic identities, especially when conducted through the ordinary “everyday-ness” of registering for public services. In this article, the politics of category-making for counting purposes meets the politics of “ethnicity” and “race.” The article examines the creation of categories to tabulate “race-ethnic” concepts and identities through registration practices, as seen in The Netherlands. Registration form questions and answers show how “race,” “ethnicity,” and related ideas are being constructed, implicitly, through commonplace, everyday activities. What makes this case unusual is that these activities take place within an explicit policy restriction on the use of “race.” The article concludes with implications for policy-making with respect to the actuarial, “calculating” state and for theorizing the play of race-ethnic categories in policy practices for tabulating populations.

**Keywords:** state category-making, race-ethnicity, classification practices, comparative category analysis, the politics of statistics.

Address correspondence and reprint requests to: Dvora Yanow, Communication, Philosophy, and Technology Sub-Department, Wageningen University, Wageningen, The Netherlands. E-mail: [Dvora.Yanow@wur.nl](mailto:Dvora.Yanow@wur.nl)

“Surveys and statistics are merely a tool and as such are neutral.”

– Fermín Bouza, Professor of Sociology of Public Opinion,  
University Complutense of Madrid  
(quoted in Güell 2009<sup>1</sup>)

“‘Are you Dutch or Moroccan, then?’ my oldest son was asked on the playground. I see him looking bewildered. He doesn’t know what to say: what reply does this situation call for? ‘Dutch,’ he says in the end, and he quickly moves on.”

– A Dutch woman married to a Moroccan man, mother of two sons  
(*Mix: Jongeren in Nederland* 2010<sup>1</sup>)

“Race. . .has become passé.”

– Editorial, *New England Journal of Medicine*, 2001  
(quoted in Abu El-Haj 2012, 12)

In the early 19th century, enumerating the characteristics of its population according to various criteria and categories became a mark of the modern state, and statistics—sharing a linguistic root with state—was developed for that purpose (see, e.g., McClure 2014). Today, many states tabulate a range of demographic traits through censuses and other means, fielding an army of civil service statisticians to generate and report on those numbers (see, e.g., Anderson 1988; Hobsbawm 1990; Mitchell 2002; Scott 1998; J. Simon 1988, P. Simon 2012). Among these traits are “race,” “ethnicity,” and “nationality.”

Such enumeration rests on category-making. States name the characteristics deemed interesting for tabulation; state-related agencies generate the data; and a central bureau typically collects these for statistical analysis and regular reporting. These enumeration activities are commonly perceived as enacting objective, scientific processes. Because of that and the status enjoyed by “science,” statistical science in particular, legislators, members of the public, and some academics readily assume that such enumerations capture population traits exactly, statistical reports mirroring presumptively naturally-occurring traits in an objective, neutral fashion (to wit, the first epigraph). Scholars analyzing categories, however, have been arguing for their ontological status as socially constructed concepts rather than as objective mirrors of natural phenomena (e.g., Bowker and Star 1999; Hacking 1986; Keeler 2007; Kertzer and Arel 2002; Minow 1990; Rasmussen 2011; Stevens 1999; Stone 2012/1988; Yanow 1996, 2003). These arguments join those treating “race” and “ethnicity” themselves as social constructs (e.g., López 2006/1996; Vucetic 2013). Still, seeing such social construction processes as they unfold is difficult, as that

occurs over time and across multiple intersubjective interactions. We can usually see only the traces of these processes after the fact and infer the creation that has taken place.

In this article, we examine the role of state category-making practices in creating “race-ethnic” concepts and identities—an ethnogenesis—as seen in The Netherlands. Rather than begin with statisticians’, biologists’ or social scientists’ a priori definitions of “ethnicity” and “race,” we show how the meanings of these concepts are being created through administrative practices in everyday (or quasi-everyday) life. As the state tolled its last census in 1971, analyses of population characteristics are conducted by Statistics Netherlands (the *Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek*, CBS), drawing on household sample surveys along with reports from a range of other institutions, including the municipal-level population register (*Gemeentelijke Basisadministratie*, GBA<sup>2</sup>; Van der Laan 2000) and organizations’ reports on the people they serve. Organizationally-generated data come from forms that state residents are asked to fill out when they register for various commonplace, “everyday” services: enrolling a child in school, requesting medical care, seeking employment, etc. In these registration practices, state and individual meet in ordinary, everyday ways.

The language and structure of these registration form questions comprise the data for this analysis. Categories are invoked in form questions about “ethnicity,” “nationality,” and related concepts, as well as in possible answers provided there from which registrants select their replies. Analysis of these questions and categories shows that ethnicity, nationality, and so forth are operationally defined on the basis of a central characteristic: place of birth, whether of service-recipients, their parents or their grandparents. Labeled with different geographic monikers, the resulting taxonomy of place-based definitions-in-practice of “ethnicity” and related concepts links these terms to the common statistical, policy, and everyday Netherlands taxonomy for “foreigner” and “native,” *allochthon* and *autochthon*, through their Greek root *chthōn*—earth. The centrality of land further links taxonomic terms to the concept of “race,” whose classical and modern uses position birth-soil as a key component. In these registration practices, we see the state creation of race-ethnic concepts and groups.

Whereas the argument that the concepts “race” and “ethnicity” and their categories are social constructions, and that race, ethnicity, and nationality are often treated interchangeably in state enumerations, has been advanced, and widely accepted, across the social sciences, it has not widely penetrated the non-academic public, including policy-makers

and enumerators in various policy-implementation settings. When these arguments ground their analyses in empirical detail, they typically look at censuses or legal decisions (e.g., Ford 1994; Morning 2008; López 2006/1996; see Yanow and van der Haar 2013 for an exception). What makes the particular ethnogenesis examined here striking, however, is not only that it is carried out through everyday registration practices, but also that it takes place within a policy context that largely prohibits the use of “race.” “Origins,” defined in “identity” terms such as “ethnicity,” “nationality,” and “race,” is a sensitive topic, still, in light of World War II’s uniquely high extermination rate of Jewish Netherlanders—upwards of 75% of the Jewish population<sup>3</sup>—along with others. It is now widely understood that the centralized amassing of “identity” data enabled the “processing,” deportation, enslavement, and eradication of so many who were designated by “racial,” “ethnic,” or other characteristics: African-Germans, Jews, Roma, Sinti, Slavs, “a-socials,” elderly, homosexuals, the mentally or physically “disabled,” and religious dissidents (Berenbaum 1990, xi, Kesting 2002, 358–60). Consequently, collecting data that designate “origins,” considered *private* information, is, today, highly suspect and subject to regulation. Our analysis of registration form questions and categories suggests, however, that despite governmental prohibitions on gathering “race”-related data, the concept persists, albeit by proxy: the birth geographies used in the forms’ questions and answers smuggle in “race” implicitly. The article shows how “race” is an “absent presence,” continuing to surface despite efforts to remove it (M’charek, Schramm, and David 2014, 462).

We begin by reviewing the Netherlands’ categories and policy background and then engage a set of registration forms, focusing on those sections that ask “origins” questions. Examining the question and answer terminologies reveals that registering “ethnic” origins is not as straightforward as it might seem. The results call into question what the statistical reporting derived from these data actually conveys. The categories and their differences across organizations and policy sectors (e.g., health, education, criminal justice) make manifest the dynamic processes of the collective, societal construction of “race-ethnicity”—as much as any slowly unfolding, implicit process can be “seen.” What some understand, then, as a neutrally scientific mode of data collection and analysis appears, instead, as a political process in which states, through statistical and other bureaus, define a set of identities for others and, through seemingly innocuous registration forms and attendant practices, impose these identities on them. Further, to the extent that these categories are, in

fact, “race”-based, regulatory legislation has not succeeded in its aims, “race”-naming continuing, albeit by implication, tacitly, through these surrogates.

## THE CALCULATING STATE: CATEGORIES AND COUNTING MEET DATA PRIVACY POLICIES AND “RACE”

Knowing the characteristics a state wishes to track (e.g., socio-economic status), its statisticians stipulate indicators and some range of difference for each (e.g., educational attainment, annual income). Categories are thereby drawn, named, and sometimes formally defined. Category-making institutionalizes those differences and locates them in or ascribes them to members of the population being studied. Such state “actuarial practices”—“techniques that use statistics to represent the distribution of variables in a population”—are frequently invoked with respect to matters “generating fundamental changes in our political culture” (J. Simon 1988, 771). For instance, naming and then using categories to track “natives” and newcomers, common in classic immigration states (e.g., Canada, Israel, and United States), has come into use more recently in Europe, the UK, and elsewhere (e.g., various Latin American states<sup>4</sup>), often as those states perceive immigration-related challenges to their socio-political cultures. Such tracking might assess the degree of immigrant integration and/or attainment of social justice goals, such as positive discrimination/affirmative action, measured by various indicators. This was President Nicolas Sarkozy’s intention, for example, when in late 2008 he asked France’s statisticians to develop a set of categories and their definitions to tabulate the state population’s “ethnic” background in order to track the extent of discrimination against certain groups.<sup>5</sup> Similar category-making occurred in the United States in 1977 when, for the first time, the federal government, through Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Directive No. 15, formally named and defined the “race-ethnic” characteristics of its population. Intended for affirmative action reporting purposes, the policy required all agencies nationwide receiving federal funds (e.g., schools) to report annually using those named categories (Yanow 2003).

