Nightlife in the Cabo Verdean diaspora: the case of Rotterdam City

Kersbergen, S.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Est vida ka é vida, ta trabalha na mar e ceu,
Pa larga pa Tipoia, m' tem vontade de bibe, vontade de vive.

This is no life, hard work on sea…
Let's go to Tipoia's bar, I'm in for a drink, I feel like having fun.

(Cabo Verde Show 1979, translation added)

In the song above, a group of Cabo Verdean sailors arrive at last in the city of Rotterdam, the Netherlands, after a long and tiresome trip at sea. One of the men tries to persuade the others to go to a bar known as *Tipoia*'s, to let off some steam and drink the beer that is waiting for them there. Recorded in 1979 in Paris, France, by the group Cabo Verde Show, this song, entitled 'Barraca', is one of many traces, stories, and testimonies narrated by Cabo Verdean migrants about their lives in Europe's largest port city. This is no surprise - Rotterdam has deep historical connections with Cabo Verde. Building on an already-established relationship around maritime industries, migration from Cabo Verde accelerated from the 1950s. It was driven by political oppression in the country, which was still under Portuguese colonial rule, and by the economic opportunities available in the ports of Rotterdam.

Cabo Verde consists of ten islands off the coast of West Africa, nine of which are inhabited by approximately 550,000 residents. The islands, then uninhabited, were discovered in 1456 by Portuguese and Genovese navigators, and settlements were quickly established in several places. As transatlantic commerce grew, Cabo Verde became a transit port for enslaved people from the African continent to the Americas and Europe, as well as a supply point for transit ships, a business which was facilitated by the establishment of a plantation economy on some of the islands. With slavery coming to an end in Cabo Verde around the 1860s, many Cabo Verdeans migrated towards the United States to work in the whaling industry (Carling 2008: 20), which was the start of a tradition of migration that over time led many to move to

different countries including Argentina, Italy, Portugal, and Sweden. In fact, more Cabo Verdeans live in the diaspora than on the islands themselves (Meintel 2002: 27). The country remained a Portuguese colony until July 1, 1975, when it officially became independent after a long struggle led by the revolutionary leader Amílcar Cabral.

The Netherlands experienced large-scale labour migration after the Second World War. This consisted of several waves. Economic growth across post-war Europe was accompanied by large labour shortages, especially in lower-skilled segments such as the industrial sector, factories, and mining. These labour shortages were overcome by actively recruiting large flows of migrant labour. In the case of the Netherlands these workers came mainly from southern Europe (in particular Italy and Spain), and Turkey and Morocco. The government also formalised recruitment contracts and mediated in the recruitment of workers (Lucassen & Penninx 1995: 53). Then the 1973 oil crisis caused a global recession. Labour migration to the Netherlands slowed down, in part because of restrictive measures taken by the government. After this priority shift, migration through family reunification started (Jennissen 2011: 33-44). In addition, the Netherlands also received migrants from former colonies, particularly after their independence. This included from Indonesia (independent since 1945) and from Suriname (since 1975).

The case of Cabo Verdean migration is somewhat different from the migrations mentioned above. Although Cabo Verdean migration to the Netherlands also increased after the Second World War, this was not part of the broader national labour strategy but was instead achieved via other routes. A colony of Portugal, Cabo Verde became embroiled in a struggle for independence in the 1960s, resulting in people fleeing the country because of poverty, oppression or hunger, or to avoid military service. While other groups of migrants are spread over different provinces and cities in the Netherlands, Cabo Verdeans are mainly found in Rotterdam

because of their historical link with the maritime sector. This is partly because unlike, for example, Turkish and Moroccan workers, Cabo Verdeans were not actively recruited by governments or companies. Similar to other groups though, a pattern of chain migration towards the Netherlands developed over time.

One term that has stuck and which has become linked with the Cabo Verdean community is that of 'silent migrants'. The term was originally coined by a local foundation for foreign workers (Slingeland 2012; Carling 2008) as a way of describing the inconspicuous and relatively small group of migrants. The term is also associated with the image of a hardworking, docile migrant community that causes few problems (de Freitas 2008; de Freitas 2016). Indeed, in the beginning of migration Cabo Verdean sailors stayed in boarding houses and quickly left for the sea again, not interfacing much with Dutch society (Slingeland 2012). This perception of silence, however, according to several key figures in the community, has also been taken or used to imply a certain subordination and docile mentality towards their living conditions, and a capacity to endure hardship without questioning or improving their marginal position in society. Thus it also carries certain "connotations of passivity and helplessness often rejected by the Dutch-Cape Verdeans themselves" (Carling 2008: 95).

