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SUMMARY

News in a Glasshouse:

Media, Publics, and Senses of Belonging in the Dutch Caribbean

What is ‘the news’ and how does it differ from ‘news’? The latter speaks to power, plurality of news media, and a recognition of multiple publics, including what Habermas singularly termed the public sphere. This dissertation is an ethnographic study of ‘the news’ and ‘news’ on the Dutch Caribbean isles of Curaçao and Sint Maarten.

News and ‘the news’, the analytical distinction I work with in this thesis, recognizes how news practices shape and are shaped through two parallel yet interacting publics: the institutional public and the popular public. ‘News’ is about news practices employed in the popular public (so, popular news practices), while ‘the news’ represents the news practices in the institutional public (institutional news practices). Practices of news and ‘the news’ cannot be kept separate. They are constantly interacting with each other whilst remaining somewhat distinct. For analytical purposes I treat them as ideal types. Like elsewhere, many people on Curaçao and St. Maarten love ‘the news’ and are also quite taken by the ‘new’ and ‘noteworthy’ which is prevalent in popular realms of public life. Journalists, reporters, and other media actors working for or with news media also engage with news while creating ‘the news’. News emerges from the stories people tell and share about what happens around them and gathers momentum once these stories become widely known with more people consuming, remaking, and disseminating them. In this thesis, ‘news’ is understood in terms of ‘musicking’ (music as a verb – what we do when we ‘music’ – rather than an object), thereby relocating the meaning and function of ‘news’ into the processes of how people on Curaçao and Sint Maarten turn events into collective stories. News however also usually engages with ‘the news’, hence, recognizing this dialectic allows for a study of newsmaking and community which critically represents the common, contested and at times cathartic senses of belonging expressed on Curaçao and Sint Maarten.

By focusing on news in Curaçao and Sint Maarten as a social process that unfolds in everyday life, the aim of this thesis is to broaden our perception of what ‘news’ means and does to people – or, rather, what people do through news. My starting point is therefore not solely or exclusively ‘the news’ – news as a thing (e.g., a news article, a broadcast) or an entity (e.g., a newspaper, the media) – but ‘news’ as a social

process that generates common and contested senses of belonging. The main research question addressed: *how do institutional and popular practices of newsmaking in the public sphere in Curaçao and Sint Maarten – understood as social processes of turning events into collective stories – generate common, contested and at times also cathartic senses of belonging?*

Through **multi-sited ethnographic research**, this thesis explores this question by following practices of news and ‘the news’ in Curaçao and Sint Maarten and throughout the wider Kingdom of the Netherlands. I followed other sites, including the Netherlands, via electronic media or by engaging with my interlocutors who also moved. I build primarily on participant observation at three different newsrooms (of a Papiamentu-language and a Dutch-language newspaper on Curaçao, and an English-language newspaper on Sint Maarten) and at several news websites and social media platforms; over 40 in-depth interviews with journalists, editors, and news media owners; and observations and engagements with everyday practices of newsmaking between 2015 and 2019. I contend that the analysis presented in this thesis is not bounded to the territorial borders of Curaçao and Sint Maarten but extends into the realm of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Some of my interlocutors moved across islands and to the Netherlands. I will elaborate on this in work I plan to do and publish after this dissertation.

The metaphor of the ‘**glasshouse**’, my major conceptual contribution, introduced in the Introduction and Chapter One, refers to how social life on Curaçao and Sint Maarten was designed under Dutch colonial rule and has evolved as part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands since. As a metaphor, the glasshouse resembles a microcosmos of a logistic operation of reducing the world (production process, producers, and goods) to the dictates of capitalism. Like (real) glasshouses, constructed as regulated artificial atmospheres to optimize the growth of plants outside of their natural environment, I argue that as part of the Dutch colonial enterprise, Curaçao and Sint Maarten were designed and regulated as social environments to optimize processes of production and distribution. Yet, just as uncontrolled metamorphoses of plants and wildlife (ants, bugs, fungus) take place in actual glasshouses, so too unexpected flowerings and mushrooming happen on Curaçao and Sint Maarten. News in the glasshouses that are Curaçao and Sint Maarten does not necessarily follow the script of a bourgeois liberal imagining of a common sense of belonging. ‘The news’ attempts to do so but is constantly thwarted by news. The latter articulates how the island communities are continuously constructed in-between regulation. It is reproduced by the institutional order, as well as by the popular practices that emerge in relation to this regulation. It is not so much despite oppressive infrastructures since colonial rule but due to oppression that

