

Radical Imagining in Dutch Caribbean Music

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All of the Antilles, every island, is an effort of memory; every mind, every racial biography culminating in amnesia and fog. Pieces of sunlight through the fog and sudden rainbows, *arcs-en-ciel*. That is the effort, the labour of the Antillean imagination, rebuilding its gods from bamboo frames, phrase by phrase.¹

Because what we choose to emphasize determines our lives.²

Repetition: Making Longstanding Ideas Felt Anew

We forgot to water the plantain shoots
when our houses were full of borrowed meat
and our stomachs with the gift of strangers
who laugh now as they pass us³

We must not forget to water the plantain shoots—a poetic reminder by Audre Lorde. Attending to heritage is the very act of watering, so that we and those who come before and after us might have necessary nourishment. Lorde also teaches us that “there are no new ideas, just new ways of giving those ideas we cherish breath and power in our own living ... only new ways of making them felt—of examining what those ideas feel like” throughout our lived experiences. What do those ideas feel like “while we suffer the old longings, battle the old warnings and fears of being silent and impotent and alone, while we taste new possibilities and strengths”?⁴

Following Lorde, this meditation on heritage and Dutch Caribbean music is not new but is an offering anew. Our musicians and artists have long emphasised the importance of music and performance as part of cultural heritage in their work. Moreover, in 2012 anthropologist and pedagogue Eric La Croes⁵ wrote “Seù ta Muzik Kultural: Lagu’é manera e ta.” He states:

Gobièrnu di Kòrsou i skolnan di Enseñansa Fundeshi meste deklará kuarta, tambú, chapi (agan), wiri i kachu komo artefaktonan musical importante di nos patrimonio kultural i nos herensia kultural. Dor ku e hóbennan ta sigui e tradishon di toka, ku gruponan kultural di

gaita benesolano, boneriano (di simadan i barf) i arubano (di dande, aguinaldo i gaita) tin awendia, tokando nan muzik nashonal kontemporaneo. Konsèrvando asina nan ekspreshon kultural musikal nashonal, toká dor di nan mes hóbennan dje komunidad konserní. Nan ta kai den e area di muzik tradishonal regional karibeño i latino. Esaki alabes ta prevení kriminalidat bou di hóbennan. ... Gobièrnu meste invertí en grande den e sektor kultural aki.⁶

I depart from La Croes for the way he names key instruments and music styles of Aruba, Curaçao, and Bonaire; for the way he directs the musical heritage to the attention of the government and the education system; for the way he emphasises youth participation; and finally, for the way he makes broader connections to the Caribbean region in a poetics of relation—a Glissantian archipelagic relation enabled by music.

Commenting more on the quest for dignity, self-empowerment, self-esteem, and the importance of national and cultural identity for those postcolonial parts of the developing world, Rex Nettleford emphasises the creative imagination in artistic practice. Nettleford notes that such practices not only empower but grant “entire societies a status in the world.”⁷ For this reason, Nettleford argues that arts in education be mandatory. Resonating with La Croes, Nettleford references Sir Arthur Lewis: “A society without the creative arts is a cultural desert ... I would commend to our statement that they put a lot more money into the creative arts department of our secondary schools.”⁸ To this Nettleford adds primary and tertiary institutions, saying: “For it is to the exercise of the creative imagination and the products of such exercise that the now globalized world must turn for a sense of balance that the dissonance and chaos of our world demand.”⁹

Tasked with an assignment to meditate on music and heritage in the Dutch Caribbean, I want to ruminate on the exercise of the creative imagination in Dutch Caribbean music and what such an exercise is generative of. Thus, I ask, at the intersection of Dutch Caribbean music and performance, what quelled knowledges have not benefitted from our generosity? From our careful attendance? There is no question whether music in particular, and the arts more broadly, are integral to heritage, whether the body of knowledge bequeathed to us and maintained are useful to us and those who succeed us. What remains in question however is how music is structurally and socially nurtured. Within the Dutch Caribbean education system, within the governmental realm, and thereby in the social realm there is apprehension of nurturing that which has been established as integral to heritage—a disconnect of great proportions. I have been thinking about what hinders our ability to imagine other possibilities in music, or to think and feel other more liveable futures through music.

I think of the many high school teachers in Aruba who strongly and frequently suggested I limit music to a hobby. I was advised to practice on the side, to not take

music seriously, to not be fully dedicated to music practice as a full-time endeavour. The implication was that I should stunt my practice of imagining. Beyond myself, I think of the many other Dutch Caribbean contemporary musicians and artists who share such stories with me—unnurtured possibilities, still made possible. Popularly cited by teachers, as a way to dissuade, are the logics of capital—money. Within such logics the value of music and art is reduced to a singular one (capital), disregarding music's many other important values, such as: giving meaning to lived realities, and preventing us from living in communities devoid of pleasure, intimacy, love, and erotics.¹⁰ According to Lorde “the erotic is the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge.”¹¹ I take this seriously because Black feminist thought teaches me that love and the erotics are political and crucial to liveability. Lorde asserts that “our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives.”¹² My time playing in numerous panyards has also allowed me to take Lorde's assertions seriously for there is much at stake. Approaching music as restorative and as a resource for and mode of cultivating joy, I want to throw into relief these aspects that have been offered little attention in discussions of music, especially in relation to cultural heritage. Here I attempt to articulate and emphasise the potential of music as a resource and reservoir that we can draw on and from, beyond its economic use and exchange value or its use to eschew criminality. Instead, through music (-making) we can imagine other ways of being and living relationally, such as through Rubén Blades's singing livingness, specifically the contingency of life and the surprises that accompany livingness in “Pedro Navaja” with the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra directed by Wynton Marsalis.¹³ With this example I underscore the relationality between genres (salsa and jazz), an example of sonic relationality.

