News in a glasshouse: media, publics, and senses of belonging in the Dutch Caribbean

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5 | A shattered glasshouse

Cathartic senses of belonging in Hurricane Irma's aftermath across the Dutch world

While previous chapters have shown the infrastructural logics (and logistics) of the glasshouse by exploring practices of news and 'the news', in this last chapter I shed light on what happens when the glasshouse suddenly breaks down. Such a situation took place on Sint Maarten when Hurricane Irma hit the island in September 2017. As a hurricane of the highest level in strength, Irma had a devastating impact on the material, institutional, and social infrastructures on Sint Maarten. In a moment, Sint Maarteners daily lives radically changed.

The focus of this chapter is on how news practices unfolded in Hurricane Irma's aftermath and generated cathartic senses of belonging across the Dutch world. After Hurricane Irma hit the island, its media houses were heavily constrained in providing 'the news' on Sint Maarten. The telecom infrastructures were severely damaged, reporters could not travel the island, and local officials long kept silent in reaction to the chaos on the island. As 'the news' was cut off and the island government remained silent, Sint Maarteners on the island and throughout the Dutch world (and beyond) had to turn to popular news practices and communication networks that were operative, such as family, social media, and digital (radio) platforms. As news found its way through live YouTube footage, one radio station, Facebook groups, and Twitter, the aftermath of Hurricane Irma led to the exposure and intensification of more popular news practices that now answered a widespread need for information by not only the popular but also the institutional public on Sint Maarten.

In fact, the sudden and violent disruption of social life as it used to be broke down the glasshouse and with it the division of an institutional public versus a popular public on Sint Maarten. Now, every Sint Maartener stood in the face of the unknown, while many related to and affected by the disastrous event were confronted with feelings of hope and fear. They scrolled the internet for a sign of life of a loved one; listening day and night to the only locally operative radio station; and they joined the rapidly emerging Facebook groups in need for emotional release and some comfort. Amidst severe existential insecurity, these and other news practices generated cathartic senses of belonging. In the face of the unknown, all belonged to 'we', Sint Maarteners.

In this chapter I show that these cathartic feelings of belonging were not constrained by territorial or national borders of the island but stretched into the Dutch Kingdom (and beyond). In The Netherlands, the news media no longer portrayed Sint Maarteners as the Others, far-away and backwards on a distant Caribbean island, but, rather, as Dutch citizens in need of help. On Curaçao, the

call to stand with "our Antillean brothers and sisters" was spread via popular and institutional news practices, alike. For a moment, 'we' were all in this together. Whether this moment lasted – and why (not) – is a question that I will (try to) answer in the conclusion of this thesis.

5.1. A HOUSE WITHOUT A ROOF: NEWS AND 'THE NEWS' IN THE EYE OF THE STORM

After weeks of speculating about its path, scientists were clear about what would be a most unfortunate yet certain truth: Hurricane Irma's path headed directly to Sint Maarten. I still vividly remember staring at my screen looking at the NASA satellite shots of what appeared to me to be a giant white monster. Perhaps this was my way of trying to come to terms with something beyond my imagination that was unavoidably going to happen. I recall I felt humble at this point, not only vis-a-vis this force of nature but also in relation to everyone on Sint Maarten who were bracing themselves for the coming storm. I could only imagine what they were going through. Or maybe I could not imagine it which was in and of itself a position of privilege, I realized. It was early September 2017 and I felt nervous, anxious, and helpless from behind my desk in The Netherlands.

I nurtured myself with thoughts about the conversations I had had with Sint Maarteners during my stay on the island a year before, in 2016. Many had recalled their experiences with that other massive Hurricane, Luis, in 1995 and how they had dealt with it. I come back to this previous hurricane and how it lived on in the stories, embodied memories, and senses of belonging among Sint Maarteners, in the next section. To me these stories were a reminder that Sint Maarteners were resilient. I told myself they knew what was – or, at least, could be – ahead of them and how to brace for it.

With only hours to go before Hurricane Irma would make landfall on the island, 'we' could only wait. At this point, most Sint Maarteners were inside in their (or their relatives') boarded and shored up houses. Among those whose housing was unsafe, some had made it to the few public shelters, others did not go because of a lack of trust that these shelters would hold or because of a lack of time and information (Abayneh Abebe et al., 2018). The government had only belatedly ordered some of the public shelters to be opened prior to the hurricane's passing and not after, as the latest official press release had

announced (Government of Sint Maarten, 2017). The government's inability to reach the broader population with 'the news' about the shelters was a prelude to the absence of governmental communication in Irma's aftermath. This shows the importance of popular news networks and channels even prior to the hurricane making landfall.

Ignoring the official warnings, Kenjiro, a police reporter who was always on top of breaking news on the island, went out. While driving his truck, his mobile camera live recorded how the storm surge was already pushing the ocean into the nearly empty streets of Philipsburg. "This is silence before the storm", he said. Together with hundreds of others who were watching on Facebook, I could only keep my fingers crossed for all those who had not fled the island – either because they could not or because they did not want to leave their homes and relatives. At one point, my eye was caught by a comment made by a viewer from the US. She was asking for help on behalf of a friend who got stuck at home on the island. She was alone and in panic. Could Kenjiro help her with making it to a public shelter? The curfew was already in effect and there was no time left to move her friend. Yet, after exchanging cell-numbers, Kenjiro made sure to contact her friend, after which he got her to a safe place where she had company.

It was neither the first nor the last time that Kenjiro played an important role in communicating information and needs among Sint Maarteners via his Facebook channels and WhatsApp news groups. In one of his last-minute live streams, he urged:

> Let we make Facebook the *center* of the communication, ok? And to do it, is passing my network to your network and your network passing to other networks. Because not everybody has the same friends. (…) The WhatsApp [group] is the same thing. Broadcast and re-broadcast my news constantly. Among your group, among your friends and different groups that you're in. Let we spread the news *out.* (Facebook timeline, September 5, 2017)

Kenjiro urged that people build on popular communication channels and networks. He had already tried to translate all government information and 'the news' which was provided in English (or French, on the northern part of the island) to Spanish to inform migrants from Spanish speaking countries in the region. The lack of access to 'the news' among migrant workers on Sint Maarten was not new. During my fieldwork on the island, journalists, editors, and media

managers told me that they had once considered producing multilingual news, yet the market for 'the news' was simply too small to be profitable.[71] This was a concern in the institutional public. Moreover, to cater the migrant population on Sint Maarten, news in Spanish alone was not enough. Those working in and for 'the news' were not the only ones aware of this. In a comment on Kenjiro's call to "spread the news out" in Spanish, someone wrote, "Once u go Spanish, u vanish, u need a Haitian gf [girlfriend – SR] for us to get it in Kreyol". Although there was a substantial group of Spanish-speaking Dominicans on the island (est. 5.8% of the official population in 2011), the commenter pointed to the significant Haitian community on the island (est. 6.9%). They spoke Haitian creole or Kreyol. Moreover, those from Dominica, Guadeloupe, and other (formerly) French colonies in the Lesser Antilles, spoke their version of Kreyol (or Patois). Many languages were spoken on Sint Maarten and among these, Spanish only played a limited role.

There was an urgent need, though, to reach migrant workers with information now that a catastrophic event was about to unfold. Among them were the most vulnerable – and marginalized – on the island, particularly the estimated 15,000 persons without official documents (De Wit, 2015). They had been forced to build their dwellings up against the hills, which made them prone to landslides caused by heavy rainfall. Others lived in often deplorable conditions in Sint Maarten's poorest neighborhoods. Either way, they were in severe danger. Yet, with a hurricane like Irma on its way, no one was truly safe. And it was in the face of this truth that Sint Maarteners went into a long night of waiting in fear for what would come.