Such categorizing and counting is, in effect, a way of “mapping” a state’s population, rendering it legible numerically. It is one form of a societal orientation toward “calculability”: “establish[ing] equivalences, ...identify[ing] social actors or agents, mak[ing]...performances

measurable, and designat[ing] relations of control and command” (Mitchell 2002, 8–9). Although Mitchell’s politics of calculation was directed toward matters economic, it holds equally well for other aspects of “governmentality,” as Foucault (1991) termed the relationship between state knowledge and state power. The modern, “calculating” mind, Simmel remarked over a century ago (quoted and paraphrased in Mitchell 2002, 80), manifests a “purely matter-of-fact attitude in the treatment of persons and things.” This “calculating exactness of practical life . . . corresponds to the ideal of natural science, namely that of transforming the world into an arithmetical problem and of fixing everyone of its parts in a mathematical formula”—resulting in a precision and unambiguousness in social relationships (contrasted with an earlier inclination toward less faceless, more personal ones) leading to their perceived neutrality.

Although it is now widely accepted across the social sciences that categories do not reflect social realities, but are imposed upon them, a state’s calculation practices commonly appear completely unremarkable and ordinary—“matter(s) of fact”—to its veteran members, acculturated as they are to its ways. This is because both counting and the categories created for it, along with their definitions, whether formal or operational, typically institutionalize existing common-sensical, society-wide, tacit knowledge. Registration forms with their classification schemes have become so much a part of everyday life in many states, including The Netherlands, that being asked to fill one out appears normal and ordinary. When done by state agents in the name of state interests, classifying enacts the collective power of state identity definition over and above individual powers of self-identification. The commonplaceness of states’ “making up people” (Hacking 1986) masks this exercise of power.

In inscribing order on the world, classification practices render that world legible in particular ways (Mitchell 1988). The sequencing of categories in a taxonomy, for instance, or their exclusion of specific elements imposes a logic onto the social world so ordered. Such ordering is a non-traditional function of “statecraft” (Scott 1998), in particular when monitoring mobile populations. Knowing their numbers enables their control, at minimum through potential or actual taxation and conscription, the original purpose of many censuses, and in some cases through “prevention of rebellion” (Scott 1998, 2). It is precisely through evading or subverting such legibility measures, for instance, that undocumented (“illegal”) migrants acquire “paper citizenship” and disappear into the ranks of legal citizens (Sadiq 2009).

Classification practices intertwine with statistical science to enable such legibility. To report analytic findings in scientifically acceptable ways, a category schema needs a certain degree of uniformity, over time and reporting instruments. For example, to demonstrate changes in discrimination against a particular population group, the category name designating that group and its formal or operational definition need to be identical across tabulations. This uniformity is what the U.S. OMB sought in naming and defining the population categories to be used in monitoring “racial” and “ethnic” groups across policy sectors (but see Yanow 2003 on complications arising from definitions and policy implementation practices).

Similarly, in 1999 Statistics Netherlands (hereafter CBS) standardized the definition of the main category it had been using to demarcate “foreigner”—*allochtoon*—from “native”—*autochtoon* (Keij 2000), along two dimensions. The first is geographic, on the basis of the birthplace of the individual or at least one parent and distinguishing between Western and non-Western allochthons (see Table 1). The second dimension adds time to space through generational distinctions, but applied only to non-Western allochthons:

first generation non-Western allochthons were themselves born in a foreign country with at least one foreign-born parent (thereby ruling out children born “overseas” to two Netherlands-born parents who happened to be residing there when the child was born);

second generation non-Western allochthons are Netherlands-born persons with at least one foreign-born parent.

First generation non-Western allochthons include “guest workers” from Turkey and Morocco recruited in the 1960s and 1970s to fill the labor shortage created by the Second World War, as well as migrants from former colonies (Suriname, the Antilles). Migration policy initially stressed the former’s temporariness: as they were expected to return home, they were encouraged to preserve their “native” cultures. When they stayed on, policy changed to enable family-reunification and -formation, leading to a second generation and an emphasis on integration. Discussion at the time considered using third generation, as well—Netherlands-born persons with at least one non-Western-born grandparent (Goedhuys, König, and Geertjes 2010, 10, Table 1, note 1)—a practice not adopted for another decade. Much current

**Table 1.** Defining allochthon

Western	Non-Western
Europe (but not Turkey)	Turkey
	Africa [Morocco]
North America	Latin America
Oceania	
Japan	Asia
Indonesia (including former Dutch Indonesia)	[Suriname, Dutch Antilles/Aruba]

Source: Yanow and van der Haar (2013, p. 242, Table 3), constructed from the place names listed narratively in Keij (2000); bracketed names come from a separate statement there.

social policy focuses on integration failures, especially among the “non-Western” groups; explaining various social problems through statistical analyses using these categories has become an increasingly normalized feature of governmental and public discourses (see also van der Haar and Yanow 2015; Yanow and van der Haar 2013).

Reporting on ethnic background has itself not been uncontested, especially concerning its compatibility with privacy laws protecting individuals’ “origins” from public identification. For example, the electronic database commissioned in 2006 by Minister Rita Verdonk (conservative-liberal VVD party; responsible for integration policy) for tracking first- and second generation Antilleans to the age of 24—a population considered socially “at risk”<sup>6</sup>—enjoyed 4 years of Parliamentary debate concerning its violations of those laws. World War II experiences frame the discussion, as invoked in left-wing party GroenLinks’ Rotterdam-based chair Anneke Verwijs’ remark, “Since the Second World War it is by law illegal to register and judge people on the basis of their origin” (Wanders 2009). The Constitution, Personal Data Protection Act (*Wet bescherming persoonsgegevens* 2000, abbreviated Wbp), and Central Bureau of Statistics Act (*Wet op het centraal bureau voor de statistiek* 2003) regulate the use of personal data.<sup>7</sup> Included is the use of the term “race,” taboo in The Netherlands, as in other European states, since the end of that war. The Constitution’s Article 1 (2008) states: “Discrimination on the grounds of religion, belief, political opinion, race or sex or on any other grounds whatsoever shall not be permitted.” The Wbp stipulates that “race” refers to any designation on the basis of “skin color, origin [*afkomst*], and national or ethnic ancestry [*afstamming*]” (Hooghiemstra 2007, 100), and its Article 16 prohibits processing “sensitive,” personal data concerning race and other elements, except as



permitted by the seven subsequent Articles. Two of these touch on race: 18 allows data collection for combatting racial/ethnic/cultural minority “disadvantages” (but those data can only designate “the birthplace of the person, his parents or grandparents”; *Wet bescherming persoonsgegevens* 2000, Art. 18.b.2); 21.3 exempts medical treatment or care and 21.4 allows data collection for scientific research and statistics (*Wet bescherming persoonsgegevens* 2000; see also Hooghiemstra 2007, 110).

These laws notwithstanding, analysis of various agencies’ forms shows that “race” still lies at the heart of registration practices in non-exempt circumstances, even when the term is not explicitly used. *The idea of race* informs other uses, in other settings, for other purposes. The soil on which one or one’s parent was born figures strongly in these registration form questions, and birth-soil is central to definitions-in-use of “race,” themselves resting on old race-thinking: the four color-associated bodily fluids (or humors: blood, phlegm, yellow bile, black bile) that 18th–19th century race theories tied to skin-color-related behavioral traits were, in their ancient Greek origins, linked to the particular earth, air, sun, and water characteristics of an individual’s birth-location (Greenwood 1984). Through all manner of bodily measurements—sizes, shapes, and gradations of skulls, noses, ears, eyes, brows, and figure—19th–20th century state practices of calculability sought to tie those traits and their related “race” categories to spatial geographies (see, e.g., Beals and Hoijer 1965/1953; Bean 1935; Kroeber 1948/1923; Sheldon 1970/1940; Steinmetz, Barge, and Hagedoorn 1938). Even where not explicitly invoked as “race,” then, “racial” ideas are being carried into the category structures used in these forms, and thereby into statistical analyses derived from them, through a taxonomy of birth-soil locations. Two other concepts—“ethnicity” and “nationality” (with birth at its root: *nātiō-*, *nātus*)—also do racial work, in similar ways. Netherlands’ practices are, then, similar to those of the Latin American states analyzed by Loveman (2014). By contrast with “[s]tates that legally institutionalize racial distinctions,” she writes, who “‘make race’ by making race matter, directly and explicitly. . . [, other] states that refrain from legal racial discrimination among citizens may also engage in the political construction of ethnoracial divides. . . , mak[ing] race *indirectly* through strategies of governance. . .” (Loveman 2014, 5; original emphasis).<sup>8</sup> “Race,” contra the *New England Journal of Medicine* (third epigraph), is, *in practice*, hardly passé.

## CATEGORIES AND REGISTRATION FORMS: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Category analysis is based on the understanding that language is significant for both cognition and action, giving voice, in phenomenological-hermeneutic fashion, to existing ideas about a topic and shaping ensuing acts (Lakoff and Johnson 1987, 79; Schön 1993/1979; Yanow 2008, 2016). It starts from the premise that taxonomies, rather than existing in nature, are human artifacts developed intersubjectively, over time, and inscribed on the surrounding world. Interrogating their presumed normalcy, analysis looks for the logic embedded in a category set which renders it sensible (Yanow 2000). This logic is typically not stated explicitly but can be inferred through analyzing the ordering perspective embedded in the category structure. For example, in many cultures an alphabetical or chronological sequencing of category terms implicitly conveys equivalence among elements; another sequencing structure invites explicit attention to the ordering logic. In the absence of a clear ordering logic, the lead term often embodies the point of view from which the category structure has been created, establishing that term as the “normal” state of being from which others “deviate” (Yanow 2003). A critical “stranger-ness” (Agar 1996) enables making this tacit knowledge explicit.