To meditate on the above, I discuss briefly the work of two contemporary Dutch Caribbean artists, Vernon Chatlein and Sharelly Emanuelson, who are imagining and creating paths towards more possible and liveable futures in their art practice and their use of music therein. Music underpins and is the spindle around which these possibilities are made real; music provides a guide and the possibility to feel yourself, to know your multiple selves in relation to each other, to unwork history and build histories as Glissant instructs us: “the negation of a History and the open dawn of histories.”¹⁴ This presents a shift from the universal of humanity to a transversal community of persons. Engagement with music occurs through documentaries, theatre pieces, performance art, audio-visual installations, live curated DJ sets, and bringing to the fore the sounds of multiple, traditionally made drums—urging us to take pleasure while grappling with coloniality. The work of Emanuelson and Chatlein among others sound out Caribbean being and its complexity, and illustrates a practice of imagining in their mixed media art

practices' engagement with music. I submit that in doing so both artists elude that which impedes our ability to imagine. By briefly touching on Emanuelson and Chatlein's work, I seek to acknowledge the radical creative imagination in their practices, linking this to how we might imagine strengthening Dutch Caribbean music infrastructure for reasons beyond how music subdues criminality or its economic viability as a value good. How does the practice of imagining with music in Emanuelson and Chatlein's work help us to outline the conditions for change? Both artists have had to create their own paths and sustainable infrastructure to do their work; in doing so, they offer the Dutch Caribbean and its Diaspora a sense of togetherness, a collectiveness that further builds the communal.

Lives, livingness, liveability, and *humaning*¹⁵ clipped, disrupted, cut short, curtailed, and abbreviated both during colonialism's tenure and beyond its judicial end is well acknowledged. The music erupts with critiques of coloniality, emphasising the gaping wounds of its legacy. Here I cite Joe Arroyo's "No le pegue a la Negra" also known as "La Rebellion," a repetitive everlasting salsa that frames itself as telling a piece of our history, Black history—"De la historia negra, de la historia nuestra."¹⁶ Here both cyclical and linear time are disrupted in an attempt to make another possible; Arroyo is saying this is not a song of now that wrestles with gender-based violence, femicide, and child abuse. This is the Glissantian time history in practice: "This past, to which we were subjected, which has not yet emerged as history for us, is, however, obsessively present. The duty of the writer [and other artists] is to explore this obsession, to show its relevance in a continuous fashion to the immediate present."¹⁷ Arroyo presents a repetitive chorus of "esclavitud perpetua" that describes abuse, violence, and mistreatment, thereby unworking linear time—there is no past fully separate from the present or the future. This song also sings of the beautiful black man who rebelled, taking retribution for his beloved. It is vital to highlight other practices that create possibilities, so that resisting ongoing coloniality is not the only event that shapes our being. Arroyo's song, which opens with the clave, makes us dance, makes us feel beyond the telling of this piece of history through the rhythmic breaks, the sharp brass, and the cowbell that locks it all together. For all that, music still induces the desire that we might come to overstand ourselves, to connect the Diaspora, to know each other, to know ourselves, to elude the politics of difference, inseminated by colonialism and maintained by coloniality. Here I cite Marley's "Redemption Song" and Chin Behilia "bo ta liber den bo cansion"¹⁸ or "Zikinza,"¹⁹ a scathing critique of coloniality in a dance song—a sensorial mode of critique where our entire physicality is entangled in critical thought-movement. Along with struggles against colonialism and oppression and for judicial emancipation, there continues a reparative practice that unearths feeling, sensation, pleasure, care, tenderness, and love. Herein music generates new ways of being and knowing, offering both

the wound and its mending; there is a continuous effort to repair, to mend. The pleasures of and in creation impede individualism. Creation makes multiple selves possible and establishes a space where we can encounter one another. With this piece I want to attend briefly to the profundity of (Dutch) Caribbean music, its making, practice, and performance and the knowledge that is generated therein. This work in music is a necessary work. It is germinal to how we self-authorise and organise our ways of being in the world. The centrality of the musics discussed here to the necessity of our being, of my being, makes my reflection here possible. Without (Dutch) Caribbean music, I would not have myself. On *tambú*, René Rosalia makes clear that the playing and dancing of *tambú* was important for life, for the future.²⁰ The life-giving and life-affirming must be attended to. The question then remains: How can we move heritage towards a new analytic in discussing and thinking through Dutch Caribbean music (-making)?