It was in the early morning of Wednesday September 6, 2017 that Hurricane Irma made landfall on Sint Maarten. Around 7 am (local time) NASA-NOAA shared a rare satellite shot of the island caught in the eye of the storm [see **Figure 18**]. Irma hit Sint Maarten directly. After 45 minutes of relative calm weather, the second half of the hurricane roared over the island for a few hours more. By the end of the morning, Sint Maarteners found themselves in a world unmade. With winds over 300 km/h, massive storm surge, heavy rain, and flooding, Irma caused widespread devastation on the island. Houses, shops, and public buildings had crumbled, boats and containers had crashed against the shores and further

[71] See also the blog "The privilege to inform and be informed" (Rotmeijer, 2017b) that I wrote in Irma's aftermath in which I made this point.

inland, roads had become impassable, crops had been stripped, and trees uprooted. The hurricane had left the once lush island brown, the ocean grey, and the nights dark. Electricity had gone out soon after Irma's landfall. The fire department and the airport were so badly damaged that they were unusable. There was no running water. And because telephone and internet networks were down, there was hardly any communication on, from, and to the island.

Some pictures and recordings sent by island residents to their overseas family members in the eye of the storm had made it online. These showed horrifying images of the damage that had already been done. Yet, as a resident of Point Blanche, close to Sint Maarten's harbor, would later say to The New Yorker:

> You thought that was bad already, but then, after the eye, the tail of the hurricane came, and that was even worse. I swear to God, I was holding on to the edge of my bed. And that's when the damage was really done. My neighbor had lost part of his roof already— I think he was hiding in the closet. And another neighbor was hiding in a bathroom with his son and his wife. All the windows and the doors, everything was blown off. (…) After the storm, it was complete devastation. There was not a roof in sight. (E. Velasquez, cited by Meade, 2017)

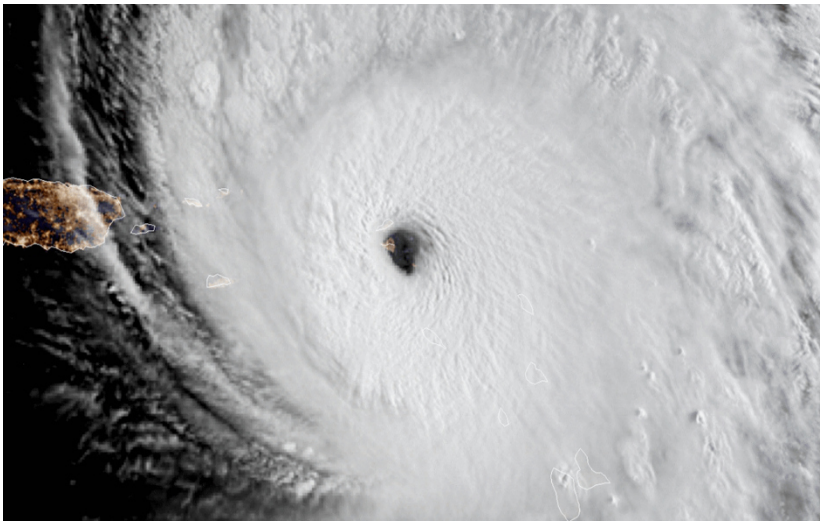

Figure 18: Sint Maarten in the eye of Hurricane Irma as seen from space (Image credit: NOAA/GOES)

Island residents had to cope with this disruptive reality at once. People elsewhere were still in the dark. Among the first impressions that came out were the aerial views provided by the Dutch Ministry of Defense [see **Figure 19**].

Figure 19: Devastation on Sint Maarten, 6 September 2017 (Image credit: Netherlands Ministry of Defense/Gerben van Es)

A few days prior to Irma's landfall, Dutch marine and military forces had departed from Aruba and Curaçao together with local militias and police to provide first aid in the hurricane's immediate aftermath. When their ships arrived on the 6th of September, a Dutch military helicopter took off just before sunset to map the immense destruction on the island. As news media were dependent on scarcely available information at this point (see Hadders & Evers, 2017), these shots were shared by news outlets across the globe.

Among friends, relatives, and others with close connections on the island, myself included, these images evoked intense feelings of insecurity, fear, and anxiety. In desperate need of some sign of life from sisters, brothers, (grand)parents, neighbors, and friends, many people turned to those channels that were still operative. On Twitter for example, the Dutch Navy account was used by relatives asking for help in finding their loved ones. "Could you search for my little sister on Saba?" a Dutch lady asked, "from Windward side to Momo Cottages, first to the left, around the little gardens. Thank you"[72] (response to Frank Boots Twitter, September 6, 2017). After it became clear that the Royal Dutch Navy could not address individual requests[73], people desperately asked, "How can we get in touch with our family members, many people are anxious as there is no communication possible" (response to Koninklijke Marine Twitter, September 7, 2017). Many put their faith in the Dutch military because their satellite connection provided a way to get information from the island to the rest of the world – and vice versa.

This connectivity also became clear to Harris, a freelance journalist, and Dutch Caribbean correspondent for the Dutch public broadcaster (NOS), who had made it to Sint Maarten by hopping on one of the Royal Dutch naval vessels leaving Curaçao. This meant he had direct access to the military satellite connection and many of those in urgent need for information, including the Dutch press, turned to Harris for 'the news'. Yet, to spread 'the news', as Harris could, one had to get it first. Harris was among the first civilians to go ashore, but only briefly and his access was limited to the Marine-protected harbor area at

[72] I have translated the original Dutch-language quotes as reported in Dutch news media and on social media have into English in this chapter.

[73] The Royal Dutch Navy replied to messages like this that its mission was to support local authorities who, in turn, determined its actions, but another person responded to the query: "The brother of my co-worker knows her. There have been no casualties and her house is still intact. He'll try to contact her" (response to Koninklijke Marine Twitter, September 7, 2017).

Philipsburg. From there he reported to Dutch TV, "It's like a warzone, a deserted warzone. (…) Desolate, you could say. *Uncanny* it even felt to me", while adding that "it must be *insane* in the city. When I zoom in with my camera from the harbor, all I see are houses destroyed" (Nieuwsuur, 2017a, n.p.). Thus, while Harris witnessed the destruction Hurricane Irma had left, he could also barely imagine what was going on in the streets and what Sint Maarteners were really going through.

This became clear when Harris posted an update on his Facebook timeline on 8 September 2017. It was only two days after the passing of Irma, but Sint Maarten had to brace for yet another massive hurricane (José). While Harris was back on board the ship to wait out the hurricane's passing offshore, he noted, "The residents of SXM probably have no idea that a second hurricane is on its way". This supposition resonated with a common perception in the Kingdom-wide institutional public. How, after all, was it possible to get information when the telecom infrastructures were severely damaged, the government remained silent, and the island's press was heavily constrained? "There is no order, enforcement, and authority", as Harris wrote, and related to that, "There is no communication anywhere". There was indeed a profound lack of 'the news' on (and about the situation on) the island. Yet Sint Maarteners on the island and throughout the (Dutch) world soon found other ways to get the news and spread it. They did this through popular news practices and communication networks via family, Facebook, and radio transmissions.

5.2. THE INTENSIFICATION OF POPULAR NEWS PRACTICES IN IRMA'S AFTERMATH

ON-THE-GROUND ACCOUNTS AMIDST CHAOS AND DEVASTATION

In the wake of Irma's passing, first-hand stories, pictures, and recordings started to trickle in online. Despite the immense devastation of buildings, utilities and communication infrastructures on the ground, some residents found a way to connect online. "There is an underground glass fiber", one of them explained to a Dutch newspaper, and went on to say, "While all wires are damaged, at times we have Wi-Fi somewhere" (cited in Van Wijk, 2017, n.p.).