Categories typically follow one of two types: slotting or prototyping. Slotting is based on the understanding that all elements do, or will, neatly fit into one and only one box. Categorical “lumpiness” results when elements subsumed under one label (in one “box”) appear more divergent than similar; a different organizing perspective would deem them unrelated. Anomalies that violate expected ordering logics seem (sometimes to group members, sometimes only to analyst-“strangers”) to be category “errors” or “mistakes.” These “illogics” bring the implicit category-making perspective to the fore (Yanow 2000, 2003). Prototyping is more forgiving, accommodating family resemblances among elements, each category built around a representative image of its prototype while allowing for “outliers” (e.g., what a Moroccan “is,” or “looks like”; see Bowker and Star 1999).

Here, focusing on registration form categories and practices highlights the ways through which policy meanings are expressed, enacted, and communicated by and to various audiences. To advance the argument that The Netherlands makes “race” matter under conditions in which the use of the word is largely prohibited requires a detailed examination of the terms in their sources. Such detail is necessary to show how

“ethnicity” and “nationality” are often *operationally* defined, at least in part, in racial terms—and vice versa, that “race,” when it is used, is also treated interchangeably with ethnicity and nationality. As we are interested in “ordinary language” meanings of key concepts (see Schaffer 2014, 2016), we drew on two Van Dale dictionaries—the *Groot Woordenboek van de Nederlandse Taal* (the three-volume, standard reference work for Dutch) and the *Pocketwoordenboek Nederlands als Tweede Taal* (“Pocket Dictionary of Dutch as a Second Language”)—for assistance in elaborating differences of meaning across these concepts. We also consulted Synoniemen.net, an online compilation of synonyms and their definitions and etymologies.<sup>9</sup>

We began by tracing moments across a life cycle when a Netherlands resident is invited or required by state-related organizations to fill out a registration form. These include a family member or guardian acting on behalf of another—e.g., registering an infant’s birth or a child for school—or filing for oneself—e.g., registering for university or recording a marriage. We identified the type of organization providing services at each moment and then searched online for examples of each type which both required registration and made the relevant registration forms available.<sup>10</sup> Table 2a (see online Supplementary Material) lists these, noting the number of organizations of each type from which forms were collected. As our intention is to illustrate and analyze language-in-use, rather than to single out any particular organization for praise or blame, we have anonymized all organizations other than public institutions, removing references that might identify particular individuals (e.g., specific primary schools and their principals). We also considered registration occasions not tied to specific life-cycle events, such as encountering the police as victim or perpetrator (see Table 2b, also online). Our interest in the play of categorizing in the course of everyday life led us to focus on the kinds of “ordinary,” commonly unnoticed registration that residents would encounter. We have therefore excluded from analysis the registration practices required of recent immigrants, refugees, asylum-seekers, and other resident non-citizens (e.g., “knowledge migrants”). Given their “non-Netherlander” status, their having to register with specialized organizations (e.g., the Immigration and Naturalization Service; the Foreigners’ Police, *Vreemdelingenpolitie*) and answer “origins” questions would be expected, by contrast with the more commonplace registration practices of “normal” life which are our concern.

We examined the collected forms’ language-in-use with respect to “origins”-related questions. Analysis also included supplemental materials

defining the categories and/or explaining the forms' intended uses, where these existed. In light of statistical science's requirement for comparable categories and definitions, we analyzed forms across organizations within a single policy sector (e.g., across schools implementing educational policy) for their uniformity. Because nation-wide statistical reports often present data analyses for "ethnic" groups as a whole, rather than by policy issue, we also compared registration form categories across policy sectors. The different ways of asking about "ethnicity" and related terms, as well as the possible answers offered on the forms, show a range of terminological definitions-in-use.

## REGISTERING "ORIGINS"

In what follows, we proceed from registration forms that request more general kinds of "origins" information to those that frame their questions in ever more specific ways. Three aspects of origins-talk are used in people-making: making "ethnicity," emplacement versus mobility, and making "race." Geographies of birth are central to each.

### Making "Ethnicity" through Nationality and Birth-Geographies

Werk.nl, the government employment agency, asks job seekers for the sorts of information that most, including Netherlanders, are, today, accustomed to providing when registering for public services: identification number, name, birthdate, sex, nationality, address, and telephone number. Form questions seem unremarkable with respect to "origins," "nationality" appearing within a set of customary, "neutral" items. In further exploring the relationship between registration forms and statistical reporting, however, the seeming innocuousness of "nationality" and even of identification numbers dissipates.

Two healthcare forms initially appear similarly unremarkable. One (GP Clinic 1) resembles others that new patients registering with a general practitioner (GP) fill out. Although different GP clinics structure their forms differently, the ones we analyzed all request the same sorts of personal data: name, address, telephone number, date of birth, marital status, health insurance provider and policy number, previous physician's name and address. Comparing this with the werk.nl form illustrates the policy context-specificity of registration form questions: asking about

insurance coverage or previous health care provider, appropriate in a medical context, would be odd on the employment form.

The second healthcare form is from a clinic serving both its geographic area and a teaching hospital conducting medical research (GP Clinic 3). Alongside the same general information requested on the previous form, it asks after marital status, present and former occupations, and education. These two forms exemplify organizational context-specificity within the same policy sector: the request for additional personal information may derive from the hospital's research needs. But this form asks two additional questions: birthplace (*geboorteplaats*, commonly designating city/town/village of birth) and ethnicity (*etniciteit*). Three sub-questions define "ethnicity" operationally: the patient's, biological father's, and biological mother's birth-land/country (*geboorteland*).

Birth geography enters differently in still other forms, such as one for online reporting of crimes. It asks "routine" questions (the filer's name, identity number, sex), including nationality, defined as birth-land/country, but adds birth-municipality (*geboortegemeente*) to the birth-geography taxonomy.

In these and other forms, birth location—so far operationalized in three ways: birth-city/town/village, birth-land/country, birth-municipality—becomes a key identity marker and creates "ethnicity." A recent government statement that "objective" information concerning country of birth was the only *ethnic* background data permitted for collection (Tweede Kamer 2010–2011, 31 268, 45) underscores the link between birth-soil and identity. The next set of forms further complicates this link.

## Emplacement versus Mobility

Educational policy sector forms illustrate yet more complexity in the interplay between birth geographies and kinds of "origin," including "ethnicity." Some enable registering two nationalities, among them a primary school registration form and the Stichting Studielink website, a hybrid governmental-NGO entity that draws on GBA (Municipal Administrative Database) data and, since October 1, 2007, enables higher education registration through a single, nationwide portal (Stichting Studielink n.d.). In addition to basic information, Studielink's registration form requests the applicant's birth-city/town/village, birth-land/country, nationality, and, if relevant, second nationality.<sup>11</sup> The preparatory pre-Master's degree program form used previously had also asked for parental origins (*herkomst*), meaning land/country.

The significance of rootedness in place is emphasized when questions focus on a mobile placelessness, as in school registration forms. Until a 2006 policy change, primary schools received supplemental funding to enroll “underprivileged” children (*achterstandsleerlingen*), understood as needing remedial tutoring and other types of help. Several forms’ questions operationalize the meanings of underprivilege in place-based terms, reflecting the Ministry of Education and the Dutch Inspectorate of Education’s thinking at the time. That the forms still appeared online at least 5 years after the policy change suggests the extent of the ideas’ institutionalization (see discussion, n. 10).

Form 1 (School 2) provides an example (see online Supplementary Material). The first group of questions targets types of parental occupation that would require children to move around, thereby missing continuity in school attendance. It names skippers’ children, along with “other business”; two such, listed on another form (School 8), are fairground employment and mobile-home-dwelling.<sup>12</sup> What autochthonous barge, fair, and mobile-home children (*schipperskinderen*, *kermiskinderen*, *kinderen van woonwaggen bewoners*) share is an itinerant way of life, marking them as different from the norm, a sort of placelessness by contrast with other registration forms’ emphasis on emplacements of birth in city/town/village, land/country, and municipality. The second group of questions in that form names three categories of allochthonous children which mix four traits: class (labor migrants, three of them “non-Western”—Morocco, Turkey, Tunisia); ex-colonial and refugee status (characteristically “non-Western”); language command (“non-English speaking country outside Europe”); and a protected “heritage” (Moluccan; see Form 1, n. 4). Both question sets rely on geographies of residence and birth, the place-free mobility or dis-“place”-ment of “underprivileged” “othering” autochthonous Netherlanders much as “foreign” birth-geographies do allochthonous Netherlanders.<sup>13</sup>

The complexities of making Netherlanders through their “origins”—ancestry, birth geography, ethnicity, heritage, and nationality—increase when “race” explicitly enters the picture.

## Adding “Race”

Asking about “race,” when deemed necessary to the provision of health-care, is permitted by Wbp Article 21.3. But the ways in which the healthcare-related registration forms analyzed here engage this category give pause, as the categories not only treat “ethnicity” and “race”

interchangeably, but also proliferate terms and their meanings in statistically non-comparable ways.