A Kaleidoscope of Dutch Caribbean Music

because our land is barren
the farms are choked with stunted rows of straw
and with our nightmares
of juicy brown yams that cannot fill us²¹

The stage is set with some of our instruments: *tambú grandi*, *matrimonial*, *tambú*, and *benta*. I enter the theatre and sit with histories, histories precede and follow.²² During a theatre performance of *Voices from Letter: Zikinzá* at the Bijlmerpark theatre in Amsterdam, I sit, entranced by the performance of the many sounds, musical styles, riddims, and dances of the Dutch Caribbean that are weaved together to tell a story about how the past ruptures the present, and offers new, alternative future possibilities. The presence of histories is intensified by the known voices of playwright Nydia Ecury and poet Elis Juliana, as well as the lesser known voices of interviewed citizens Maria Doran²³ and Elogio Maduro.²⁴ The music departs from and builds on footage of Ecury detailing how attempts were made to suppress the erotic, how dancing *tumba* was scorned; I knew this of *tambú*'s documented history, but not *tumba*'s.²⁵ The necessary hip movements that suggest physical liberation and the ownership of self were often (mis)interpreted as sexual and are frequently still misconstrued. This is a false narrative that has served to historically hypersexualise the region's cultural and performance practices, especially dance. Ecury tells of how all-night parties—gatherings where we practiced co-creating and co-imagining—were interrupted by priests. The men would break up parties and disperse everyone, and with that dissolve the erotic and intimate space—pleasure



Vernon Chatlein playing bari grandi with mounted matrimonial (from video Allan Chatlein)

was thus undone. This is for the most part ignored in today's Dutch Caribbean scholarship, which prefers to focus on resistance against the colonial order.

The erotic is maintained, perhaps remembered, and definitely conjured by Chatlein's playing a *tumba* on the *tambú grandi*, which has a matrimonial tethered to it. The physical presence of the instrument, the sound of the blown *kachu*, the struck *benta* all resonate through the body. How do we care for and nurture that which nourishes us? Chatlein plays this *tumba* around the rhythmic poetry of anthropologist and ethnographer Elis Juliana, specifically the poem "Bekita."²⁶ The poem illustrates the *tumba* rhythm while describing the dancing of Bekita, a fictional character. Designer and performer Laurindo Andrea embodies the character of Bekita while dancing *tumba*. In this scene, dance, music, and poetry come together, to undo the historical disruption of the erotic, which Audre Lorde teaches us is an "internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire [in all areas of life]. For having experienced the fulness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves."²⁷ In less than four minutes, music restores the disruption outlined by Ecury; such a performance is thus reparative in some measure.

To think of heritage and music is to think of feeling, to practice *humaning*, to emphasise the erotic that, as Lorde notes, functions in "providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference."²⁸ In Chatlein and Andrea's

tumba performance, the erotic is brought back—a practice of imagining. The theatre piece relies on Dutch Caribbean music, which is the propeller that moves the play forward and backward and to repeat; music guides each scene and sets the tone and feeling for its multiple themes (mourning, anger, reverence, celebration). The musical scaffolding around the voices is sparing, the recomposing is thrifty, what Morrison describes as “an exercise in restraint, a holding back—not because it’s not there, or because one had exhausted it, but because of the riches, and because it can be done again.”²⁹ Such thrift and restraint while sonically working with the voices, imagining what they can do anew, demands practice.

Morrison described her writing practice as that of a jazz musician, as

someone who practices and practices and practices in order to be able to invent and to make his art look effortless and graceful. I was always conscious of the constructed aspect of the writing process, and that art appears natural and elegant only as a result of constant practice and awareness of its formal structures. You must practice thrift in order to achieve that luxurious quality of wastefulness—that sense that you have enough to waste, that you are holding back—without actually wasting anything. You shouldn’t overgratify, you should never satiate. I’ve always felt that that peculiar sense of hunger at the end of a piece of art—a yearning for more—is really very, very powerful. But there is at the same time a kind of contentment, knowing that at some other time there will indeed be more because the artist is endlessly inventive.³⁰

I extend Morrison’s words to a very musical sense of practice: the dedicated, daily, careful, habitual work of living with music; isolating troublesome passages, breaking down phrases and putting them back together; repeating favourite parts, revising, slowing down only to bring back up to tempo, rehearsing again and again not for perfection but intimacy. I have embodied such practice; I take it with me into the everyday. My meaning of practice stems from my own musicking,³¹ both in the panyard and various music practice rooms. Creative imagination requires practice. In the same way, heritage is practice; this is a lesson that can be learned from the realm of music practice, and more explicitly from contemporary Dutch Caribbean music practice.