In the "NOS Achtuurjournaal" (Eight O'clock News) on the day after Irma's devastating landfall on the island, a woman who was visiting her family on Sint Maarten tried to describe what she and others were going through. While a video recording made from a car driving the streets was shown on screen, she said in a voice-over:

> It's as if a lawn mower has come down from heaven and just went straight over the island. Yes, so how people are doing here? People are truly *helpless.* It's just really, they just don't know what to do. You see the fear in their eyes. People are just still looking for people. Of course there is also looting going on. No one knows for how long your rations at home— for how long they last you. So you see that people are really plundering supermarkets. And yes [sights], we also do not get much information. We also don't know where we stand. For how long we have to deal with this of course. We just really don't know what to do! People are just standing here— their house has just been razed to the ground. And it's really just, yes, *hor-ri-ble.* (NOS, 2017a)

Like other first on-the-ground accounts, one could hear, see, and sense the utter despair and anxiety felt by Sint Maarteners at this point. Pictures showed how residents were wandering the streets in shock over how Sint Maarten, their home, had been razed to the ground overnight [see **Figure 20**]. In such an environment of complete devastation and disorder, people were in desperate need of a sign of their loved ones. Yet, as a witness told to the Dutch broadcaster, "Many houses are destroyed, no one knows where the inhabitants are" (NOS, 2017a).

Figure 20: A panorama picture of people wandering the streets on Sint Maarten in the wake of Hurricane Irma, taken and posted on Facebook by a resident (anonymized by me).

Without any operating telecom network, Sint Maarteners had to lean on personal networks and popular news practices to find anything out. The latest updates on who was where in what state could be found in the streets, where information circulated rapidly from neighbor to neighbor and among friends and family. This

was particularly the case in urban areas on higher ground, where one was able to go out and meet one another. Some of the lower-lying areas, however, were completely flooded, while roadblocks meant that (more) remote neighborhoods, like Point Blanche, were closed off for days. Several interlocutors later told me that they had witnessed people risking their lives to reach their loved ones and find out whether they were alive. Over the next few days, official sources reported that four people had lost their lives during the hurricane's passing. Hundreds of people were injured. They needed urgent medical help. The hospital, however, was severely damaged just like the fire department, the police headquarters, and other public services. "I don't see ambulances", a resident said, and "one is helping another" (NOS, 2017a). Sint Maarteners were thrown back onto themselves and each other in the chaos the island now faced.

This situation led to cases of looting. Many had lost nearly everything and faced severe insecurity about what was ahead. They had made it through the hurricane alive. Now, they had to make sure to survive its aftermath. Of course, looting was not only a matter of immediate survival. In addition to supermarkets for food and water, looters were spotted at electronics shops, jewelry stores, wholesalers, and distributors of various goods. Images and live recordings of looting circulated online, showing people carrying flat screen TVs, smartphones, and other luxury goods. Although the main – and after Irma, only – newspaper on the island, *The Daily Herald*, was severely limited in publishing 'the news' daily, the paper's building "escaped Irma's wrath fairly unscathed", as a former employee and current news website owner in the Netherlands wrote (Hokstam, 2017, n.p.). Moreover, it still had access to glass cable internet and, therefore, could publish 'the news' online at times. In an article on its website, it described a case of looting:

> 'Come look, a generator', shouted a shirtless man to his fellow looters just hours after monster storm Hurricane Irma devastated St. Maarten/St. Martin. He was pushing a new generator out of the ripped doors of Safe Cargo, one of the island's main shipping companies. He was by far not the only opportunist after the devastating hurricane left the island's shores. Many people converged on supermarkets, food warehouses, liquor depots, furniture stores and electronic equipment stores to cart away as much as they could with absolutely no shame or remorse. (The Daily Herald, 2017, n.p.)

The Herald was not the only one shaming those involved in looting, particularly of what were considered luxury goods and non-essentials. Looting was widely condemned in the institutional public and the popular public alike. Some, however, also understood that in the glasshouse Sint Maarten was (or, rather, used to be), those who found themselves in in the lower ranks of society dreamt of a better life someday. To these people, Irma's aftermath provided an opportunity to fulfill this dream now that the island's social order was destroyed all at once. Local officials and authorities kept silent in reaction to the chaos on the island. There was no structural law enforcement in the streets. The subsequent disorder was what life meant in a glasshouse broken into pieces overnight. Finding oneself in this broken glasshouse was daunting. People on Sint Maarten hankered after some stability and to know where they were at. And it was one of Sint Maarten's (commercial) radio stations, together with popular Facebook groups, that met this deeply felt need.

NEWS VIBRATING IN THE ETHER AND CIRCULATING ONLINE

While the electricity was down and the local transmission tower destroyed, radio station *Laser 101* managed to go back on air and to remain in the ether in the days and weeks following the hurricane's passing. Thanks to a backup FM antenna and an emergency generator the radio station came to play a pivotal role in providing information to people on the island and beyond. Via battery operated portable radios, Sint Maarteners tuned in to the station en masse. "Ask a random person on Sint Maarten how to get information after hurricane Irma, and he or she will respond, 'via radio station Laser 101'" (ANP/Redactie, 2017) The DJs, editors, musicians, and technicians who were all part of the station's "Storm Watch Team" worked around the clock. Many of them had lost their homes too, but even those whose houses had been spared practically lived in the studio. Working at the only operative news outlet on the island meant that there was simply no time to call it a day.

When shortly after Irma's passing, Hurricane José was on its way, most on the island heard about this via the latest updates of the "Storm Watch Team". And when emergency first aid finally arrived on the island, it were *Laser 101* DJs who informed their listeners about the where, when, and how of food and water distribution. Even those who were outside the reach of the radio station, either because they could not tune in – having no radio or (full) batteries at hand – or

because they did not master the English language, were indirectly informed by the on air news broadcasts. On Sint Maarten news spread fast by word of mouth. While people on the island depended on what they heard via the ether, *Laser 101* depended on the information and help they got from the island community. There was a continual circulation of people in and out of the studio. “Some want to tell their story or they search for information”, the owner of *Laser 101* said, “Others bring pizza, for example, after they’ve heard our DJs feeling hungry on air” (ANP/Redactie, 2017). Everyone on the island turned to popular news practices now that all building and communication infrastructures on the island were destroyed.

The same was true for those residing beyond the island who were in desperate need for on-the-ground accounts of what was going on. Because *Laser 101* had been able to regain its internet connection soon after Irma’s passing, the radio station broadcasted online and streamed live out of Sint Maarten. It enabled people from all over the world to tune in to *Laser 101*, which became a key gateway to get and spread news from and to the island. Via the station’s hotlines, relatives called in on air to ask, “Have you heard something of my little sister, living in St. Peters?” or “Could someone please check on my mom in Belvedere?” and “Have you found my brother yet? I haven’t heard from him since Tuesday?” The phone lines of the “Storm Watch Team” were ringing off the hook. “Yes, it is still difficult at times”, one of the radio DJs said after a week of phone lines ringing off the hook, “Some people call- they are very emotional. But we keep holding on” (Nieuwsuur, 2017b). Most of the time, the Storm Watch Team could not provide concrete information about the state of relatives on the island immediately. But a listening ear to people in despair and explaining to them that they probably hadn’t heard anything from their loved ones because the electricity and telecom networks were down, already gave callers some solace. As such, *Laser 101* became much more than a news outlet “spreading the news out”. Its broadcasts allowed for a sense of continuity and provided mental support and comfort to its listeners on the island and beyond. Hence it also got calls from people expressing their gratitude. “Oh my God, I cannot imagine how we could hold on without the radio, without listening to a familiar voice” (ibid).

Similar words of appreciation about the radio station were expressed on Facebook, such as though of a Canadian resident who posted, “My wife [X] was able to speak on air with radio laser101. Omg we are so Grateful of the amazing work they do to help the right information circulate. Thx laser101❤” (Facebook,

September 10, 2017). Popular news practices on Facebook, and particularly in Facebook groups, unfolded in close relation to the broadcasts of *Laser 101*. One of the most important Facebook groups, "Hurricane Irma – Contact and Aid – SXM"[74] (henceforth, ICA- SXM) [see **Figure 21**] was launched on the day that Irma hit Sint Maarten by several young(er) Sint Maarteners who resided both on island and in diaspora. They sensed and acted on the urgent need for an online platform to "find missing persons, report emergencies, get aid and help others" in Irma's aftermath.