Since the 1950s Rotterdam has developed into what migrants today call Cabo Verde's tenth inhabited island, and is home to over 20,000 Cabo Verdeans across generations. The presence of Cabo Verdeans in the Netherlands is mostly unknown outside of Rotterdam, which is the only city with such a large community. Elsewhere in the country only small communities exist, usually of between 600 and 2500 Cabo Verdeans, in cities such as The Hague and Amsterdam, and in smaller port cities such as Zaanstad and Delfzijl. While at first Cabo Verdean men would generally arrive in Rotterdam looking for work on ships, over time work was also increasingly found ashore. This allowed for a steady growth of the community in the city, and different places in the city quickly became important spaces for the community to gather, both

in public (in streets, neighbourhoods and squares) and private (in restaurants, community centres, bars and nightclubs). Significantly, many of these spaces were visited at night; the bar in the song above is a notable example of such a common space. In such ways the night offered Rotterdam's Cabo Verdeans a way of bringing their social group together, to celebrate, connect and have fun.

This doctoral research took place in the context of the collaborative research project NITE (Night spaces: migration, culture and integration in Europe), led by the University of Leiden, which tackles the following question: *How are night spaces imagined, produced, experienced, and narrated by migrant communities in Europe?* The project involves five European universities considering the above question in eight European cities. NITE acknowledges night spaces as important sites of crisis and regeneration, memory and heritage, community solidarity and growth (NITE project website 2020). The night offers a crucial yet often overlooked space of reflection on daily life in migration. Night spaces hold the potential of becoming spaces of diasporic community, where a sense of belonging and identity can be constructed. The night is also a time and place in which culture is expressed in and through different forms: music, theatre, dance, and film, but also through casual encounters and conversations. Yet the night is not experienced equally by everyone. Ethnic minorities, for example, are often viewed with suspicion at night, looked upon either as troublemakers or potential criminals, often denied access to nighttime venues and surveilled in public spaces. For many women, the night is a dangerous domain too. They often need to be more vigilant at night, as they are more likely to be verbally and physically harassed, abused, or worse.

This thesis aims to contribute to an understanding of *how urban night spaces have been, and how they are currently produced, imagined, experienced, and narrated among the Cabo Verdean migrant community in Rotterdam, from the 1950s until the present day*. A common thread that runs through this work is the music written by Cabo Verdean artists who have lived

in Rotterdam since the 1950s, or who temporarily stayed there, but also those born and raised as second or third generation Cabo Verdeans in Rotterdam. The Netherlands and Rotterdam are sung about or mentioned in at least eighty such songs by different artists, including contemporary artists. The selection of Cabo Verdean music in this thesis includes stories of occurrences in familiar city spaces for Cabo Verdean migrants, in which the daily and nightly life and rhythms of the city are described in meticulous detail, thus generating narratives of city life. As sociologist James Donalds puts it: "narratives about cities imagine events taking place in an urban topography. They conjure up the space of the city through the projection of these narrative images" (1999: 123). I argue that the city is both constructed and reconstructed through narratives found in music, as well as in other cultural expressions such as film, literature, and theatre. As such, the city is a space that is represented and imagined, and can be read through the lens of those narratives found in different media.

Cabo Verdean music is particularly firmly connected to the night. Nocturnal experiences are described and narrated in lyrics, and most performances, recordings, or music played at parties take place in the after-hours. Cultural texts not only shape Cabo Verdean life in the city, but they also facilitate the re-memorisation and re-experiencing of diasporic lives in current events and cultural productions. In this study I will address the connections of music and other cultural expressions to the city, in order to understand how urban spaces are represented and narrated, particularly those related to culture, work, and leisure, and how these representations can contribute to an understanding of day and night as important sites for belonging, identity and culture in the Cabo Verdean diaspora. I will address how the city historically was (and still is) navigated, used, and experienced, and how a collective Cabo Verdean memory of the city is constructed in which spaces of community are forged, thus emphasising important connections between place and diasporic memory. I emphasise that daytime and nighttime city life connec-

tions as cultural productions express how the cityscape is navigated, represented and experienced during both time-spaces, and in which working, going out, relaxing and sleeping all form part of the city's rhythms.