Liberté égalité—Maria Doran tells us that on liberation day there was song. Her recorded voice moves through the theatre as she sings us the liberation song. The melody returns in the play so that we can hear it again—anew. What does that melodic return have to do with heritage? What can it convey about the intersection of music, heritage, and the ongoing pursuit of freedom—*Liberté*? Do we recognise this melody? Is it part of us? Does it resonate? What are its echoes? Chatlein’s sound and music ensures that this part of our heritage becomes an integral part of us. In his careful practice of composing around the archived voices we get a *tambú*

that connects Maria Doran's voice with Elia Isenia's. Chatlein performs a *tambú* (genre) while a projection of a pre-recorded performance of Isenia singing the same chorus and clapping runs simultaneously. The *chapi*, a work tool repurposed as a musical instrument, is dubbed into the recording and the *tambú* (drum) is played live. A repetitive chorus, *liberté égalité*, is supported by *tambú*, which locks us in, we can connect to the melody that carries the lyrics, we can move physically and feel our bodies by the rolls of the drum. Morrison echoes Fanon's reminder "that the real *leap* consists in introducing invention into existence."³² Bogues argues that Fanon is "imploing us to engage in the work of the radical imagination to imagine anew what human life could be like."³³ I hear this intervention in Chatlein's use of the sonic past to say something (a)new. *Tambú* is necessary, the drum is necessary, the clapping is necessary, the flesh of palms, the sheep or goat hide—the flesh is necessary to the proclamation, then and now. The voice, the drum, and the flesh of clapping hands connects the present to July 1, 1863, to Maria Doran's voice. There is pleasure in the repetitive chorus, in the sustained rolls of the drum, in Andrea dancing *tambú* and encouraging us, the audience, to participate. Here there is a constant movement from within to outward and back; working with a melody that was sung, then recomposing that melody in a *tambú*, the imaginary occurs in this sound work and ushers in something new, the definition of which we may not grasp now. Because of the form and its potential to carry us melodically, lyrically, sonically, and rhythmically, a space of synthesis is created where, as participants, we stand, dance, and sit with multiple relationships to ourselves, to others who are brought in, to sound, to space, to nature and heritages. Here we can answer Fanon's question: "Why not simply try to touch the other, feel the other, discover each other?"³⁴ This is the work that it takes to imagine the future. Coming together in this particular way, music does the work of helping us imagine futures brimming with *liberté égalité*. In a practice of imagining, we might consider the singing of this song in 1863, as we live what our ancestors imagined then, and relate to our singing the same chorus now. Here we perform a liveability that is yet to come; this can be thought of as a practice of radical creative imagination in Dutch Caribbean music performance. As Chatlein makes clear in his performances and the personal conversations I have had with him, letters are being sent to the future by voices from the past—performing heritages. Kathrine Mckittrick³⁵ says that imagination is "experiential and representational ... an act that is difficult to explain with clarity," so she overstands "the work of imagination as both quiet and agentive (our inner imaginative thoughts are enunciated imperfectly: they outline the conditions for change, they invite us to do)." For the future to be possible it must be imagined now, the sung spirituals taught us this in their practice of "outlining the conditions for change"—imagining in practice.

Departing from Césaire, Robin Kelly makes clear that "it is *that* imagination, that effort to see the future in the present, that I shall call 'poetry' or 'poetic

knowledge.”³⁶ In music, this imagining offers yet another way of knowing to add to poetic knowledge. In the way music practice enables communion, and allows us to co-create knowledge and thereby an overstanding of our multiple selves, music offers another way of being. Heritage is vital to such knowledge, as exemplified by Chatlein’s composing and performing Dutch Caribbean music. At the root of such imagining is the erotic; working in and with sound changes the way we feel; new ways of feeling are embodied that encourage pleasure. In this repetitious *tambú*, the chorus of liberation can disaggregate who we thought we were before musicking, we can co-construct our multiple selves since in music the boundaries of the self are made porous and the distance between self and non-self becomes opaque in that very Glissantian way. Music allows us to constantly create ourselves in that Fanonian way (to embody Bekita or to feel *liberté*, even if only briefly). We make life with and for each other—*liberté*, *égalité*. Music makes that heritage felt; we can embody that feeling and imagine what that liberation was and can be like. Because of the feelings that are made possible herein and the intimacy that is animated by music, it is crucial to think through heritage and nurture the music and erotic power that its practice generates. Wynter offered us the practice of art as a site where a “re-enchanted human” can be realised, where a new poesis of being human is possible.³⁷

Here Wynter’s words resonate with Morrison’s in a talk on *The Foreigners’ Home*, a project on how art and language operate to make us feel at home, which is “vital to understanding what it means to be human.”³⁸ She says: “We are dreaming all wrong. Art is otherwise, all that is left, able to lift the grime and glitter caked under eyelids and halt, thereby, our crippled, crippling dreaming. Truth is otherwise. It risks all to be born, to be unstopably, irresistibly alive.”³⁹