An Academic Medical Center's department of Clinical Pharmacology and Pharmacy (AMC1) asks for the patient's "ethnic origin" (*ethnische* [sic] *afkomst*). Two of the three possible answers provided are "race" names: Caucasian, Negro, and Asian, the latter offering one sub-category option: "Hindustani."<sup>14</sup> Another Academic Medical Center's obstetrics clinic (AMC2) asks for "ethnicity (race)" (*etniciteit* (*ras*)), providing nine answer options: Caucasian, Negro, African, Turkish, Middle Eastern, Asian, Southeast Asia, Indian Subcontinent, and Hindustani, each with its own set of subcategories (see [Form 2](#)). A third form (PRN/LNR), from the Netherlands Perinatal Registry (PRN)—founded in 2001 to collect medical data for national, European, and international policy-related statistics, in cooperation with other organizations, including CBS (Stichting Perinatale Registratie Nederland 2011)—requests identical birth-location information for both of the newborn's parents, in two questions. The first asks if the land/country of birth is The Netherlands, with three answers possible. If the answer is "Yes," nothing further is requested. If the answer is "No," the respondent is asked to indicate what it is. If the answer is "Unknown"—one of few forms in our collection to include this possibility—instructions send the respondent to a second question: birth-continent (*geboortecontinent*). The form lists seven possible replies, in this order: Europe, Africa, North America, South America, Asia, Oceania, and Unknown (Stichting Perinatale Registratie Nederland/Landelijke Neonatale Registratie 2011).

The same birth-location question is asked about the child, with a space for identifying it if not The Netherlands. But instead of then asking about the child's continent of birth (presumably because with at least one birth parent present, "Unknown" would never be the case, unlike some adoptions), the form introduces race, similarly linked to ethnicity: "ethnicity/race" (*Etniciteit/Ras*). Ten possible answers are provided: Caucasian, African, Hindustani, Moroccan, Turkish, Asian, Other Western, Other non-Western, Mixed (another rare occurrence in our forms), and Unknown. These are defined separately in an online key (see [Table 3](#)) for the practitioner's use when administering the questionnaire.<sup>15</sup>

Still other forms, from the National Midwife Registry (LVR1, LVR2, LVRh), ask a different question: "Type of Woman" (i.e., seeking services; Item 10, LVR1). LVR1 lists seven possible answers: Dutch, Mediterranean, Other European, Creole<sup>16</sup>, Hindustani, Asian, and Other. In annual reports derived from those data, "Mediterranean" is

**Form 2.** “Ethnicity (race)”: Registering for pre-conception counseling, obstetrics clinic (Academic Medical Center 2)

<b>Caucasian</b> Dutch, White European, Canada, US	<b>Negro</b> Suriname, Dutch Antilles, Central Africa, sub-Saharan Africa
<b>African</b> Moroccan, Algerian	
<b>Turkish</b> Turkey, Kurdistan	<b>Middle Eastern</b> Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq
<b>Asian</b> China, Japan	<b>Southeast Asian</b> <sup>a</sup> Pakistan, India
<b>Indian subcontinent</b> <sup>a</sup> Indonesia, Ambong <sup>b</sup> , Vietnam	<b>Hindustani</b> Suriname, Dutch Antilles

Bolded terms = main categories; non-bolded are the subcategories for each.

Instructions invite the respondent to circle the category which “for you is the most appropriate.”

Source: Anonymized (accessed April 24, 2009).

<sup>a</sup>The subcategories for “Indian subcontinent” and “Southeast Asian” seem to be reversed (thanks to Des Gasper, personal communication, May 5, 2010, for catching this).

<sup>b</sup>The Malay term for Ambon. The use of Ambong or Ambonese is somewhat odd as, while common before 1970, it has been replaced by “Moluccan.” Although about 90% of the Moluccans in The Netherlands are from Ambon, “[s]trictly speaking, in referring to the whole group, for instance in using statistical data, only the term Moluccans is correct” (Van Amersfoort 2003: note 171). See also Form 1, n. 4.

further specified as Moroccan and Turkish (Stichting Perinatale Registratie 2008). The LVRh list varies in order and detail: Dutch or other European; Turk, Kurdish; Moroccan; African, Surinamese, Antillean; Creole; Hindustani; Asian; Other.

Unlike the AMC2 and PRN/LNR forms, “race” is not present explicitly in the LVR forms. But “type of” puts it in play. Common well into the 1970s in anthropological classifications of racial markers (e.g., “racial types,” Kroeber 1948/1923, 140), the phrase can be found in photographic plates portraying “representative *types*” of the various races (Bean 1935, 100 ff., Steinmetz, Barge, and Hagedoorn 1938). Century-old color prints from books published in Leipzig and elsewhere portraying African, American, Asian, Australian, and Oceanic “folk types” (*völkertypen*) could still be purchased in Amsterdam antiquarian shops in Winter 2016. The registration forms’ requests for information about “*type vrouw*” echoes this historical usage, introducing race implicitly through the invocation of old racial concepts. This invocation is underscored in the forms’ classification practices based on “physical characteristics,



**Table 3.** Identifying the child’s “ethnicity/race,” key for Netherlands Perinatal Registry (PRN/LNR) form (version 1.3)

Code for B2 Key	Ethnicity/race Description	Explanation
1	Caucasian	Dutch, White European (excl. Turkey)
2	African	African, Surinamese/Antillean of Negro origin ( <i>afkomst</i> )
3	Hindustani	Hindustani, Pakistani, Indian, Surinamese/Antillean of Hindustani origin ( <i>afkomst</i> )
4	Moroccan	Moroccan, Algerian, North African
5	Turkish	Turkish, Kurdish
6	Asian	Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian, Ambonese, Vietnamese
7	Other Western	North American, Australian, etc. <sup>a</sup>
8	Other non-Western	South and Central African <sup>b</sup>
9	Mixed	Mixed origin ( <i>afkomst</i> )
99	Unknown	

Source: Stichting Perinatale Registratie Nederland (N.d.a).

<sup>a</sup>Original ellipsis.

<sup>b</sup>“African” appears to be a misprint for “American,” as African is already present at #2 as both main category and subcategory and the taxonomy is incomplete without Central and South America.

language and surname” (Stichting Perinatale Registratie Nederland 2008, 11, discussed further below).

### ANALYZING REGISTRATION CATEGORIES AND PRACTICES

Comparative analysis of the categories offered as answers to registration form origins questions shows taxonomic variation in definitions-in-use of “ethnicity,” “nationality,” and “race”: operational definitions are inconsistent, even contradictory, raising questions about what is being observed and enumerated. Further analysis engages category logic and lumpiness; their defining point of view; and self- versus other-identification practices. These aspects of categorizing practices show how “simple” registration forms are not innocent of enacting political processes and of carrying racial meaning even when the term is not explicitly named.

#### “Ethnicity” = “Nationality” = “Race”?

Many academic and dictionary definitions of these terms imply that their meanings should be singular, and distinct. But registration forms and the

policy discourses that underpin them do not begin with formal definitions. And in operation, these forms—one listing three possible answers for “ethnic origin” (AMC1), another offering ten for “ethnicity/race” (PRN/LNR), and still others suggesting seven (LVR1) or eight (LVRh) “types”—show overlapping definitions (see [Table 4](#)). “Ethnicity” is operationalized at times in nation-state terms and at times in “racial” terms, as in the PRN/LNR, LVR1, and LVRh forms, which explicitly equate “ethnicity” with “race” (as does Van Dale 1995, defining “ethnic” in racial terms). These operational definitions tie birth to land in the four-part geography noted above—birth-place, birth-municipality, birth-land/country, birth-continent—often juxtaposing individuals’ own birth identifiers and those of one or both parents. Defining “ethnicity” in birth-geography terms replaces its common academic and dictionary definitions as a set of “cultural” traits (customs, cuisines, language, etc.). Moreover, the elaboration of land-based sources of “origins” underscores birth-soil’s (presumed) centrality to identity, a centrality that echoes ancient understandings of “race” as place characteristics, with humors establishing individual character. These birth geographies thereby become proxies for “race,” introduced conceptually even when not explicitly named.

The language of birth also lies at the root of “nationality,” as noted above. Dictionary definitions reinforce these links: both nationality and “ethnic” (*etnisch*) are defined as the people (*volk*) and land to which one “officially” belongs; *volk* is “all the people of a land” (Van Dale 2006). “Naturalized” citizens (from the same natal root), then, are individuals re-born, on a different land-place-soil, but (conceptually speaking) with a new character. So, to be born in a specific location generates not only nationality relative to state jurisdiction over that piece of land (at least, under *jus soli*), but also character (in the ancient Greek understanding), “race” (in the more modern one), and “ethnicity” (in these forms). Birth-geographies’ centrality in these definitions thereby conceptually displaces phenotyping (or genetic heritage) from “racial” definitions and culture from “ethnic identity.” Consider GP Clinic 3: if the patient’s and both parents’ birth-land/country is France, for instance, “ethnicity” would be “French.” Yet someone born in France might be, say, “ethnically” Tunisian—a possible “culture” or “people” from a different categorizing point of view. And one can be a national—e.g., carry a passport—of a state other than one’s birth-land. Furthermore, with “ethnicity” defined as one’s own and one’s parents’ birth-land/country, what is a “mixed birth-land” person’s “ethnicity”?