In her influential conceptualisation of time-space, geographer Doreen Massey argues that the idea of time-space requires thinking through time and space not as a dichotomy but as an interweaving, as "a configuration of social relations within which the specifically spatial may be conceived of as an inherently dynamic simultaneity" (1994: 3). Much in accordance with geographer Arjun Appadurai's (1996) concept of *-scapes*, the spatial should be thought of in terms of global and local interrelations, movements and flows, both political, economic, and cultural. Place, then, should be understood as a node within these (spatial) networks of social relations, but one which is ever-changing and contested by different (social) groups. Massey and Appadurai's ideas will be further discussed in the following chapter. In what has become known as the 24-hour city, and in relation to the idea of space-time's inherent dynamics, I study the continuations of diurnal and nocturnal time-spaces, even though these time-spaces display different movements, activities, and associations. Following political scientist Robert Williams (2008), I view night spaces as "socially mediated" (2008: 514), as they are embedded in social practices and, similar to Massey's views, constituted through the intersections of politics, culture, economy and history, and entangled in social struggles. Night spaces are mediated through forms of governmental control and yet shaped through daily practices by diverse social groups.

With regard to Cabo Verde's former status as a colony of Portugal and Cabo Verdeans' position as migrants in another country, (cultural) practices in the diaspora should also be considered in a 'postcolonial' context. In referring to the postcolonial in terms of culture, it is important to emphasise the asymmetries with regard to the expression, production, visibility and distribution of diasporic cultural practices and products vis-à-vis dominant cultures. In *The Postcolonial Exotic* (2002), postcolonial literature scholar Graham Huggan distinguishes the

concept of 'postcolonialism' from 'postcoloniality'. On the one hand, postcolonialism refers to an anti-colonial intellectual practice which "reads and valorises the signs of social struggle in the faultlines of literary and cultural texts". By this, Huggan in a broad sense refers to postcolonial studies as an intellectual field. Huggan's definition of postcoloniality is however most instrumental. In his telling, postcoloniality refers to a "value-regulating mechanism" that produces value through "global market operations involving the exchange of cultural commodities and, particularly, culturally 'othered' goods" (Huggan 2001: 6). Huggan is largely concerned with the commodification of postcolonial studies and its conceptual fields as such. His idea of the "postcolonial exotic" provides insight into how postcolonial cultural productions are swallowed up into commercialised and commodified circuits. According to Huggan, a commodifiable difference turns non-Western cultures into "saleable exotic objects" through a process of fetishisation, as "cultural difference also has an aesthetic value, a value often measured explicitly or implicitly in terms of the exotic" (2001: 13). As such, he perceives the exotic not to be

> An inherent *quality* to be found 'in' certain people, distinctive objects, or specific places; exoticism describes, rather, a particular mode of aesthetic *perception* — one which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery. (Huggan 2001: 13)

In this sense, it turns cultural difference into something culturally undifferentiated, and the exotic serves as a symbolic system within which cultural expressions are integrated. Cultural products from postcolonial cultures (Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa) are in this regard 'translated' to a western metropolitan audience, where these products are less visible than those of other regions, or are understood and interpreted through an exoticised lens. This issue

of translation underscores the caution and rigour required when approaching the diversity of Cabo Verdean (diasporic) cultural products I engage with in this thesis.

This thesis is made up of four chapters. The first chapter seeks to establish a framework through which we can better understand the intricate connections of space and place to the night, to diaspora and to music practices, as well as proposing an understanding of how all these somewhat broad and diverse conceptualisations interrelate. The following three chapters each then build on this structure by focusing their attention on a particular place and/or activity.

Chapter two, entitled *Myth-Making In The Rotterdam Diaspora*, addresses the activities that take place in the city where a (conscious) effort is made to produce or maintain diasporic identities or narratives. It zooms in on a series of interrelated issues; the history and legacy of record label Morabeza Records, cultural activism in contemporary hip-hop, and the cultural-religious celebrations of São João Baptista ('Saint John the Baptist'). What these cultural manifestations all have in common is that each claims its space(s) in the city, and these spaces have since been embedded in memories of the city.

The third chapter is titled *The Routines Of Work Life In And Around The City*. It traces the routes that have been taken from Cabo Verde to Rotterdam and within Rotterdam itself, zooming in on the experiences of the city, especially since the start of migration. It traces important places related to the labour migrant experience such as boarding houses, employment agencies, but also the bars visited after a day spent working or looking for work. This process involves working with an archive of musical material in which these places are meticulously described through experiences and stories.