I recognise some of the above in practice in Chatlein’s musicking,⁴⁰ which we can learn from as it informs other discussions. Studying and performing Caribbean music offers so much to how we think about livingness, humaning, different ways of being, freedom practices, sovereignty, and multiple philosophies of love. Thinking through such discussions anew within the Dutch Caribbean can be generative to ongoing Caribbean cultural criticism: by leaving identity for a minute, leaving resistance for a second, and thinking of music and heritage, music practice and climate change effects, or music and the afterlife of disaster, or music and the re-enchantment of the human—especially given the way Dutch Caribbean music lends alternative frames to complicate the overrepresentation of humanity⁴¹—and thereby disaggregate that central and centred human perspective. Through music, sovereignty can be thought anew, the discussion need not exhaust itself in judicial, legislative or political areas. Music fundamentally transforms how we approach such a discussion owing to the way imagining, a radical creative imagining, is enabled, for example, in how nature is sourced to create sound worlds. Bagues

offers that “the work of the imagination operates as critical thought. It imagines and breaks the boundaries/horizons of the status quo of the everyday ... produces new thought and desires.”⁴² I submit that these desires are taken up into the erotic, repeatedly reinscribing it. Lorde reminds us:

But when we begin to live from within outward, in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves, and allowing that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon the world around us, then we begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense. For as we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering a self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like their only alternative in our society.⁴³

In music we can embrace those fleshy things, we can use the erotics and understand that its usefulness is political, as Lorde emphasises.

In addition to knowledge and sovereignty, a practice of freedom is made possible in the engagement of music and heritage and how they are intrinsically bound up with each other. Chatlein’s work underscores how we mythologise our lives by playing with the story of flying Africans; imagining freedom in this way makes freedom felt. Through music practice, performance, and art more broadly we might imagine and create a more just, equitable, free, and magical world—*liberté égalité*. I return to Bogues: “[F]reedom as practice, as a creative activity, operates through the radical imagination. Practices of freedom construct new ways of life for us as humans ... freedom is grounded in a set of human practices that challenges what we are at any specific historical moment.”⁴⁴

The practice of imagining via music catapults us into a kaleidoscope of sound, beauty, and form, a legacy bequeathed to us and heritages that are worked with to realise our multiple selves. When we gather, we share emotional space, and music allows us to feel emotion while immersed in the sound of a *caha di orgel*, *wiri*, or *chapi* as it supports the melody of a liberation song. The thinness and airiness of the *benta* and oscillation of the sound allows us to feel emotion. Such musicked spaces are maintained in the feedback of affirmations—“e Forsa tei.”⁴⁵ Such sharing is not only about self-expression but involves a response(ability), to be reached by that which is a part of your multiple selves—the joining of selves. This music moves, educates, enlightens, and feeds us, as well as shapes the way we understand our being in the world. It traces and works with heritages; it imagines a future where all our sounds and instruments are not silent but archived in living breathing moving forms.

Sharellly Emanuelson uses three compositions by musician Oswin Chin Behilia to co-tell the story of coloniality in relation to film, the archive, the colonial gaze, and the unintended audience that regards itself through that gaze. Emanuelson’s film brings us back to Behilia’s music and its lyrical critique of colonialism that



Sharelly Emmanuelson with one of her works in her studio, 2019 (photo Alex van Stipriaan)

moves one to dance. Behilia's music is used so deftly by Emanuelson that its presence adds another critical layer, opening with *Bendishon Disfraz* (son montuno), moving onto *Vota NO* (son montuno), *Gaña Nan ta Gaña* (rhythmic Seú, with a salsa Antiana instrumentation). Echoing Morrison's instruction that "[o]nly the act of imagination can help me," McKittrick notes:

[W]hen wading through the nested processes of seeing, knowing, unknowing, observing, representing, expressing, sharing, forgetting, erasing (and living with inaccuracies and unresolved problems), it is our imagination that helps us muddle through these complexities. As we wade, it is our imagination that seeks out and affirms already existing freedom practices. Imagination, too, leads to invention (and reinvention). Imagination is not an answer (noun), it is an opening (an act, a verb). And: Imagination does not always lead to representation, explanation, or description.⁴⁶

Emanuelson mobilises long-standing critiques in the way she uses music to support her own critique, making imagining a continued practice through which we can situate ourselves in the world, a modality through which we make the world liveable and habitable. Music enables this and is thus a practice through which we can disrupt the status quo in order to make ideas and critiques heard. Can we mobilise our imagination for the things we deem necessary? It is in art that we move with Juliana and Behilia, the beauty and the sadness, the meditation and the making anew of a song and sound. Both Emanuelson and Chatlein source from the sound and music archive not to regurgitate, not to replicate, not to comfort, but to imagine other possibilities, to create differently.

Possible Futurities

Our skins are empty.
They have been vacated by the spirits
who are angered by our reluctance
to feed them.⁴⁷

Caribbean musics accompany me as I write this and meditate on their importance to our ongoing practice in creating liveable worlds, imagining other future possibilities and music's significance to the whole of our livingness in the region and as Diaspora. For all sorts of reasons, the foremost being migration and continuous movement within the region, Dutch Caribbean music must also mean and include popular music and instruments of the wider Caribbean and Latin America such as calypso, merengue, salsa, timba, bachata, cumbia, reggae, bolero, bouyon, montuno, waltz,



Curaçaoan musicians performing during a commemoration of freedom fighter Tula, one playing a benta, mouth bow (photo Alex van Stipriaan)

mazurka, kadans, kompa, zouk, and steelpan. Rap, hip-hop, R&B, and jazz must also be included together with alternative rock, metal, and EDM. I have chosen to concentrate on more contemporary work that engages and centralises traditional music practices, instruments, and riddims of the Papiamentu/o-speaking islands. Traditional music, mobilised in contemporary art practice, does not often get highlighted in Dutch Caribbean scholarship, and traditional music's potential is therefore disremembered or relegated to no longer existing, a past long-gone practice.