invention, creativity, and resourcefulness emerge in daily island life. News practices – again, understood as the social processes of turning events into collective stories – articulate the creative transformation that emerges from contestation into new ways of imagining and constructing the island communities.

This too was the case on Curaçao and Sint Maarten as shown in **Chapter Two**. In this chapter, I present **an history of ‘the news’ contested by news** on Curaçao and Sint Maarten. Public life on these islands took shape via multiple emerging publics, and differently so. Whereas Curaçao has long known a Dutch presence as an extra layer of ruling power on the island, this power was outsourced on Sint Maarten to private individuals. The effect of this was that the public sphere on Sint Maarten was private. This was clear to all Sint Maarteners. Here, the popular and institutional public (news and ‘the news’) met on more equal, and thus political, terms. On Curaçao such equal understandings of what is basically a system of inequality (a class-based social order based on capitalist production relations) was ‘disturbed’. On Curaçao, the popular public does not meet on equal terms with the split institutional public in the public sphere on this island. While those in power on both islands and sides of the ocean acted on emerging media infrastructures, so did those among the lower rungs of society. ‘The news’ has always interacted with and been contested by news. This interactional process between practices of newsmaking in the institutional and the popular public continues to shape current public life on the islands. Through the proliferation of electronic and digital media technologies during the past decades, practices of news and ‘the news’ came to generate a plethora of different outlooks in and on the world – outlooks that open up to and, at the same time, reduce the world (people, production, produce) to the demands of global capitalism.

The analysis presented in Chapter Two ties in with the first part of my main research question, namely *how institutional and popular practices of newsmaking in the public sphere in Curaçao and Sint Maarten* were shaped by the imposition of a capitalist mode of being and, in turn, acted on (and were contested by) by news practices on the islands. Following these traces back is important because they continue to be manifested in everyday public articulations of *common, contested and at times also cathartic senses of belonging*. These are explored in the rest of the chapters of this book.

In **Chapter Three** I explore *how institutional and popular news practices in the public sphere of Sint Maarten generated **contested senses of belonging*** among the middle classes on the island. Using my experiences with the lecture of Dr. Umar Johnson (a clinical psychologist and pan-Africanist from the US) during Black History Month (February 2016) on Sint Maarten as my point of departure, I show how this event was both news and ‘the news’ (as the event was turned into stories in both the

popular and the institutional public). Dr. Johnson was invited by a group of activists who have pushed black nationalist politics into the public sphere. They used to practice news from 'below', aligned with the popular public. Today they are an alternative within the institutional public where they advocate a racialized politics of belonging. A new generation, however, does not feel that this politics of belonging represents Sint Maarten's contemporary reality. During Black History Month on Sint Maarten they challenged black politics by advocating – via practices of news and 'the news' – the acceptance of the island as a highly plural society and a dynamic regional and global junction of relations between people, politics, technologies, and business. Both publics (black nationalists and an emerging younger public) belong to the middle classes. While engaging in contestations based on contrasting politics of belonging, they shared a common understanding of Sint Maarten's public sphere as being private. On this island, it was this common understanding together with a shared language (St. Martiners') English by which the popular public and the institutional public could meet on equal terms through a *political* register.