In close relation to radio station *Laser 101*, the ICA-SXM Facebook group provided critical information and support to people on and beyond Sint Maarten. Updates and needs that were broadcasted by *Laser 101* were often simultaneously posted in this Facebook group and vice versa. In this way, both channels performed a necessary function in enhancing the reach of information so that pressing needs could be met. Among many examples were: the sharing of the latest information about water distribution points and the redistribution of water supplies among people on the island; arranging the delivery of medical supplies for the hospital's emergency room via an aid organization from the US; and informing people about the setup of relay websites to the *Laser 101* online stream so the existing streams would be overloaded [see **Figure 22**]. This was how, via the ether and online, news spread fast so that urgent needs could be met and aid could be organized rapidly.

With close to 10,000 members, the ICA-SXM Facebook group became a central space for relatives on and beyond the island to reach out to each other. As soon as the group was online, hundreds of people from all over the world started to post photo's, names, and locations of missing relatives on the island, often accompanied by heart-rending texts that expressed a deep-felt despair in the face of the unknown. Three days after Hurricane Irma, a daughter residing in the diaspora, for example, reached out to the online community in her search for her beloved father [see **Figure 23**].

[74] On March 15, 2020, the name of the Facebook group was changed to "COVID-19 Info SXM (Hurricane Contact & Aid)" and has since been used for "sharing and verifying information" about Covid-19 (casualties and statistics) on Sint Maarten. I will briefly reflect on the impact of Covid-19 on daily island life – on top of enduring struggles since the passing of Hurricane Irma – in Section 5.4.

Figure 22: Spreadsheet posted in the Facebook group "Hurricane Irma – Contact and Aid – SXM" on September 10, 2017

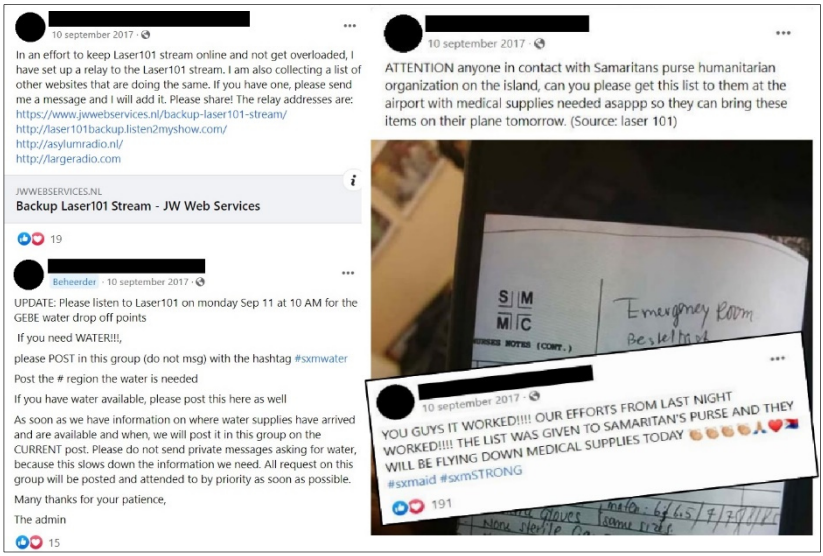

Figure 21: Examples of interactions between *Laser 101* and Facebook posts in the group "Hurricane Irma – Contact and Aid – SXM" on September 10, 2017.

Among the reactions her post generated were practical tips, such as adding the name of her father to the list of missing persons on the website *irmatracker.com* which together with the Dutch Red Cross site *ikbenveilig.nl* [safe and well] served as central registers of missing persons. Moreover, there were many people offering mental support to this daughter and her family by expressing under-

Figure 23: An example of a post by a worried daughter in search of her father and some of the reactions she got. Source: Facebook group "Hurricane Irma – Contact and Aid – SXM", 9 September 2017.

standing about the helplessness one felt being far away and by encouraging each other not to "give up hope". As such, online platforms like the ICA-SXM Facebook group became a space for relatives to articulate shared feelings of hope and fear as they awaited a sign of their loved ones. Later that day, the daughter responded to her original post with relief. She had heard via another family member that her father was safe and sound. Although his family living far away remained anxious about the devastating conditions he was in, they found some comfort knowing that his neighbors were looking out for him. In Dutch Quarter, one of the poorest neighborhoods on the island, people cared for one another. They had, in fa ct, long done so in their daily struggle to make ends meet. This father's children were well aware of this as expressed by a later post, in which the daughter said, "I am just happy some districts are taking care of one another. That's how it should be! Coming together [and] being one in this time of need!"

The examples in **Figures 22** and **23** serve to demonstrate how

Sint Maarteners on the island and throughout the (Dutch) world came to depend on popular news practices and communication networks during Irma's aftermath. As the hurricane had devastated the institutional order by destroying most buildings and communication infrastructures on the island, 'the news' was cut off and the island government remained silent. There was no central coordination, nor was there an institutional authority to depend on. People were on their own, helping each other. This was also the case for news media on the island.

Kenjiro, the breaking news reporter I mentioned above, had asked his sister to post an update on his behalf on his Facebook news page. He was without an internet connection and the truck that had allowed him to drive the streets hours before the storm was destroyed. He reached out to his media colleagues at *The Daily Herald* with whom he had cooperated before to ask them to provide him with a workspace and access to Wi-Fi. As the building of *The Herald* only had minor damages, it not only "accommodated its employees who have lost their houses, [t]he paper also shared its good fortune by allowing competing news organizations to use its offices and by giving residents access to use the WIFI or charge their phones" (Hokstam, 2017, n.p.). Due to the curfew that came into effect soon after Irma and its personnel's other priorities (dealing with private devastation), it would take more than two weeks before the first printed edition of *The Herald* came out. Nevertheless, the paper's management opened its facilities to media colleagues, among them Kenjiro, and residents alike. According to one of the managers it was an extraordinary decision in an extraordinary situation, saying:

> People wanted to communicate with the outside world. So we decided to open it, for people to be able to send WhatsApp messages to concerned friends and families abroad. Before you knew it there were up to 40 people at a time outside our building, using our internet. (…) We were really lucky to have electricity while others didn't. Allowing people to charge their phones so they could use the internet to let their families know they were okay, was the least we could do. (Cited in Hokstam, 2017, n.p.)

At the same time that media outlets like *The Herald* and also *Laser 101* provided residents access to whatever was left of communication infrastructures on the island, it was common people on the island who provided news to 'the news' on

the island and across the world. A case in point was Jeremy, one of the administrators of the ICA-SXM Facebook group and arguably "the best-known Facebook vlogger of Sint Maarten since Hurricane Irma" (Nieuwsuur, 2017c). Without having a vehicle and with his own house destroyed, Jeremy did all he could to distribute water and information among those who needed it the most across the island. The videos he made of the stories and sights he came across during his busy days, were sent out across the world. In an interview with the Dutch program "Nieuwsuur", Jeremy said, "It just blew up, my sons getting contacted by CNN, BBC, City News in Canada and they started to share my videos. Cause, according to them, I was one of the first ones up and on the air" (ibid).

As 'the news' on the island was cut off, the aftermath of Hurricane Irma led to the exposure and intensification of more popular news practices that now served a widespread need for information not only in the popular but also in the institutional public on Sint Maarten and the (Dutch) world. In fact, the sudden and violent disruption of social life as it used to be broke down the glasshouse – and with that the division of an institutional public versus a popular public on Sint Maarten. Now, every Sint Maartener stood in the face of the unknown, while many related to and affected by the disastrous event were confronted with feelings of hope and fear. They scrolled the Internet for a sign of life from a loved one; listening day and night to the only locally operative radio station; joining the rapidly emerging Facebook groups in need for emotional release and some comfort. Let me now turn to how popular news practices amidst a glasshouse shattered to pieces came to articulate and enforce cathartic senses of belonging to 'we', Sint Maarteners across the Dutch world.