Vernon Chatlein called me one day in a moderate frenzy. An edited collection on Latin-American and Caribbean music that he had been reading “says that benta does not exist, that it is no longer practiced,” he proclaimed with incredulity. To quote specifically, the entry on benta reads: “In Curaçao, another extinct instrument known only through references in the literature is benta, a mouth-bow.”⁴⁸ To deem a living instrument and thereby its sound aesthetic extinct is to extinguish part of a people.⁴⁹ This is the result of inattentiveness, and hence this piece is a call to renew attention, in line with La Croes, Nettleford, Behilia, and a host of others. This piece also suggests the urgency of this call. If we do not nurture our music practices, the misrepresentation from outside scholars will endure. This single musicological reference incited Chatlein’s work on and with the *benta*, to defend and guard the instrument against the extinction that it was relegated to by musicologists. Working against extinction and the immanence of death requires care; further, it is to overstand that at the root of such a politics of care is love, a radical decolonial love. Chatlein’s radical practice of imagining while seeking out elders who know *benta* history and playing, and of learning to make and play *benta* himself, led him to write a proposal for further research on *benta* and being awarded the Urban Arts Talent Grant from the Stichting Fonds voor Cultuurparticipatie, which in turn enabled him to compose a multichapter piece entitled *Voices from Letters*, short for the project’s concept: voices from the past that send letters to the future. The first chapter is *Zikinzá*, a theatre piece that hones in on music to tell the story of liberation through the voices of the *Zikinzá* ethnographic collection.⁵⁰ The second chapter is *Imershón*, a music performance of contemporary compositions that build around the collection’s sound fragments—a sonic ode to our ancestors. Chatlein is thoroughly researching the history of this instrument, acquiring an intimate knowledge of how to make and play it—an ongoing practice of imagining. What but love can spur such work? This transgressive love is outlined by bell hooks⁵¹ and remains little discussed but works towards our growth, contributing towards our becoming what we are not yet. This transgressive love is often dismissed as frivolous,⁵² not worth(y) (of) acknowledgement. However, I contend that a transgressive decolonial love that helps heal colonial wounds and counters individualism and capitalist self-interest, which are strong forces in (re)designing the world of modernity, requires attention when thinking through heritage. Heritage is about maintaining that love that is bequeathed to us by our ancestors’ creative imagination. Those sonic and rhythmic “jewels brought from bondage”⁵³ were birthed in love, a love that had our *becoming* in mind and fuelled a practice of imagining it, especially given, as Lorde makes clear, “we were not meant to be here.”⁵⁴ This practice of imagining is ongoing, making other futures possible and moving us in our process of becoming.⁵⁵

In music we continue to practice this love, remembering those who imagined us into being, those who have passed—as Chatlein plays alongside their voices from the past—working towards becoming our future selves.

Chatlein is not alone: Curaçaoan music educator and traditional instrumentalist Sorandy Sint Jacobs is a multi-instrumentalist, music educator, and contemporary *benta* maker and player and sound designer; Ralph Durgaram works on the Afro Caribbean Samples project.⁵⁶ So often for our traditional instruments there is only one elder, usually a man, who holds instrument and music history knowledge. This should not be the case, and young musicians such as Vernon Chatlein, Lidrich Solognier, members of Kuenta i Tambú, and various projects such as Oruba, Datapanik's caha di orgel project, and the Krosshart project, recognise this. The above musicians and music collectives all source from (Dutch) Caribbean music genres, grooves, and instrument sounds. They recognise the fragility of such music knowledge and thus are working towards extending its sound and thereby our livingness by maintaining musical knowledge practice. Part of this work in music forms bridges across the different islands of the Caribbean. I think here of how this manifests yearly at the Antiliaanse Feesten Hoogstraaten or at the many European carnivals based loosely on the West Indian carnival. The different gatherings that enable us to come together are facilitated by Caribbean music, which is the axis around which meeting and communing occurs; they are where Rebels Band from St. Eustatius can meet Oscar D'Leon and Kes or where I have found myself on multiple occasions in utter sublimation to and with the riddims of the Kassav—Zouk la se sel medikaman nou ni!—connection in music. Music practice must be nurtured so that this connection might continue.

I want to make a case for how we study, nurture, and think through the practices that enable us to make a more liveable world, and to question the labour required herein. I want to take seriously the work that music and musicians do in our practice and thereby the important uses of music to conversations of heritage. Dutch Caribbean music can teach us to pursue sovereignty through heritage, and sovereignty is possible in music praxis. Additionally, the erotic, pleasure, and love must be part of thinking through and creating policy for heritage, especially as it intersects with music. Music animates, promulgates, and crotchets together the gathering that makes imagining possible. How we imagine ourselves is in a circuitous relationship with heritage. We draw from what has been gifted us—our sounds, the materiality of our instruments, and the ways they invite us to move and feel with them as an extension of ourselves, while bound up with our environment. Being attentive to these gifts we can now offer something new.