This was different on Curaçao as I argue in **Chapter Four** which focused on *how institutional and popular news practices in the public sphere on Curaçao generated a common sense of belonging* among the working classes on the island. On this island, popular concerns (news) entered 'the news' through an *affective* register. On Curaçao, the institutionalization of the popular public 'news' via the cultural public sphere took place via 'popular news media' that operated parallel to 'formal-institutional news media' in the bourgeois public sphere. In this chapter, I explore the common sense belonging of Curaçao's working classes in relation to interactions between the (split) institutional and popular public. I do so by employing an existential anthropological approach connected to a phenomenology of hope and fear. The working classes on Curaçao do not organize and seek social change like black nationalists on Sint Maarten do. Their ambition is to live as the elites do, not to topple the structure. It is this mode of being generating a common sense of belonging among Curaçao's working classes that I explore by focusing on everyday news routines around the lottery and the obituaries. Along with being instruments of domination by keeping the lower class in check, these news routines were also employed by the working classes to express a common sense of belonging. This was important as they found themselves thrown to the bottom of the social order of the glasshouse that was Curaçao. To escape their daily reality in this glasshouse, the working classes oriented themselves towards the future in the hope of a better life one day (lottery) and fearing a future that was inevitable (obituaries). Curaçao's popular news media acted on this future orientation among the working classes by providing them the issues of the day,

an ethic of (tomorrow) ‘God Willing’, a future through the ‘university of the street’, and a dream of getting out of this glasshouse someday – that is, by winning the lottery.

What happens when the glasshouse, due to an external catastrophic event, breaks down, is the central focus in **Chapter Five**, where I explore *how institutional and popular news practices in Hurricane’s Irma’s aftermath on Sint Maarten generated cathartic senses of belonging throughout the Kingdom of the Netherlands*. I show that the aftermath of Hurricane Irma led to the exposure and intensification of more popular news practices that, at that moment, served a widespread need for information not only in the popular but also in the institutional public. The sudden and violent disruption of social life as it used to be broke down the glasshouse – and with it the infrastructures upon which the division between these publics existed. The intensification of popular news practices generated cathartic senses of belonging throughout the (Dutch) world. For a moment, all belonged to ‘we’, Sint Maarteners. What happened to these popular news practices and the world we came to share in Irma’s immediate aftermath? These news practices were by no means gone. What did change was that with the reconstruction of the formal-institutional order and its underlying liberal-democratic norms, popular news practices and the (common and cathartic) senses of belonging generated by these, were pushed back into the popular public. ‘News’ was thereby removed from ‘the news’ again. In the institutional public of the Kingdom of The Netherlands, ‘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.

Based on the acknowledgement that apart from ‘the news’ in the institutional public there is always also news in the popular public, this thesis problematizes two prevalent dominant representations about ‘the islands’. The first, is based on ‘spatio-temporal othering’ and continues to buttress public debates, political campaigns, and media representations across the Kingdom of the Netherlands as well as to inform the many ‘development projects’ employed on the islands. In this institutional public the islands are places characterized by lack. The other one is employed by those who wish to counter the first representation by highlighting Afro-Caribbean cultural practices and ‘black’ forms of expression. This is a version of black nationalism. Throughout this book, I show that both these representations tend to ignore how Caribbean communities have always come into being by multiple publics and in between oppression and invention. In daily life on Curaçao and Sint Maarten, news in the popular public and ‘the news’ in the institutional public interact continuously, whilst remaining somewhat distinct. These interacting social processes of turning

events into collective stories may generate common, contested and at times cathartic senses of belonging. To understand the function and meaning of news, as a marker and generator of senses of belonging, it is necessary to take multiple emerging publics and their interactions in the public sphere on Curaçao and Sint Maarten into account. Moreover, these publics connect intimately, yet differently, to the realm of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and a shared past of colonialism and the imposition of a capitalist mode of being. Public life on Curaçao and Sint Maarten and across the Kingdom of the Netherlands has always come into being because of contestation that enables multiple publics to form. And by highlighting these processes of contestation in daily life, this thesis shows that those excluded from the (bourgeois) public sphere, become central to its construction and, in fact, have always done so.