**Table 4.** Comparing categories

a. Netherlands Perinatal Registry (PRN/LNR), Question 05: “Ethnicity/race – child,” plus key (Table 3)	b. Department of Clinical Pharmacology and Pharmacy, Academic Medical Center 1 (AMC1): “Patient’s ethnic background”	c. Obstetrics clinic, Academic Medical Center 2 (AMC2), Question 5 (Form 2): “Ethnicity (race)”	d. National Midwife Registry (LVR1), Question 10: “Type of woman”	e. National Midwife Registry (LVRh), Question 8: “Type of woman”
1 Caucasian [Dutch, White European (excl. Turkey)]	Caucasian	Caucasian [Dutch, White European, Canada, United States]	0 Dutch	0 Dutch or other European
		Middle Eastern [Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq]	2 Other European 1 Mediterranean [yearbook reports include Moroccan, Turkish]	
5 Turkish [Turkish, Kurdish]		Turkish [Turkey, Kurdistan]		1 Turk, Kurdish
4 Moroccan [Moroccan, Algerian, North African]		African [Moroccan, Algerian]		2 Moroccan
2 African [African, Surinamese/Antillean of Negro origin]	Negro	Negro [Surinam, Dutch Antilles, Central Africa, sub-Saharan Africa]		3 African, Surinamese, Antillean
3 Hindustani [Hindustani, Pakistani, Indian, Surinamese/Antillean of Hindustani origin]		Hindustani [Surinam, Dutch Antilles]	3 Creole	4 Creole
			4 Hindustani	5 Hindustani

*Continued*

**Table 4. Continued**

a. Netherlands Perinatal Registry (PRN/LNR), Question 05: “Ethnicity/race—child,” plus key (Table 3)	b. Department of Clinical Pharmacology and Pharmacy, Academic Medical Center 1 (AMC1): “Patient’s ethnic background”	c. Obstetrics clinic, Academic Medical Center 2 (AMC2), Question 5 (Form 2): “Ethnicity (race)”	d. National Midwife Registry (LVR1), Question 10: “Type of woman”	e. National Midwife Registry (LVRh), Question 8: “Type of woman”
6 Asian [Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian, Ambonese, Vietnamese]	Asian [Hindustani Y/N]	Asian [China, Japan]	5 Asian	6 Asian
		Southeast Asian <sup>a</sup> [Pakistan, India] Indian subcontinent <sup>a</sup> [Indonesia, Ambong, Vietnam]		
			6 Other	9 Other
7 Other Western [North American, Australian, ... (sic)]				
8 Other non-Western [South and Central (American <sup>b</sup> )]				
9 Mixed [Mixed origin]				
99 Unknown				

Entries follow the sequence of Form LVRh (the right-most column); bracketed terms are subcategories in the original forms or key (the left-most column; see Table 3). Columns a and c reproduce the categories from this article’s Table 3 and Form 2, respectively. Coding numbers, where given, follow the original sequence, although for comparative purposes several of them have been re-ordered. Seeming errors in Form 2 <sup>(a)</sup> and Table 3 <sup>(b)</sup> have been corrected (see notes there).

Other usage circularities abound. The equation of “ethnicity” and birth-land/country is not always consistent within the same practice. The website instructs practitioners filling out the PRN/LNR form to determine “the woman’s ethnicity on the basis of her country of birth and that of her parents” (Stichting Perinatale Registratie, [N.d.b](#), Box P12). But the form’s instructions for identifying both woman’s and child’s “ethnicity” note that “ethnic group”—Caucasian, African, etc.—is to be determined *separately* from birth-land/country (Stichting Perinatale Registratie, [N.d.b](#), Boxes P20, G20).<sup>17</sup> Nor is usage always consistent within a form. Whereas the PRN/LNR form asks identical questions with respect to mother’s, father’s, and child’s “birth-land/country,” only the child is treated as having “ethnicity/race.” Moreover, the form’s structure eliminates the possibility of cross-“race-ethnic” parentage and “mixed” child origins. Not asking about parental “ethnicity/race” when identifying children in such terms does not silence the matter of their “ethnic/racial” identity.<sup>18</sup> By contrast, several forms that ask about the respondent’s birth-land/country also ask about the parents’, using either that language or *herkomst*-origins.<sup>19</sup> The latter is transitive; ethnicity/race is not—in these forms.

At least one form seems uneasy about these practices. Addressing the woman filling it out, AMC2 explains why “race” is needed as an explicit identity marker:

From scientific research it has become clear that *race* (*your identity*) can influence your pregnancy. We know, for example, that children from Negro people often have a lower birth weight than children from white parents. . . . This is the reason we ask you *from which race you originate* (emphases added).

The hospital may be legitimating its request for “racial” data to comply with the Wbp exemption. Still, the language seems to manifest certain nervousness about that request. It ties race to identity as if this were exclusive and unproblematic; it relates “origins” to race unquestioningly; and it implies that individuals have origins in only a single, distinctive, and definable race—as if conception across “racial” lines were neither imaginable nor possible.

The category terms presented on the forms as answers to origins-related concepts—“ethnicity,” “nationality,” “type,” and “race”—show the extent to which these four concepts’ meanings are not distinct, different forms invoking the same term for different concepts (see [Table 5](#)). Some answers to race and type questions are common terms denoting ethnicity

**Table 5.** Mixtures of meaning in registration categories

General concepts	Answers provided on forms summarized in <a href="#">Table 4</a>
“Ethnicities”	Asian (Hindustani), Creole [in the sense of a cultural group], Hindustani, Kurdish, “Surinamese/Dutch Antilles of <i>Hindustani origin</i> ”
Nation-states	Afghanistan, Algeria, Australia, Canada, China, Dutch, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Japan, Morocco, Turkey, Pakistan, Suriname, United States, Vietnam
Regions or continents	African, Ambonese, Ambong, Asian, Central America, Dutch Antilles, European, Indian subcontinent, Kurdistan, Mediterranean, Middle East, North African, North American, other Western, other non-Western, South America, Southeast Asian, sub-Saharan Africa
“Races”	Caucasian, Creole [in the sense of “mixed race”], mixed, Negro, “Surinamese/Antillean of <i>Negro origin</i> ,” white European, “white European (excl. Turkey)”

Central and South Africa have been replaced with Central and South America [see [Table 3](#)<sup>(b)</sup>].

in its traditional sense of “cultural groups” or “peoples” (Hindustani, for example, or Kurdish). Other answers are nation-states, continents, and regions (including geographic abstractions: Algeria, Turkey; African, Asian; Mediterranean, non-Western). And some are clearly “race” terms, both classical and contemporary, in the traditional, phenotypic sense (Negro, white European, Mixed). This mingling can take place in a single form: for “type,” LVR1 and LVRh use nation-states (Netherlands, Turk, Surinamese), “peoples” (Creole, Hindustani), regions (Mediterranean), and continents (African, Asian, European); for “ethnicity,” AMC1 mixes two classic “race” categories (Caucasian, Negro), one continent (Asia), and one “people” (Hindustani). Since this form requests neither the individual’s birth-country nor other common indicators for ethnicity, such as parental origins, classification here is, to put it bluntly, based on “white,” “black,” and “yellow” skin color. Only “red” is wanting, to flesh out the classification system that held sway in science and statecraft well into the 20th century. In these ways, registration forms render “ethnicity,” “nationality,” and “race” operationally equivalent.

### Category Logic and Lumpiness

Not only is there a lack of uniformity across forms when naming more or less the same groups of people, as [Table 4](#) shows. Even when category

names are identical, their meanings vary across forms, often yielding some odd taxonomic inclusions, especially from an international relations perspective, making for “lumpy” categories that reflect the state’s embedded categorizing point of view (see the next section), including its orientations toward othering—and “racing”—certain populations but not others. The following discussion roughly follows the order of the PRN/LNR key (Table 3).

*Caucasian, Dutch, white Netherlander, white European, other European, Canadian, US.* “Caucasian” (*Kaukasisch*), a race term appearing in PRN/LNR, AMC1, and AMC2 forms, is used to refer primarily to Dutch and other “white” Europeans. LVR1 and LVRh use only those two terms, disappearing Surinamese-Netherlanders and other darker-skinned EU citizens. AMC2 adds Canada and the US, rendering all North Americans “Caucasian,” including African-Canadians, Canadian First Peoples, Chinese and other non-“white” Canadians, and African-, Asian-, Latino/a-, and Native Americans, thereby disappearing their “at-home” differences. Whereas in the US, “Caucasian” also designates those of Middle Eastern background, here Middle Eastern (meaning Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq) and Mediterranean (meaning Moroccan and Turkish), when mentioned, are categorized separately, reflecting different ideas concerning hierarchies of racialized groups.

*African, Surinamese, [Dutch] Antillean, Surinamese/Antillean of Negro origin, Negro, Central African, sub-Saharan African, Creole.* “African” includes itself as well as “Surinamese/Antillean of Negro descent” in the PRN/LNR key, paralleled in LVRh (“African, Surinamese, Antillean”). The category seems to want to refer to “black” people without invoking a color term. The use of “Negro” in the PRN/LNR key and AMC1 in reference to “ethnic background”/*afkomst* points to “ethnicity”’s racial meaning, not its meaning as “culture.” In LVR1 and LVRh, “Creole,” meaning Surinamese of African background, appears separately. At the same time, in defining Moroccan and Algerian as “African” while designating Central and sub-Saharan Africans, along with Surinamese and Dutch Antilleans, as “Negro,” AMC2 divorces the southern part of the continent from its “African” identity, again seemingly designating “racial” differences without invoking color terms. Northern Africa becomes “brown”; the south, “Black”; “Negro” becomes a placeless designator; and the continent’s “white” and “yellow” residents are disappeared.