Feeling is mobilised to transform multiple oppressive social conditions. As I listen, I feel musicians are concerned with making a music that offers alternative possibilities especially in how traditional music is curated and used to carry

histories, disrupt time, and repeat stories—this is heritage. How do we practice livingness and humanity in the face of continued dehumanisation, intensified during and in the aftermath of climate catastrophe, by socioeconomic precarity, unemployment spikes and failing infrastructure, and now a pandemic? We created and continue to create songs and sound from the conditions that demanded their creation, using shells, horns, and calabashes (gourds) to create new ways of knowing, consequently inventing different genres of being.⁵⁷ Tree stems, branches, roots, trunks, oil drums—all these helped us to create intimacy and pleasure through practices of self-authorship that do not rely on the recognition or acknowledgement of the nation-state—working outside the nation-state's imaginary reach. What is at stake if we do not take seriously performance art practice? What if the state were to join in that practice of imagining? What are the possibilities that such a joining would yield? What would it make available to us? Perhaps such a joining will even offer a critical complication of heritage and lead to the nation-state's questioning itself. This is the role of creative imagination, in troubling the still waters, to challenge the ongoing nescience with which art practice is regarded especially in ensuring continuity. The role of the creative imagination allows us to bring into question how we nurture art practice within the Dutch Caribbean. Considering the transformative possibilities of creative imagination, how might imagination usher in a Dutch intellectual tradition that critically questions cultural phenomena such as sovereignty, heritage, and the nation-state with respect to change?

I tender this piece to place some contemporary practices that engage with Dutch Caribbean music in conversation with intimacy, interiority, and care, emphasising the importance of how we sense each other and our environment as part of ourselves, and to stress how the self is extended. With this preliminary discussion on contemporary music practice, I want the reader to experience the way music expands being, thought, criticality, and pleasure. The sonic and rhythmic aesthetic imbues music with futurity as performed by the musicians discussed above. Such aesthetics not only critiques colonial machinations, but are sonic ways of knowing, providing the necessary sustenance for the future that is yet to be realised—this too is heritage.

Thus, from this discussion, I offer some suggestions in closing that would be generative towards the strengthening of infrastructure for music, and the sustainability of performance art practice. Imagine with me:

- An application contingent, government-funded, mentoring and training program between young up-and-coming artists and professional local or regional artists. Such a program, based on an atelier type collaboration, would provide a yearlong mentoring scheme that culminates in a performance week or an interdisciplinary art exhibition. Such a program would ensure the sustainability of the islands' creative industry (theatre, literature, design, performance

art, music, poetry, film, dance, fashion). I imagine the growth of this scheme leading to inter-island encounters and exchanges that would be beneficial to the region's strength as well. This is where cross-generational knowledge, methods, and best practice can be shared across the region. During the program the focus would not only be on practice; courses facilitating necessary knowledge in the different fields of art practice would be conducted. Imagine the Dutch, Spanish, English, and French Caribbean meeting in this way, gathering in such an art-charged space, and to have each Dutch Caribbean island act as host. This could be a moving Caribbean biennale of sorts that emerges from a mentoring program based in the Dutch Caribbean.

- On a smaller scale, master classes in primary schools and clinics in secondary schools would also bring about intergenerational discussions, securing sustained knowledge transmission in a systematic and structured way. This would avoid silos in knowledge of local art practice. Such a program must be supported by a curated syllabus and tailored curriculum for Dutch Caribbean students.
- Formation of high school bands or orchestras, with proper band room facilities that are easily accessible to students. Especially during high school, students must be able to practice and be confronted with live performances of all sorts within their school hours. This suggestion comes from my almost five-year tenure with the Northern Illinois University steel band, where I completed my undergraduate work. Our university steel band would tour high schools in the Chicago area to perform hour-long programs at high school auditoriums. We would engage students in discussion after performing, informing them about the university curriculum, the history and culture of the steelpan (going through the musical function of each instrument voice and the importance of the percussion). Through such engagement with graduating high school students, some chose to attend NIU for their undergraduate music studies. During such play outs we would be invited into the various band rooms and high school rehearsal spaces, or on rare occasions get to listen to students play for us. I was always astonished by the facilities available in some high school music rooms that held a full range of orchestral instruments, including kettle drums and other percussion instruments that became familiar to me only after leaving Aruba. I could not help but compare my high school music experience with those of my peers to whom US high school music facilities provided possibilities. Not only were the resources available but they were used. Students often shared their schedules for practice during their high school stay, which started with “marching band rehearsals at 6am.” Connected to this, I also think of my own childhood afterschool music program at Excelsior Steelpan Academy in San Nicolas, Aruba, which would take a ten-piece youth steel band ensemble

into elementary schools for peer performances, especially in the neighbourhoods where the ensemble was based. The sheer joy that such performances brought remains invaluable.