The final chapter, entitled *Dancing Down Memory Lane: (Re)Experiences Of Cabo Verdean Nightlife*, builds towards a discussion on music and experiences of nightlife in its more common sense, meaning dancing or clubbing, seen over a time period spanning the start of

migration to the city until now. It examines how certain night scenes are remembered, but also how elements of historic night life are reused, reworked, and re-experienced in contemporary nightlife events.

In order to take into consideration the multiple and changing experiences, representations and narrations of the night, this research pursues an ethnographic approach with a comparative component. The comparative component encompasses several elements. First of all, it compares different time periods. For what purposes has the night been used in different eras? This automatically entails a comparison between generations, between those born in Cabo Verde and who travelled to the Netherlands, and those born in the Netherlands (referred to as second, third or further generations).

The ethnographic approach is also textually comparative, as I engage with a diversity of materials. As part of the ethnographic research I conducted dozens of interviews with first-generation (cultural) pioneers, as well as with contemporary artists, producers and DJs. In addition, I researched within an archive of interviews realised through a project called Storia de nhas Pais ('The Story of my parents'), where children of first-generation migrants interviewed their parents or other relatives about their migration history. This archive has also been made available to the Stadsarchief Rotterdam ('City Archives of Rotterdam') in collaboration with the NITE project. Ethnographic observation involved visiting a variety of nighttime and cultural events and venues, including large-scale parties and concerts in city centre venues, small-scale music evenings in restaurants, cultural and educational events, and even simple city strolls, which often reveal the Cabo Verdean 'structures' of the city.

This study also draws heavily on an archive of Cabo Verdean music in which the Netherlands and Rotterdam are sung about. This archive was established in collaboration with two non-academic partners, Jorge Lizardo and Vera Rocha. Lizardo, a Rotterdam-based artist and

Cabo Verdean music connoisseur, has been a vital inspiration and partner in creating this archive, and I discussed, analysed and translated a large number of lyrics with him. Meanwhile a number of songs were translated by Rocha, a Lisbon-based translator working with the InterculturaCidade cultural centre.

Besides these materials many other types of sources are used, including (online) articles and interviews, newspaper clippings, literature and film produced by or about the Cabo Verdean community in Rotterdam, documentaries, theatre performances, and photography. In response to the diversity of source materials, this research approaches the analysis of migrant nocturnal spaces using mixed methods from cultural analysis, such as close reading of diverse materials, as well as ethnographic research, including both physical as well as online ethnography, the latter mainly as a consequence of measures intended to stop the spread of COVID-19.

On a practical note, I have chosen not to translate street names and other geographic names for readability. Street names usually contain the suffix *-weg* ('road/way'), *-straat* ('street') or *-singel* (a 'boulevard' next to a canal), and squares the suffix *-plein*. Some city districts, neighbourhoods, and of course (historical) ports contain the suffix *-haven* ('port') in the name, often indicative of the historical function of an area. With Rotterdam as the main port of Europe, there is no shortage of references to these. Additionally, in October 2013 the Republic of Cabo Verde changed its official English name in the UN (having previously been called the Republic of Cape Verde). In referring to the country I use 'Cabo Verde', but when citing secondary sources I maintain the original spelling present in these sources.

The study of night spaces — or 'night studies' — is an emerging field in the humanities and social sciences as well as natural sciences. This field includes the study of nighttime economies and the night-scenes associated with them, analysed both from a producer's and consumer's perspective and as part of the modern 24-hour economy. It includes historical studies

on nightlife in large cities and neighbourhoods, often based on historical reports written up by authorities. Studies of the night are profoundly interdisciplinary: “physical and social processes at night — circadian rhythms, capitalism, education, race, gender, security, mobility public lighting, and inequality — are entangled in complex and sometimes unexpected ways” (Kyba et al. 2020: 3). Migratory movements in the past seventy years have had enormous impacts on urban life in the city, yet scholars have regularly neglected to pay attention to how newcomers navigate and use cityscapes particularly beyond the sphere of work.

This research focusses on migrant night spaces as important spaces of belonging, culture and identity, combining analysis of cultural objects with ethnographic research. The night might serve as a backdrop, a shelter, a home, a place of worship or work, or simply as a space of leisure and relaxation. There is no singular meaning to ‘night’ nor is there a singular use, experience, or representation of the night, and as such it would be impossible to define the night unambiguously. In order to approach the study of migrant night spaces, in the following chapter I will first seek to create an understanding of the key concepts of space, memory, diaspora and the night.