*Hindustani, Pakistani, Indian, Surinamese/Antillean of Hindustani origin, Asian, Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian, Ambonese [Ambong], Vietnamese, Southeast Asian.* These several forms treat Hindustani, Asian, Southeast

Asian, and the Indian subcontinent in different ways. AMC2 separates them; PRN/LNR, LVRI, and LVRh use only the first two; and only PRN/LNR marks sub-distinctions. “Hindustani” itself is treated variously. In the Suriname context, “Hindustani” refers to those of South Asian background, as distinct from Surinamese of African, Chinese or Javanese background. This usage contrasts with the political sense of its use in India, where—as Des Gasper (personal communication, 11 May 2010) notes —“Hindustani” retains “a more nationalist flavor” by contrast with the “more Anglophone feel” of “India,” leading some Indian companies to name themselves “Hindustan” instead.

*Moroccan, Algerian, North African, African, Turkish, Kurdish, Middle Eastern, Afghani, Iranian, Iraqi, Mediterranean.* “Moroccan” also receives varied treatment, appearing both as an umbrella term (PRN/LNR, LVRh; including itself with Algerians and “North Africans” in the PRN/LNR key) and as an element within another category (subsumed with Algerians as “African” in AMC2). This creates categorical lumpiness, as Morocco, Algeria, and other North African states are distinct, nationally, and distinctive, culturally. The treatment of Turks and Kurds creates a similarly lumpy category. Ignoring political histories and cultural distinctions that make conflating them problematic, the PRN/LNR, LVRh, and AMC2 forms subsume Kurds within Turkish “ethnicity,” “type,” and “ethnicity/race.”

Further complicating the picture, the PRN Yearbooks join Morocco and Turkey as subcategories of “Mediterranean” on LVRI (Stichting Perinatale Registratie 2008). That these two are demarcated subcategories, whereas other categories on the form, e.g. “Creoles,” “Asians,” “other Europeans,” have no subcategories, signals the importance of Moroccans and Turks for the state’s construction of difference, reflected in their extensive presence in social policies and media coverage as problematic populations.

*Silenced states.* Other Middle Eastern countries are difficult to place within this set of categories. They are not commonly considered Asian nor typically treated as African, but they also are not demarcated within the other non-Western categories. Also, unless Russia and the Western parts of the Former Soviet Union are considered “white European,” it is not clear where their populations fit in the schema; and it is entirely unclear where Asian-Russians/FSU belong—unless under Asia or the occasional “Other” box.

In these details, we see a central characteristic of the categories: the ways in which each of them lumps together groups whose members would, from a different categorizing point of view, under other political, social, and/or cultural circumstances, be classified separately. Even the finest-grained



classification set among these forms (bracketing the PRN/LNR key), LVRh, excludes certain groups, and others that it includes could, following some other ordering logic, be placed in other categories. That these taxonomies are products of a particular moment in time, with its own historical background, is clear when considering “Moroccan” demographics in light of The Netherlands’ labor history: recruited as temporary workers, these are largely Berber people from Morocco’s Rif region.

Underpinning this categorical lumping is an equation of “ethnic” group boundaries with nation-state borders: one state, one ethnicity, with no migration or internal ethnic divisions. The taxonomic logic enacts the historical imaginary of The Netherlands as a unitary national-cultural and linguistic entity in which populations were less mobile and the “mixing” of people less common.<sup>20</sup> And it projects this identity onto other states: African states are populated only by “Negroes”; Australia, Canada, and others only by Caucasians; and so forth. That imaginary is of a piece with forms that preclude checking more than one box for ethnic/racial identity or birth-land/country-based ethnicity, forcing a choice between different parental birth-places. This might also explain the forms’ usage of “mixed,” designating different parental birth-lands/countries more than phenotypical, genetic, or cultural traits.

### **The Defining Point of View: Creating “The Dutch Race”**

What defining point of view explains this category-making logic? The lists follow neither an alphabetical (African, Asian, Caucasian, etc.) nor a chronological (e.g., by period of immigration) ordering logic, either of which would establish a conceptual equality among category members, as would rank ordering by population size. The lead position in all five forms in [Table 4](#) is some version of “white”<sup>21</sup>; other terms follow in various orders. Such positioning suggests that this is the “normal” case from which others deviate, establishing Caucasian–Dutch–European as the point of view from which taxonomy logic emerges. One form, the PRN/LNR birth-continent list, suggests an additional, proximity-sequencing logic: ordering begins with The Netherlands, casting an eye first on the neighbors (Europe), then south (to Africa), next due west (North America), then southwest (South America), further west (to Asia), and still further south (Oceania).

But it is a racialized Netherlands/Euro-centrism. The lead Caucasian/Dutch category excludes non-100%–“Caucasian” Netherlands citizens,

e.g. ex-colonial Surinamese, Antilleans, Indonesians or Moluccans, let alone second or later generation labor migrants' descendants; "white European" renders that exclusion explicit. Moreover, using race-type category terms (Caucasian, Negro) alongside national ("Canada") and regional ones ("European," "African") renders "Dutch," in the registration form context, a race-ethnic category. Operationally defined in terms of whiteness, usage also treats "white Netherlander" as internally undifferentiated (e.g., disappearing "Friesian," "Brabanter," etc.; see Yanow and van der Haar 2013, Table 6).

In assuming a one-to-one correspondence between nation-state boundaries and "ethnicity" or "race," form questions and answers ignore those aspects of contemporary life which produce "mixed" offspring and mixed "identities." They draw on a racialization embedded not only in category names themselves, but also in the understanding that "origins" are see-able, enabling onlookers to identify others' racial markers—through phenotyping, the "eyeballing" operative in other-identification.

### Self- versus other-Identification

Many forms invite those registering to provide the relevant information, whether about themselves or another (e.g., registering a child for school, describing the alleged perpetrator of a crime). Others proceed differently. The online instructions for the PRN/LNR form, for instance, discussing when the practitioner needs to involve the newborn's mother in filling out the form, suggest an active identifying role for the former. Instructions stipulate that birth-land/country/continent should be identified "according to the woman"—presumably in conversing with her; her ethnicity, too, is "preferably [*bij voorkeur*] to be answered by the woman herself" (Stichting Perinatale Registratie, N.d.b, Box G20). Regarding the child, however, the instructions stipulate that ethnicity is to be determined "according to the professional" (and unrelated to birth-land/country, as noted above; cf. Meershoek, Krumeich, and Vos 2011, on workplace disability physicians establishing employees' identities). Forms LVR1 and LVRh also follow "eyeballing" practices.

The professional's judgment thereby becomes the sole source of information. Such other-identification rests on the presumed existence of visible indicators. The PRN Yearbooks elaborate:

The provider registers the woman's ethnicity (type) *according to one's own judgment, probably based on physical characteristics, language and*

*sumame*. Ethnicity in perinatal registration is thus *not defined on the basis of parental or child country of birth* as in other perinatal studies (Stichting Perinatale Registratie Nederland 2008, 113; emphases added).

No guidance is provided on when or how to conduct the conversation with the mother—might the practitioner contest her self-identification?—nor is the possibility entertained, with appropriate instructions, of needing to generate an identity label for an infant born of parents with different “ethnic” backgrounds.

Even when respondents are invited to self-identify, their choices are constrained by the categories the forms make available; indeed, those few forms that facilitate designating “Other” do not enable further specification. Determining race-ethnic “type” through physical characteristics sustains the notion that observable physical differences, along with “foreign”-accented Dutch, names, and mobility indicators (such as on the school registration forms), are meaningful. In these categorizing practices, registration forms keep “race” in play.

## COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: POLICY AND THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Definitions-in-use, taxonomic logics, categorical lumpiness, and identification processes create and sustain ideas about origins and identities. They do so not only with respect to “ethnicity,” but also, through their emphasis on land and birth, with respect to “race,” Constitutional prohibitions notwithstanding. This comparative category analysis raises questions about the character of reported statistical information, the need for “origins” data, and the Constitutional regulation of “race,” and it points to an unexplored aspect of category theorizing.

### Report Validity?

Although the data generated through these forms’ categories are often used in national and cross-national statistical reports, potentially informing policy-making, the categories are not equivalent, something statistical analysis would require. Their wide-ranging variability and that of their formal and operational definitions raise questions about the reliability and validity of those reports. For instance, although LVR1 and LVRh use different sets of categories for “type of woman” (Table 4, columns

d, e), these non-comparable data are used in scientific publications (e.g., Achterberg and Waelput 2007; Ravelli et al. 2008; Tromp et al. 2009) which may inform subsequent decision-making.