- A mandatory half-year secondary school music program (as part of the ongoing curriculum), in performance, instrument technology, or basic research, and digitising program would engage students with different areas of music work and research. In this way, there would be a multi-layered engagement with music suitable to students' varied interests. Moreover, this would enable cataloguing and digitising of material that has been left unattended thus far. In such a way, students can conduct small-scale research into local music, its history, and music technology while contributing to securing cultural heritage. Students would learn preliminary research practice and methods, preparing them for tertiary education.
- Funding to support more summer music camps directed toward learning to make and play traditional instruments and music from the region. Such infrastructure would ensure that young people have more possibilities for working within the cultural sectors of the islands, and provide fodder for nascent cultural studies and cultural analysis research programs within tertiary institutions throughout the Caribbean region and among its Diaspora. Such programs need to be accessible to all students.

While some of the above occurs sporadically and unofficially, examples are too few and far between. My suggestions are rather geared towards a sustained and structured engagement with the arts and practice, especially where education is concerned. Such infrastructure is already being imagined, as in a newspaper article Thais Franken asks: "How can Aruba use elements of the Creative Industries in providing positive socioeconomic and cultural development? Especially for our children."⁵⁸ Again, my suggestions are neither unique nor exceptional, but how can I make them felt anew? How can I stress their urgency? I have attempted to do so by not highlighting the popular notion of music's role in producing productive citizens or emphasising its economic potential—this will come, but should not be the point of departure in thinking about music and heritage. Discussing the newly instituted Leerorkest, Franken asks us to "*imagine* national competitions or yearly performances by all schools in Aruba. *Imagine* the community based support this could offer our children."⁵⁹ Imagine further inter-island performances and competitions that culminate in one multi-island ensemble. Franken makes clear that beyond its ability to connect students to each other, instituting the Leerorkest in the education system will connect students "with the musical traditions (cultural heritage) of the country. For Aruba, this could be a tremendous initiative for cultural education with the aim of preserving Aruba's cultural heritage." I am invited here to imagine

further a tailoring of the curriculum to include and make accommodation for local instruments and music genres from Aruba and the Caribbean at large. Building upon the transplanted curriculum beyond singing traditional songs will indeed sustain the musical traditions in a radical way and thereby strengthen cultural heritage. The building, playing techniques, sounds, and potential of traditional instruments from the (Dutch) Caribbean must be taken seriously. There is a great deal at stake in overstanding that the Caribbean is a point of departure and site of instruction and reference. Glissant reinforced my knowledge of this; I knew it in practice as I left the Caribbean to study steelpan at a tertiary learning institution. What I knew in practice was sustained theoretically. Franken's article brings me to Lorde's encouragement to heretical action:

[T]here are no new ideas still waiting in the wings to save us ... as human. There are only old and forgotten ones, new combinations, extrapolations and recognitions from within ourselves—along with the renewed courage to try them out. And we must constantly encourage ourselves and each other to attempt the heretical actions that our dreams [and imagining] imply.⁶⁰

Equipped with a practice of imagining and with the desire to feel fully and sense ourselves, how can such desire move us to new practices concerning music education, appreciation, the formation of new multiple selves, and the building and maintaining of the communal? Once driven by this desire, with erotic knowledge, how might we act on it?

I have offered an account of this radical creative imagining in the work of two Dutch Caribbean artists and how it is bound up with music to suggest how this imaginary can be taken up in tangible ways to create supportive infrastructure for music praxis in the Dutch Caribbean. I suggest that music might be recognised for its role in building the communal. What sort of boundary-free and borderless imagining and imaginary is required to think of supportive infrastructure for music in terms of resources, institutionalisation education, and government sanctioned funding? What would this render?

Hartman urges us to think of and practice beauty as a political act, teaching us that the search for beauty is political. "Beauty is not a luxury, rather it is a way of creating possibility in the space of enclosure, a radical act of subsistence, an embrace of our terribleness, a transfiguration of the given. It is a will to adorn, a proclivity for the baroque, and the love of *too much*"⁶¹—from the imagining that occurs in art- and music-making emerges beauty, which is also a part of self-realisation. In search of beauty, what are we directed to? Is it the beauty of capitalism whose underbelly is land and human exploitation, the depletion of natural resources, environmental destruction, and the separation of selves with self-interest as the main goal? Part of

the beauty of capitalism makes the one-pillar economy possible. Or is the search for beauty germinal to the ways we imagine and create possibilities to make liveable lives, especially in the face of social economic death? Patterson's social death is teachable.⁶² "What we choose to emphasize will determine our lives."⁶³ The poetics of Caribbean literary and performance tradition instructs that we must feed the ghosts, and "not anger the spirits with our reluctance to do so."⁶⁴ This has been an attempt to overstand and explain us to ourselves, to show small morsels with which we might be able to feed the spirits. "The search for the beloved—the part of the self that is you, and loves you, and is always there for you"⁶⁵—occurs in music. Our livingness and the knowledge of this livingness, this humaning is practiced, located, and emblematised in music.