5.3. ALL BELONG TO 'WE', SINT MAARTENERS: CATHARTIC SENSES OF BELONGING IN THE DUTCH WORLD

> Then He arose and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace, be still!'
> And the wind ceased and there was a great calm. (Mark 4:39, NKJV)[75]

In this section I explore how popular news practices became a cathartic vehicle to share and release feelings of hope and fear in Irma's immediate aftermath.

[75] Shared by Kenjiro on his Facebook timeline.

Understood here as "a purification or purgation [of emotions] that brings about spiritual renewal or release from tension", (Merriam-Webster, *n.d.*) catharsis provided a way to cope with and to heal from the traumatic disruption of what used to be familiar – and to do so side by side, together. In the wake of Hurricane Irma, the tragedy and loss so widely shared was turned into a story of solidarity and spiritual renewal; of rising again from the shards and fragments of a broken glasshouse. I explore the generation of cathartic senses of belonging across the Dutch Kingdom through news practices unfolding through sharing food ("Breaking bread together") and music ("Musicking the world anew").

BREAKING BREAD TOGETHER

In the wake of Hurricane Irma, rations were running out, supermarkets were empty, and ATM machines were out of order. Whole families lived on one canned meal a day. Some survived by eating dry biscuits for days. Amidst severe scarcity and insecurity about when outside emergency aid would arrive, news about small eateries, restaurants, bakeries, and supermarkets who started to open what was left of their establishments to feed their brothers and sisters on the island, spread fast. A case in point was the family-run bakery and supermarket, Cake House, located in the (Dutch) Sint Maarten residential area of Cul-du-Sac. The then still operating newspaper Today,[76] reported online, "The day after Hurricane Irma passed word spread fast in the Cul-de-Sac area and beyond that Cake House Supermarket was giving out free bread to neighborhood residents" (StMaartenNews, 2017). Soon, not only families from St. Peters, Saunders, and other Cul-du-Sac districts, but all the way from Sucker Garden and other outside districts headed to Cake House to wait for free food in the bread line.

News about the initiative spread rapidly by word of mouth via the ether and online. When *The Daily Herald* uploaded the article, "Cake House giving out bread". It soon circulated across the web and was widely shared on social media. In the "Hurricane Irma – Aid & Contact – SXM" (ICA-SXM) Facebook group, I noticed how the sharing of this news article was often accompanied by posts that

[76] *Today* was Sint Maarten's second newspaper. In Irma's immediate aftermath, *The Herald* opened its facilities to what had been its only competitor since 2000. After Irma had forced *Today* to cease printing, its former editor-in-chief would continue to write for the newly established news website StMaartenNews.com, where the article about Cake House also would be uploaded.

articulated and generated feelings of hope and togetherness amidst adversity. This was illustrated, among others, by a post in the ICA-SXM Facebook group on September 11, 2017 [see **Figure 24**]. This group member articulated feelings of gratitude and relief – as expressed, among others, in the emoticons, such as ✊ ❤ 🙏 and 🤲 😇 – aroused by the article about Cake House giving out bread for free. She also noted what was needed ("It takes a village…" and "#MoreGoodVibes") to improve things and bring people together.

To understand this post in its context, I need to point out that the owners of Cake House were Taiwanese, who islanders viewed as virtually indistinguishable from the Chinese community on the island. In the glasshouse that used to be Sint Maarten, politics of belonging related to black nationalism and a struggle for independence (as I discussed in Chapter Two) involved, at times, xenophobic rhetoric towards 'outsiders', among whom those with a Chinese background. Related to the increasing Chinese institutional presence in the wider Caribbean, the success of Chinese (family) businesses on the island had often been condemned as being at the expense of "local black entrepreneurs". The owners of Cake House, who ran a successful retail busi-ness and were in charge of the local department of the Tsu Chi Buddhist charity organization, which operated worldwide, had also been accused of increasing their wealth and influence on the backs of "local black Sint Maarteners". Whether or not these accusations held water, my point is that when Irma broke the glasshouse down, these politics of belonging made place for cathartic senses of belonging as articulated and enforced by posts about Cake House giving out bread for free. From this angle, the hashtag #ThisIsSt.Maarten in the post above was not so much a description of what Sint Maarten used to be, nor was it explicitly referring to the Cake House initiative. Rather it articulated what Sint Maarten could become and, according to this group member, needed to become to overcome despair. With the last sentence, "I feel a shift in the atmosphere", this woman added to the performativity of her post by expressing her feeling that change was in the air, it simultaneously enabled and enforced this very change.

The telling and retelling of stories about sharing food formed part of how Sint Maarteners coped with and healed from the devastation of Hurricane Irma. They turned it into a story through which imagined futures could emerge. By imposing "a narrative structure and order onto an event that seems to defy any structure or order", practicing news became "itself a form of catharsis"

(Gerstenberger & Nusser, 2015, p. 8). The intensification of popular news practices after the hurricane resembled what Aristoteles called "aesthetic catharsis" which describes "not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen, i.e., what is possible as being probable or necessary?" (Paskow, 1983, p. 60).

Another example of aesthetic catharsis through communicating news around food sharing in Irma's after-math was a post by Kenjiro on his Facebook timeline on September 24, 2017 [see **Figure 25**]. Kenjiro was a religious man as are many people on Sint Maarten as well as on Curaçao, the island where he was born and raised. It had been three weeks since Irma had passed, an event that Kenjiro came to terms with by understanding and articulating it as God's grace. Instead of focusing on the destruction that He had poured down upon Sint Maarten (as if a "lawn mower came down from heaven and went over the island"), he turned it into a story of how Irma had brought people together. Rather than focusing

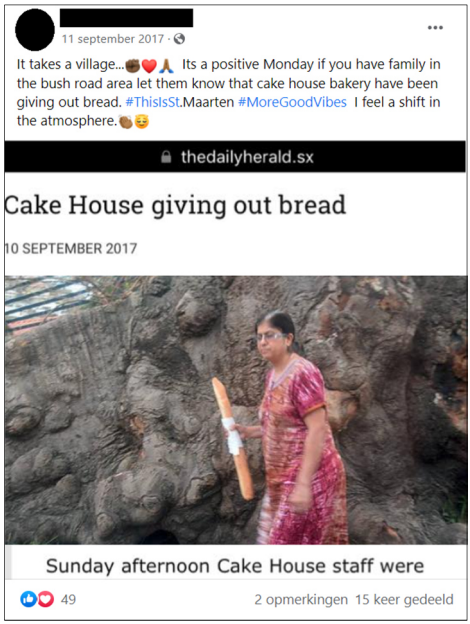

Figure 24: Post in the ICA-SXM Facebook group sharing the article "Cake House giving out bread" by *The Daily Herald* on September 11, 2017.

Figure 25: Post by Kenjiro on his Facebook timeline on September 24, 2017.

on political divisions based on skin color, gender, nationality, or ethnic background, Kenjiro emphasized how God had deconstructed the capitalist social order of the glasshouse which was based on class divisions. By writing that "GOD bring the rich and the poor at one table, so they can eat from the same pot", Kenjiro articulated the biblical notion 'to break bread together'. To him, sharing food was not only a matter of survival, but a religious ritual to (re)connect, bury anger, and experience joy and peace that transcended inequality in the island's social order.