These concerns were explicitly engaged in a report on home births (Anthony et al. 2005), based on data from LVR1 and LVR2. Although neither form uses autochthon or allochthon, the report does. Its authors explain the rationale for assigning women codified on the forms as “Dutch” to autochthon and “women codified as an ethnicity other than *the Dutch ethnicity*, namely Mediterranean, other European, Creole, Hindu, Asian or other,” to allochthon:

All non-Dutch pregnant women are grouped together, first of all *because the reliability of the coding into various ethnic groups is uncertain*, and second, *because the size of each non-Dutch ethnic group per year is relatively small*. (Anthony et al. 2005, 45, emphases added)

Given the character of the forms’ categories, this acknowledgement is welcome. But it raises the possibility that policies are being based on the lumpiest of origins categories—allochthon—masking whatever differences might characterize the populations whose race-ethnic “identities” and health or other issues are thereby disappeared. Instead of statistical science serving the policy-making needs of the state, that science’s needs for samples large enough to be statistically significant in order to produce generalizable data (themselves generated from problematically-comparable categories) may be driving policy decisions.

For example, relationships between “race” and epidemiological issues, as in the CBS press release reporting that infant mortality is highest among first generation non-Western allochthons (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek 2009a), might be central to policy-making. But the lumpiness of the “non-Western allochthon” category and the derivation of its data from the equally lumpy LVR categories (see Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek 2009b), together with category non-equivalence across the forms, makes such a proclamation, and policies deriving from it, suspect: rendering maternal health, infant birth weight, and infant mortality for all “non-Dutch pregnant women” statistically equal presumes their epidemiological equality. Similar issues characterize Netherlands public health practices based on HIV/STI reporting categories (Proctor, Krumeich, and Meershoek 2011).

## The Necessity of “Origins” Data?

Blurred boundaries between “ethnicity” and “race”—indeed, their interchangeable use—mean that in everyday ethnogenetic category-making, culture and phenotype are not separated: “ethnicity” references phenotypic characteristics as much as “race” references cultural ones. The variety of meanings-in-use of “ethnicity” in these registration forms renders it unstable as a dependable concept for comparative research. Health care, one of the arenas exempted from prohibitions against collecting such data, illuminates the problematic. The registration forms from clinics in academic medical settings generate the most diverse taxonomies of race-ethnicity, perhaps because in Netherlands research, “ethnicity” is deemed important in tracking public health (Stronks, Glasgow, and Klazinga 2004)—not least in order to publish in U.S. journals (cf. Helberg-Proctor et al. 2015, n. 4). Although hereditary-genetic factors might affect illness and wellbeing (along with environmental ones), it is not clear that nation-state, continental, and other such markers are good surrogates for this information: genes do not necessarily map onto birth-geographies, especially when families’ multiple birth-land histories and generational mobility over time are not considered (cf. Stronks, Glasgow, and Klazinga 2004, 5). In other sectors, it is also not clear that parental birth-geographies constitute the best indicators for policy-making. In schools, for instance, supplemental funding has, since 2006, been allocated based on parents’ levels of schooling, rather than their birth geographies.

Registration forms are not universal, nor should they be: they are intended to provide information that particular organizations need, at particular points in time, related to particular sorts of services. Perhaps “origins” categories should be similarly not universal, but tied to specific organizational and policy purposes. Moreover, perhaps they should be made time-bound, through the use of policy “sunset clauses” requiring periodic re-evaluation to see if the categories have grown “stale”—less descriptively useful—as circumstances have changed.

## Regulating “Race”?

The Wbp’s exempting articles notwithstanding, these several registration practices enable the tracking of “race” by proxy. In defining “race” in terms of “origin [*afkomst*] and national or ethnic ancestry [*afstamming*],”

rendering these “racial” indicators alongside skin color (Hooghiemstra 2007, 100), Constitutional language itself institutionalizes a tacit “racial” discourse carried out through registration form usages that erase the putative conceptual distinctiveness of “ethnicity” and “race.” The assumption underlying “race”—that a population can be meaningfully taxonomized based on birth geographies and visible and identifiable phenotypic characteristics—survives in these registration forms.

That these traits can be, and are being, correlated with presumed characterological attributes—the ancient link of earth and other elements to skin colors and their associated “temperaments”—and that the individuals and groups so-designated are being rank-ordered—the 18th-19th century approach to “race”—is evident in the forms’ taxonomic structures. Additionally problematic for public policy concerns is the instantiation and perpetuation of racial ideas as identity markers not only in forms such as these, but in the use of statistical data derived from them in state and other agencies’ reports. The Constitution and other legislation may have regulated the explicit use of “race,” but that has not regulated the implicit presence of “racial” thinking in registration practices and related policy discourses.

### Category Theorizing

This analysis points to one theoretical matter in need of further investigation. Categorical lumpiness seemingly results when prototyping and slotting are combined, or as slotting’s clarity blurs over time into prototyping. In those policy issues that begin with clear demarcations among taxonomic elements, slotting may slide into prototyping as more and more people no longer fit within the sharp demarcations of the initial slots. Requiring those of “mixed” race-ethnic heritage to choose one parental-ancestral background with which to identify follows a slotting approach; its limitations are apparent. Moreover, although the CBS recognizes that people can belong to different “origins” groups (Goedhuys, König, and Geertjes 2010, 10), the forms in this collection, on the whole, do not: only the PRN/LNR form acknowledges “mixed background”; few enable marking “Other.” As more “anomalies” (or “category errors”) accrue, taxonomies may become increasingly less useful for policy purposes, especially as those who increasingly experience themselves as not fitting, and the category structure as somehow injurious, push back. The 1997 revision of the 1977 U.S. OMB 15’s category structure exemplifies this process.

## MAKING “ETHNICITY” AND “RACE” THROUGH REGISTRATION FORMS: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Statistical science developed to serve states by generating knowledge regarding categorized populations. The ubiquity of registration forms and practices bespeaks their “ordinariness” and that of the actuarial state. By contrast with the taxonomic detail of other forms, the *werk.nl* form with which we started seems neutrally simple, indeed. In light of the foregoing discussion, however, its “nationality” question begins to appear less natural and even less neutral, especially when one knows that its requested identity number leads directly to the GBA database, opening analytic access to a range of other “origins” data.

These acts of category-definition and usage make visible some of the ways in which ethnogenesis—the creation of race-ethnic “peoples” and identities—unfolds in everyday practices, along with the construction of the very meaning of “ethnicity” itself. In making a range of “ethnicities” and “races” available for selection, these ordinary registration form questions and their categories operationalize those concepts, potentially fashioning form-fillers’—parents’, clients’, patients’, practitioners’, other employees’—thinking about themselves and others. As they inform statistical analyses that shape policy-making and implementation, the questions, concepts, and categories also shape public discourse. Every time they are used, in whatever context—form-filling, analysis and report-writing, media and general discussions—the meanings underlying them are reinstated and maintained. The more detailed medical categories thereby inform understandings of the non-medical ones, even if tacitly. From this perspective, asking who initially created these categories is beside the point: coming from a different methodological perspective, this question misses the presupposition that registration form categories give voice to collective knowledge and public discourse, whose traces are carried in the taxonomies. This is what it means to say that these concepts and categories are socially, intersubjectively constructed. Academic researchers and state statisticians alike, along with the state and its data-generating organizations and institutions, are implicated in this making-up-people. Moreover, these practices unfold within the wider public discourse concerning the character of “Dutch-ness”—of belonging (autochthony) and foreignness (allochthony)—in generational-geographic terms. In that sense, these registration forms become an implicit forum for creating and regulating Dutch identity, as when the emphasis on soil-based birth identity implicitly privileges a non-mobile, stable society.

These issues are not unique to The Netherlands. In France, for instance, a 27-person committee headed by former head of the French National Institute for Demographic Studies François Héran filed a report on February 5, 2010 with Yazid Sabeg, Sarkozy's Commissioner on Diversity and Equal Opportunities, stipulating that the census should not classify people by ethnicity, race or origins, instead asking about residents' parents' nationality or place of birth (France urged to ease ethnic statistics taboo 2010). This analysis shows, however, that nationality and birth terms do not escape ethnic, racial, or origins discourses.

Despite anthropologist Alfred Kroeber's caution that such categories should be "employed merely as brief convenient labels...[as] they have no real descriptive value" (1948, 131), their ongoing use in registration forms across the spectrum of policy topics and in policy recommendations based on statistics derived from those imputes a "reality" beyond mere convenience. A heightened awareness of category-making and classification practices might lead to greater reflection on the political implications embedded in the use of "ethnicity" and other "identity/origins" markers in registration forms such as those analyzed here. Such awareness might, for instance, have changed the discussion at a March 11, 2009 seminar organized by the Netherlands Platform for Survey Research. In engaging the under-representation of "migrants and ethnic minorities" in survey research, steps to enhance the validity and reliability of survey data, and practical solutions to decrease non-response rates, the question of categorization was touched upon only marginally, without critical assessment of the categories themselves. The presumptive need for "origins" data might itself be revisited, periodically and explicitly, in the context of specific policy sectors, along with the rationale for permitting asking such questions. What is achieved by the ongoing questioning of a state's residents about their ethnicity, nationality, birth-geographies, and even race, as well as that of their children and their parents? Do states still need to control their populations in these ways? Are these still useful indicators of degrees of discrimination and integration, when they re-instantiate the very concepts that promote the former and retard the latter?

Language matters. The fine-grained analysis presented here of the wording of registration form questions and their possible answers also shows the extent to which, contrary to the view reflected in the epigraph that opens this paper, neither categories nor statistics based on them, neither registration forms nor their administration, are neutral. Categories might appear that way from the perspective of Simmel's



“calculating mind,” with its “matter-of-fact attitude” toward the less personal treatment of persons. But when states and their agencies are involved in creating identities and imposing them on residents, power is involved, even if “only” the power of naming, rather than brute force. As part of the actuarial practices states use in order to control that which is named, however, “simple” naming carries its own force.