Kenjiro's post was also a form of aesthetic catharsis in not only describing experiences with breaking bread together in Irma's aftermath, but also in acting on an imagination of equality as being probable: after all, we were all equal in His eyes. As such, his post was an aesthetic practice of emotional release and spiritual relief which resonated among many of his followers who reacted with "Amen!","Sure did", "No lie about that", as well as by expressing emotions of pity ("Sad, but true"); and even by provoking laughter through bittersweet humor with reference to the early initiative by Cake House to break bread together ("Put us all in the same breadline 🍞"). The aesthetic catharsis of and brought about by Kenjiro's post also resonated through time in bringing experiences of the past and hopes for the future together. A man, for example, recalled his experiences in the aftermath of Hurricane Luis, which left the island devastated in 1995, writing, "Well those of us who [were] around for hurricane Luis living it for the second time when your enemies asking you if everything is OK and want to share the little that they have with you". Some were somewhat skeptical of whether such cathartic senses of belonging to 'we', Sint Maarteners – previously experienced after Luis and now in Irma's aftermath – would last long-term. Others, including Kenjiro himself, held on to the opportunity that Irma (God) provided for people to unite, which was expressed in comments, such as, "The people need to try and live as one (…). Having no electricity was disgusting yess, but not having it We the neighbors enjoyed the quality time together".

Sharing food not only brought together neighbors, friends, and foes on the island. Popular news practices around 'breaking bread together' also evoked and enforced cathartic senses of belonging among people who had never set foot on Sint Maarten, let alone experienced anything like a hurricane of the highest category and waking up in a world unmade.

When "Nieuwsuur" shared the video portrait of Jeremy distributing water to those in need on the island, his actions spoke to brothers and sisters

throughout the Dutch Kingdom. A Dutch woman living in Amsterdam, for example, was deeply moved by what she saw and heard in the video and reacted:

Ja is ook echt wel vreselijk.	Yes, [this] is actually really dreadful.
Van het 1 op andere moment.	From one moment to the other.
Je huis kwijt	Losing your home
Al je spullen	All your stuff
Geen water	No water
Echt wel heel heftig.	Really very tough indeed.

(*Nieuwsuur*, 2017c)

It were on-the-ground accounts, such as those given by Jeremy, which aroused not only feelings of pity and compassion, but also generated emphatic engagement throughout the (Dutch) world and across the institutional and popular public. We were no longer strangers, but, rather, brothers and sisters who all belonged to 'we', Sint Maarteners.

The widely shared, deeply felt urgency to help our brothers and sisters called for action. Under the name "One Love SXM", Curaçaoan radio and television stations worked together with bloggers, DJs, rappers, and local aid organizations to raise funds (UTS, 2017). At the same time, the Dutch Red Cross and the Dutch public broadcaster (NPO) joined forces in organizing the national fundraising campaign "Nederland helpt Sint-Maarten" [The Netherlands helps Sint Maarten] on September 15, 2017 (NPO, 2017a).[77] After the Dutch Minister of Kingdom Affairs had started the event in the early morning, politicians and 'BNers' ('Bekende Nederlanders' [famous Dutch people]) took their seats to take calls from people making donations. Both public and commercial radio and TV live-broadcasted and streamed thousands of smaller and bigger relief efforts and initiatives that took off across The Netherlands on that day. Sport clubs organized sponsored walks, hairdressers cut for free (in exchange for a donation) and whole neighborhoods collected clothes, baby food, and building materials. Efforts ranged from school classes heading to the studio to hand in refundable bottles to small children baking (cup)cakes and selling cookies all day. In response to the question of why they wanted to help, a girl said, "Because we really want to support them very much. We think it's super very bad and we just hope

[77] The total sum of money raised by the campaign was over €18.9 million (Rode Kruis, 2021, p. 53).

everything will be ok soon" (NPO, 2017b). Now, we all – children and parents, brothers, and sisters, rich and poor, kin and strangers – were breaking bread together.

MUSICKING THE WORLD ANEW

It was not a coincidence that fundraising campaigns across the Dutch Kingdom were carried by and echoed through radio broadcasts. Radio stations throughout the Dutch realm provided, like *Laser 101*, the sound of support and resilience during Irma's aftermath. As radio DJs played requested songs throughout the day, listeners called in to express their worries, pity, and compassion. In search of some comfort and solace, we all tuned in to this 'playlist' that was unfolding on the air. Certainly, in disturbing times like this, it was through sound and music that people came together. In other words, it was through 'musicking' that cathartic senses of belonging were expressed and enforced.

I recall, based on the Introduction of this dissertation, that the term 'musicking' was coined by Christopher Small (1999) to stress that the function and meaning of music "lies not in musical works, but in taking part in performance, in social action" (p. 9). I explained how, like musicking, I understand practicing news as a "process of giving and receiving information (…) by means of which the participants not only learn about, but directly experience, their concepts of how they relate, and how they ought to relate, to others in their society and the wider world" (Small, 1998, p. 8). What I came to notice in the aftermath of Hurricane Irma was that news – as a process of how society turns events into stories – resembled the socio-cultural process articulated by Small's notion of musicking. Moreover, people came to practice news not only *as if* musicking but literally *through* their engagement with music.

Sint Maarteners on the island had soon 'musicked' their experiences into shared stories via *Laser 101,* the only operational news outlet in the days following Hurricane Irma. By hearing a familiar voice on the radio who played the songs they knew, Sint Maarteners had found something to hold on to. "Immediate and quick discontinuities create anomy, (…) a loss of norms, maxims and values", as anthropologist Guadeloupe (2021, n.p.), who resided on Sint Maarten when Irma passed, explained:

> In such a situation you *need* continuity, because the landscape has changed. And what happens? Where do you find the continuity? We found it in the soundscape. Where the landscape had changed, the soundscape needed to enact continuity. And that happened by radio stations, like *Laser 101*, playing music that everyone had listened to the days before. So you had hip-hop, you had Bachata, you had Soca, you had all Calypsos. And I realized then that radio was of importance because it was distributing a particular kind of sensibility. It was saying: despite the discontinuity, there is a continuity. We are still here.

Even though the world had become unrecognizable overnight, the soundscape in the ether reminded Sint Maarteners that they were still alive and breathing. They also had to move on. And it was through creating and engaging with new songs that Sint Maarteners on and beyond the island played their way into a future worth living. In the weeks and months after Irma, making, producing, experiencing, listening to, and enjoying music together intensified. Musicking became a cathartic vehicle to turn the devastating event of Hurricane Irma into a story of all.

For Yogsta, a dancehall singer and music artist who resided on the northern (French) side of the island, Hurricane Irma made clear, as he told SXM Friendly Magazine (2017), that "even when everything has been destroyed and it feels like there is no more hope, the music is still there".[78] It became the inspiration for writing the track "Pen & Paper" which had a video clip that was recorded amidst the devastation on the island just after the hurricane had passed over the island. Two months later, when the island was gradually recovering, Yogsta came out with a second track, "Hard Like Metal", which was both an homage and an encouragement to his brothers and sisters to stay strong and keep grinding on day by day. This story was also visualized in the video clip which was released on YouTube on 4 December 2017, by shots of friends, family, and neighbors repairing each other's roofs and houses [see **Figure 26**]. The clip showed how metal tools (hammers and saws) substituted for guns – one of which was literally put into the ground, symbolizing the burying of anger. In a recurring shot, Yogsta and his fellows took turns writing on a whiteboard what "SXM lifestyle" was about (i.e., "St. Martiners look out for each other"; "like to mix!"; "Don't give up").

[78] Translated from French. The original quote was: "Même quand tout a été detruit et que l'on a l'impression qu'il n'y a plus d'espoir, la musique est toujours là".

The story of "Hard Like Metal", as told through sound and image, was not only describing what "SXM life" was about. It also musicked an aesthetic imagination of what the world could be through "SXM life". This was a world that was both known and new to fellow islanders, among whom one commented on the video, saying:

> Nobody has the same flow as YOGSTA and Yogsta a flow that nobody has. It comes from St. Martin, we speak English, French, Spanish, Creole and many more. His lyrics, this English and this accent, that are in his music (…) the sound is too freeesh. I don't even have the words to explain to you how killing it is.[79]

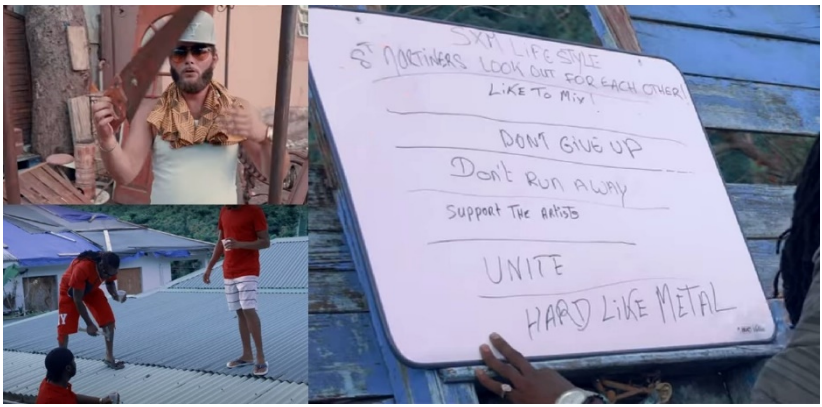

Figure 26: Stills from the video clip of "Hard like Metal", showing friends repairing a roof together; Yogsta holding a saw; a whiteboard with one-liners about "SXM life" (Yogsta, 2017).

Music(king) told a story that was difficult to rationalize and put into words. As a form of aesthetic catharsis, it spoke to people because it resonated with something one recognized while at the same time confronting one with something (a)new. It was through experiencing this ambiguity that the commentator cited above recognized the sound of the island in Yogsta's music ("his lyrics, this English, this accent") which sounded both unique ("a flow nobody has") and novel ("too freeesh"). Yogsta's track could therefore speak to many on *and* beyond the island, as illustrated by the reactions it generated on YouTube

[79] I slightly edited the comment (i.e., punctuation) to enhance the readability here.

Figure 27: Examples of music events organized throughout the Dutch Kingdom. From left to right: flyer of 'mediathon' + concert during fundraising day "One Love SXM"; flyer of benefit concert "Unity 4 St. Maarten" in Bird; flyer of benefit concert "St. Maarten Benefiet" in Annabel.

from people all over the world, including comments such as "Force Haiti 👊👊👊 " and "St. Martin all good bro's one love 🙌🙌🙌🙌🙌🏿👊👊👊🔥🔥🔥💯😂💯 😁😁 Amsterdam here bless up bro thug😎".

Music did not know territorial or national boundaries. Curaçaoans sang and danced on Brionplein in Otrobanda, Willemstad during the closing concert of the "SXM One Love" fundraising campaign for their affected sister islands. Dutch YouTubers joined forces by composing and performing the song "Ik geef om jou" [I care about you] in support of those affected by Irma. And musicians organized benefit concerts such as "Unity 4 St. Maarten" in Bird and "Irma x Anna" in Annabel, both in Rotterdam, The Netherlands [see **Figure 27**]. The cathartic force that came with musicking – whether it was through preparing, making, performing, listening – brought people together in new ways. I experienced this myself when I attended the above-mentioned benefit concert "Irma x Anna" on October 12, 2017. The musical event was initiated by the reggae rock band Orange Groove which was based in The Hague, The Netherlands. Although based in The Netherlands, as the Sint Maarten-born lead singer said, "the Caribbean has shaped us" (Orange Grove, 2019, n.p.). Several band members were born and raised on Sint Maarten, and they had felt an urge to do what they could. Music was their outlet and certainly was their means to do something now.

In the weeks after Hurricane Irma, I had seen the Orange Groove band members regularly on Dutch TV. On the evening of the national fundraising campaign on 15 September, they sat at the table in the late night talk show, "Pauw", together with the Curaçaoan jazz singer, Kris Berry, who gave a performance of "O Sweet Saint Martin's Land", the national anthem of the island.[80] The first stanza of the anthem [see **Figure 28**], written by a Dutch Catholic missionary on the French side in 1958[81], told a similar story about "SXM life" as Yogsta would do almost 60 years later. Sint Maarten spoke to the world by resembling it, anew. More than the lyrics, though, was the sound of all belonging to 'we' Sint Maarteners that was played on Dutch television and that echoed across Dutch living rooms. The news media no longer portrayed Sint Maarteners as the Other, far-away and backwards on a distant Caribbean island, but, instead, as Dutch citizens in need of help.

O Sweet Saint Martin's Land
Where over the world, say where,
You find an island there,
So lovely small with nations free
With people French and Dutch
Though talking English much,
As thee Saint Martin in the sea?

Figure 28: The first stanza of Sint Maarten's national anthem, as sung by Kris Berry in "Pauw", September 15, 2017.

After Orange Grove had announced its plans to organize a benefit concert, the Rotterdam pop podium Annabel soon brought together numerous artists, live painters, DJs, and bands who wanted to perform free of charge. After the date and location were set, news about the upcoming event spread fast via social media. On the event's Facebook page, well-known (Dutch) artists and media personalities expressed their words of love in support of the benefit concert, while businesses throughout the city offered free things (e.g., ice-cream at De IJssalon) if one showed one's ticket for the concert. The event was also shared in the ICA-SXM Facebook group, to which many had initially been drawn in their search for a sign of their loved ones. Now, a month after Irma's passing, they were looking for ways to help their relatives in need. And as news about fundraising initiatives such as #RebuildSXM, private 'gofundme' pages, and bene-

[80] While the French national anthem is the official-institutional anthem for Saint Martiners, "O Sweet Saint Martin's Land" – the official national anthem of Sint Maarten (Dutch side) – is seen by all on the island as the local anthem.
[81] Father Gerard Kemps was knighted as a "Ridder in de Orde van Oranje van Nassau" in 1984.

Figure 29: Compilation of Facebook posts around and impressions of the benefit concert "Irma x Anna". Photo credits: Mark Bolk.

fit concerts like "Irma x Anna", circulated online, Facebook groups like the "Hurricane Irma – Contact and Aid – SXM" offered a space that brought the Sint Maarten diaspora home.

To me, experiencing the "Irma x Anna" benefit concert [see **Figure 29**] brought Sint Maarten home and not only because the venue, Annabel, was just a five minutes' walk from where I, born and raised in Rotterdam, lived or because I recognized many of the artists in the line up. It was also not because I saw many familiar faces. In fact, I barely recognized anyone in the highly diverse crowd. Rather, it was by enjoying the music, live art, and performances and by dancing, drinking, and eating together (there were several food trucks too) that I suddenly felt a strong connection to those in whose midst I was standing. We were no longer strangers divided by our backgrounds, skin tones, social classes, mother tongues, and dialects. In this cathartic moment, we suddenly became aware that all of us had been connected to each other all along.

This was common knowledge in the popular public, where reggae, hip-hop, dancehall and other Caribbean(-infused) music styles thrived. Without a doubt, there were corporate and political interests involved in what had turned into a booming Caribbean music industry in The Netherlands (and, particularly, in Rotterdam, with its large diasporic communities from the Caribbean and elsewhere). Yet, as Flores (2004) eloquently argued in addressing unfolding "Caribbean soundscapes" as a process of "transnationalism from below":

> Caribbean music today, and its movement to and from its massive diasporas, remains *popular* music in the deepest and most persistent sense: whether in the region or in its diasporic settings, and in its migration back and forth between them, it lives on as the vernacular expression of people and communities seeking, and finding, their own voice and rhythm. (p. 292, *emphasis in original*)

This proces of finding and seeking a transnational "voice and rhythm" from below through Caribbean music is what I experienced during the benefit concert. It was there and then, for and with Sint Maarten, that I felt home to 'we' and we all did. As such, we were musicking our shared world again, and anew.