No set of categories is free of the kinds of problems discussed here. All categories include and exclude at the same time; all category schemes entail some degree of lumpiness, as they reflect particular times and particular points of view. The commonplaceness of registration forms—which disappears their category- and people-making—and the scientific aura that attaches to them, along with the difficulty of making tacit knowledge explicit, makes resistance difficult. The U.S. case suggests that the more visible “category errors” or anomalies become—that is, the more people experience themselves as falling outside of the category schema and voice objections to that—the greater the likelihood of both resistance and change. Still, a certain degree of social, political, and perhaps even cultural capital is necessary to challenge the legitimacy of such categories.<sup>22</sup> To date, although two national newspapers (*Trouw*, *de Volkskrant*) and the Amsterdam City Council have banned the further use of *allochtoon* and some individuals also refuse to self-identify using that and other terms, organized, vocal resistance to the use of the registration forms’ category schema is not apparent. Such resistance and a more reflective policy and administrative process might develop alongside recognition that existing categories render statistical analyses problematic and, more so, that they carry on a prohibited “race” discourse while explicitly silencing that very aspect.

## Supplementary Material

The supplementary material for this article can be found at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/rep.2016.7>.

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## NOTES

1. All translations are the authors’.

2. A renaming of the register to the *Basisregistratie Personen* (BRP) is to go into effect in 2016. As that has not yet happened and the register is still widely known as the GBA, we retain that name here. The Netherlands complies with the EU Census Regulation (adopted by the European Parliament on 20 February 2008) through the CBS’ use of a “register-based census”—the GBA—with sample survey data (Schulte Nordholt 2005), in keeping with the provisions of Article 4.1d (see European Commission 2011). At issue in EU states is whether tabulating Census Regulation information comports with privacy laws. This is not our direct concern; but see Ringelheim and de Schutter (2009).

3. As a proportion of total state populations, more Dutch Jews were killed during the Third Reich—75–78%—than Jewish citizens of any other state embroiled in that regime. Establishing exact numbers is difficult, despite the detailed records kept by the state through the GBA, due to intermarriage rates and how, and by whom, Jewish identity is tabulated (e.g., Dutch railroad apologizes for WWII role, 2005; In memorium, n.d.; Woolf 1999).

4. Medical anthropologist Roberto Suárez Montañez (workshop discussion, 20 January 2010) noted that some Latin American states have adopted such categories, despite a heritage of no “color” labeling, to join international studies or to be eligible for funding from US and UN agencies, such as the World Bank. Loveman’s historical-comparative analysis (2014, esp. 281–94) suggests a longer-standing presence there of race-ethnic categorizing.

5. This came in the aftermath of the riots in the banlieues, which focused France’s attention on the lack of integration of immigrants from particular countries of origin and their descendants. See also “France urged to ease ethnic statistics taboo” (2010), P. Simon (2009).

6. Due to their significant representation in such activities as debt assistance processes; non-registration in the GBA; contact with welfare services; extended, unexcused absences from school or having dropped out at a young age; being in a “weak” position relative to the labor market; benefits fraud; being in arrears on rent for over 6 months; having three or more nuisance reports on record; or meeting the police department’s 1-2-3 criteria (one violent offence and/or two other offences and/or three nuisance offenses; Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment 2008).

7. Two other policies concerning privacy and data protection are not discussed here: the 1993 *Wet Gemeentelijke Basisadministratie Persoonsgegevens* (Municipal Population Register Personal Data Act) and the 2007 *Wet Politiegegevens* (Police Data Act).

8. Although the argument presented here is in keeping with Omi and Winant’s (1994), Loveman’s statement, quoted here, shows how its focus on strategies of governance—here, registration forms and their implementation—departs from their concern with more general “social, economic and political forces determin[ing] the content and importance of racial categories” (Omi and Winant 1994, 61). Space does not allow elaboration of the contrasts.

9. As their compilers have turned to language corpora—field collections of naturally occurring language—as their base, dictionaries today increasingly present words’ actual (descriptive) usages, rather than the prescriptive usage recommended by expert editorial board members in past practices. (Thanks to linguist Alan Cienki for help articulating this point.) That makes them better sources for ordinary language analysis than legal decisions (such as López, 2006/1996, used). Although one might claim that the “second language” dictionary misses the nuances that the complete Van Dale captures, it arguably presents words’ most common meanings. Synoniemen.net draws on several dictionaries, among them the 43-volume *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal* and the corpus-based *Algemeen Nederlands Woordenboek*.

10. As the intention of this research is to document language use and analyze its meaning, rather than to quantify that usage in some way (e.g., incident rates), the forms do not comprise an exhaustive set. Creating a sampling would, in any event, have been impossible: the number of organizations within each type is unknowable, as is the number of forms for each one. In addition, many organizations do not regularly update either their webpages or their forms, such that older forms are still available online after policy changes would suggest a need for revision, and it is not possible to tell whether these outdated forms are still in use. Still, these “archival remains” are useful as a record of prior thinking, reflecting the objectification of ideas (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Analyzing why old forms continue in use after policy changes, as in the schools case discussed below, is beyond the scope of this article.

11. Its scroll-down menu of possible answers to the latter questions listed 253 lands/countries of birth and 211 nationalities, both including “unknown.”

12. In The Netherlands’ context, “mobile-home dwellers” are not necessarily Roma, Sinti or other “gypsies,” nor does the term appear to be being used euphemistically. On itinerant groups in The Netherlands, see Lucassen, Willems, and Cottaar (1998).

13. Tabulating primary and secondary school students’ origins links to fear of school failure. Schools enrolling predominantly non-Western allochthonous students are associated with low performance on national tests, high drop-out rates, and other educational and social problems, leading them to be called “black schools” (*zwarte scholen*). The fear of such labeling extends to universities, such as the VU University Amsterdam, where “non-Western allochthons” constitute some 20% of the general student population (notably in the law, and economics and business administration faculties). The VU’s President announced at the Employees’ Council’s [*ondernemingsraad*] Fall 2009 meeting that the university needed to be careful not to develop “the image of a black university” (de Hoog 2009), his rationale remaining implicit in the words.

14. We infer from another question on the form a concern with “genotyping,” for which “ethnic” information might be relevant; but why it would then consider only varieties of “Asian” is not clear. The linguistic structures—*Kaukasische* and *Negroïde*—used here and on other forms seem themselves racialized expressions. We have translated them Caucasian and Negro, as *Kaukasoïde*, more structurally equivalent to *Negroïde*, is unknown in Dutch. We conjecture that a usage explanation for *Negroïde* might lie in the fact that  *neger*, the more direct rendering of “Negro,” is not presently acceptable usage. We thank linguist Saskia Daalder for assistance on these points.

15. Some registration practices include supplemental materials with definitions (e.g., OMB 15); others do not (e.g., banks; Yanow 2003). We have found neither a pattern in nor an explanation for these differences.

16. Surinamese of African heritage.

17. The online form may differ from what is done in practice. The woman’s “ethnicity/race” does not appear on the online form, but the webpage instructions engage it as if it had been asked. Similarly, the online form does not ask for the woman’s parents’ countries (or, if unknown, continents) of birth, whereas the instructions do.

18. As the form concerns newborns and their birth parents, adoption and its potential birth-location uncertainties are not at issue.

19. Additional confusion concerning “origins” derives from varying connotations of three key legislative and registration form terms, *herkomst*, *afkomst*, and *afstamming*. The first two, treated as synonyms in many dictionaries, build on the same root, *komen*, to come: *herkomst*, defined as the place (*plek*) from which a person (or an object, such as a painting) comes, is used for parental origins in the Studielink Master’s degree preparatory program form; *afkomst*, defined as the place (*plaats*) where one was born or from which the family into which one was born hails (Van Dale 2006), invokes birth-source/location explicitly, underscoring it by reference to family “roots,” and is used for ethnic origins in the Wbp and PRN/LNR Code and operationalized in AMCI in “race-ethnic” terms (Caucasian, Negro, Asian [Hindustani]). *Afstamming*, used in the Wbp to mean national or ethnic ancestry, refers to bloodline descent from a people and from relatives (*bloedverwanten*; Synoniemen.net 2013). But it is treated synonymously with *afkomst* and *herkomst*, mixing blood-origins and soil-origins. The root of *afstamming* denotes a tree-trunk (Van Dale 2006), the imagery of both “family trees” (graphically represented genealogies) and the Great Chain of Being (the hierarchy of the animal kingdom topped by the three human “races,” all in relationship to God). Curiously, in the forms, *afkomst* is used only with “Negro,” “Hindustani,” and “Mixed,” not with Dutch, white European, Caucasian, North African, Turkish, or other groups.

20. Nash (2011) reports a similar phenomenon in her study of British Isles' national ancestry-tracing organizations, whose organizing logic of "people in their natural locations" obtains only until some 500 years ago. On "mixed" identities among youth, see *Mix: Jongeren in Nederland* (2010).

21. Even in the two forms that do not number their entries; one of these places "Caucasian" in the top-left corner, the typical starting-point for reading texts in Indo-European as well as many other language families.

22. As Martin Benninghoff (2015, 4) notes in another context.

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