As popular news practices intensified in the wake of Irma, we musicked the passing of the hurricane into a story of us all. These popular expressions of cathartic feelings of belonging were not constrained by territorial or national borders of the island but stretched into the Dutch Kingdom (and beyond). In The

Netherlands, the news media no longer portrayed Sint Maarteners as the Other, far-away, and backward on a distant Caribbean island, but, instead, as Dutch citizens in need of help. On Curaçao, the call to stand with "our Antillean sister islands" was spread via popular and institutional news practices, alike. For a moment, we were all in this together. Whether this moment would last is a question that leads me to the concluding paragraph of this chapter.

5.4. BUILDING BACK BETTER?: A GLASSHOUSE RECONSTRUCTED

> Sometimes you have to ask yourself: where to begin at such a moment? Today has really, yes [sighs], I think, been very useful to have seen with my own eyes how this terrible storm wreaked havoc. And also to show in this way the people of Sint Maarten and also the Governor and the Prime Minister [of Sint Maarten] that we, as a Kingdom, stand here together and will solve this together.
>
> - King Willem-Alexander (NOS, 2017b)

These words were expressed by King Willem-Alexander in an interview with the Dutch public broadcaster *NOS* during his visit to the island on 11 September, one week after Hurricane Irma had hit Sint Maarten. As the head of the Kingdom-wide institutional order, the King spoke about a 'we' that he had always represented – namely all of us, Dutch citizens, belonging to the Kingdom of The Netherlands. For him, this 'we', as a Kingdom, was not only about the present ("stand here together"), but also about the future ("will solve this together"). Thereby he articulated what all of us felt at the time as expressed through the cathartic senses of belonging throughout the Kingdom which I discussed above. Yet, what happened after the first emergency aid and relief shipments arrived and the long-term process of rebuilding the island's infrastructures began?

Here it is important to stress (once more) that in Irma's direct aftermath, Sint Maarten's political leaders remained silent for a long time. It was only after the gradual restoration of electricity and telecom networks which, in turn, enabled the use of official communication infrastructures, that the island's government appeared back on (the institutional) stage. Meanwhile, the Dutch government decided to pledge 550 million euros to help rebuild the island, but

on two conditions. One was that Sint Maarten's authorities would establish an 'Integrity Chamber' and temporarily hand over its border control to the Dutch military. The second was to pledge to improve its own border control in the long run. These conditions were not new to Sint Maarten's authorities as The Hague had already issued them earlier in the year (2017). Yet, with the passing of Hurricane Irma the position of the island's national leaders in the negotiations with Dutch authorities had changed significantly. With damages estimated around €2.5 billion ($3 billion) and a population that was in dire need of relief and help, the island's government had no other choice than to accept the Dutch conditions. At least, that seemed inevitable in popular and institutional settings alike. Yet, Sint Maarten's Prime Minister, William Marlin, refused to accept the conditions which triggered the collapse of the island's administration in November 2017. It was not the first nor the last time that Sint Maarten's people had witnessed political crises and instability. Since 2010, when Sint Maarten became a constituent country as part of the Dutch Kingdom, the island has seen ten different cabinets installed.[82] Sint Maarteners were all too familiar with the games of "politricksians" (see Chapter Three), which were played over the heads of common people and that, certainly now, were played at the expense of Sint Maarteners who had lost everything and faced utter despair, trauma, and anxiety.

While the government of Sint Maarten accepted Dutch relief funding on the terms offered by The Netherlands by the end of 2017, the power play and mutual distrust between the Dutch and Sint Maarten governments endured. The Hague decided to outsource the coordination and supervision of recovery funds to the World Bank. Without going into the details of this complex tripartite construction, it soon became clear that the Trust Fund's slogan to "Build Back Better" was not only severely hampered by World Bank bureaucracy and ongoing political instabilities, but also left behind the most vulnerable on Sint Maarten. These were the poor laborers, particularly undocumented migrant, female, and lower-educated workers and pensioners (Collodi et al., 2021, p. 210). With the help of private international investors hotels, resorts, and casinos were rebuilt in no time, while many who lived in poorer neighborhoods, such as Dutch Quarter,

[82] At the moment of writing (2022), the 10th government of Sint Maarten (installed on 28 March 2020) was still in office.

were still waiting for a roof over their heads in 2022. They found themselves back again at the bottom of the social order in a glasshouse reconstructed.

The series of events that I have described so far became part of a story that prevailed in the institutional public. 'The news' was keen on covering the political power play that unfolded in the Kingdom-wide institutional public. Although news outlets on the island faced ongoing difficulties (e.g., infrastructural damages, low advertising revenues, etc.), those who were able to operate soon competed again to get out 'the (latest) news' first. The same was true for the Dutch press, in which statements made by politicians on both sides of the ocean increasingly came to dominate the headlines about Sint Maarten. After a brief moment in which Dutch news media had focused on Sint Maarten people as Dutch citizens in need for help, 'the news' returned to portraying 'Sint Maarten' (the institutional territory rather than the people) as the Other, far away, and backward Caribbean island. This is not to say that there were no longer efforts – whether individual or editorial – to tell a different story. There were many exceptions to the rule such as, for example, the series of articles for which newspaper *Trouw* followed "the unofficial mayor" of Dutch Quarter. Human interest stories like these were more nuanced yet also – according to journalism norms and values in the bourgeois public sphere – less important than so-called 'hard news'. Human interest stories did not make it to the headlines, let alone to the "NOS Achtuurjournaal" [Eight O'clock newscast]. By then, the primary Dutch newscast had long gone back to the order of the day.

As Dutch politicians and experts in 'the news' predominantly spoke about corruption on Sint Maarten, the island's political leaders found their own channels (e.g., US news media) to blame the Dutch for neocolonialism and racism. Moreover, the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter protests would add to political tensions. As a Sint Maarten blogger summarized the ongoing bickering as displayed by 'the news':

> Dutch Government Are Racist. And Sxm Government Are Criminals. (…) It's that simple. The latest back and forth between Knops [Dutch State Secretary for the Interior and Kingdom Relations] and Jacob's [PM Sint Maarten] seems to be the same vitriol on repeat. The world is watching. (StMaartenNews, 2021, n.p.)

What happened with the world we came to share in Irma's immediate aftermath? And what about the popular news practices and their intensification that had

generated cathartic senses of belonging throughout the (Dutch) world? These practices were by no means gone. In daily island life news continued to spread fast by word of mouth as neighbors, friends, and family were helping each other to get through the day. The Facebook groups that had been launched to search for a sign of loved ones, get information, and organize aid fast still brought a worldwide community together. The "Hurricane Irma – Contact and Aid – SXM" group, for example, still existed, albeit under a different name. On March 15, 2020, the group was changed to "COVID-19 Info SXM (Hurricane Contact & Aid)" and has been used since then for "sharing and verifying information" about Covid-19 (casualties and statistics) on Sint Maarten. All of us were affected by the worldwide pandemic and for Sint Maarteners on the island it came on top of long-running struggles since Hurricane Irma. Sint Maarteners in the diaspora therefore continued their efforts to draw attention to the difficult conditions our overseas brothers and sisters found themselves in. Many of the small fundraising organizations that had been initiated by them continued to exist. And amidst all this, it was still through music(king) that cathartic senses of belonging were brought about. After all, "Caribbean music today, and its movement to and from its massive diasporas, remains *popular* music in the deepest and most persistent sense" (Flores, 2004, p. 292). It was through musicking – both in direct relation to music and in more general terms of practicing news – in the popular public that we could still feel that we belonged to 'we'. This would not change.

What did change though was that with the reconstruction of the formal-institutional order and its underlying liberal-democratic norms and news practices such as those described above were pushed back into the popular public. The popular news practices I explored in this chapter were thereby dispossessed from 'the news' again. In the ideal bourgeois-public sphere, 'the news' was key to critical-rational deliberation, which, in turn, was vital for maintaining the social order. When the infrastructures of media, politics, and business were restored, so was a capitalist mode of being in society. Hence, 'we' all found each other back in the glasshouse again.