Building on the Power of the Past: the production and politics of heritage on a Dutch Caribbean Island

Bethanie G. Aggett and Walter Van De Leur

ABSTRACT
Lying off the coast of Venezuela in a prime ‘sun, sea, and sand’ location, Curaçao is a popular tourist destination with a complex past. Since its colonisation by the Dutch in 1634, it has seen slavery, abolition, a civil rights movement, industrialisation, and severe environmental damage. All the while it has served as an exotic escape for wealthy travellers. In 2010, a high-profile European jazz festival came to the island and drew a large, international crowd. The success of this first Curaçao North Sea Jazz Festival (CNSJF) sparked a new commercial strategy by the Curaçao Tourist Board to grow the industry and in recent years, more events began to spring up on the island. One of these was Punda Jazz Vibes, which is a free event run by local residents (by contrast, CNSJF tickets cost $195 per night). This paper examines the discourses that surround and connect these events, with special focus on the production and mediation of cultural heritage in the wider tourism infrastructure that supports them. We demonstrate the political nature of heritage production on Curaçao and show how the festivals are implicated in a long history of colonial and postcolonial exploitation, thus questioning the social impact of the tourism industry at large.

Introduction

The principal aim of this paper is to illuminate some social and political impacts of festival tourism on Curaçao, through the uses and re-uses of cultural heritage. We will focus on two closely connected (but very different) festivals that we attended in September of 2016: the Curaçao North Sea Jazz Festival (CNSJF) and Punda Jazz Vibes (PJV). We will discuss them in the context of the larger economic strategy to which they belong, one that was catalysed by the arrival of CNSJF in 2010. Indeed, our initial interest came from the fact that the American owned, Dutch-run North Sea Jazz organisation successfully transported its brand, infrastructure, and equipment some 8,000 kilometres across the Atlantic to a former colony. Given Curaçao’s past of slavery by Dutch rule, and today’s complex relationship it has with its European ‘motherland’, it could be said that this move has neo-colonial undertones. Our analysis will show the layers of complexity surrounding this debate, central to which will be the use, mediation, or silencing of certain forms of cultural heritage.

In our investigation, we understand these festivals to be examples of what George McKay calls ‘heritage and cultural consumption and production at “TAST-related sites”’ – TAST stands for Transatlantic Slave Trade – ‘where the core cultural offer is jazz music, jazz being a transatlantic mode formed through the forced migratory exchanges of slavery and triangulation’ (McKay 2018).

Our analysis will centre around two basic questions: first, ‘whose heritage?’ and second, ‘whose festival?’ The first discussion will sketch the discourses that surround Curaçao’s heritage of slavery.

CONTACT Walter van de Leur w.vandeleur@uva.nl

© 2019 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.
and colonialism, and the way it is presented within the (festival) tourism industry. We will bring to light ideas about authority and ownership over heritage; who does it ‘belong’ to? Further, we will show some of the contradictions that occur when dealing with sensitive forms of cultural heritage and the ‘selling’ of locations to foreign consumers. We will argue – building on existing literature (Urry 1990; Meethan 2001; Sheller 2003, 2012; Jaffe 2006) – that the portrayal of Curaçao reflects the centuries-long exploitation of the Caribbean region by external powers. Our critique of a report published for the country’s tourism board reveals a problematic relationship between visitors and residents, again reflecting the colonial roots of tourism itself (Sheller and Urry 2004, 21) and its ‘gaze’ upon people and landscapes (Urry 1990). Our analysis supports Sheller’s argument (2012, 210) that ‘tourism can be understood as a form of embodied encounter between foreign travellers and local people that involves corporeal relations of unequal power’.

The second discussion will outline our experience of attending the Curaçao North Sea Jazz Festival and Punda Jazz Vibes, demonstrating our (outsider) perceptions of the way in which these two spaces are used by festivalgoers, ultimately asking: who are these events for? One of CHIME’s aims is to investigate the kind of synergies and frictions that arise when heritage sites and festivals interact. While Punda Jazz takes place within a UNESCO World Heritage Site located in Curaçao’s capital city of Willemstad, North Sea Jazz uses this heritage in promoting Curaçao as a location to potential consumers, yet it is based a few miles away in a contemporary conference centre. Thus, in order to comment on the social impact of these events, we will be exploring the complex links between Curaçao’s heritage, the festivals, and the tourism industry. We argue that tourism and festivals on Curaçao are not simply outside intrusions getting in the way of heritage, but rather are continuous with the island’s legacies of slavery and colonialism.

‘Cultural heritage’

The need to preserve forms of cultural heritage continues to be of great concern to tourism sectors, charity organisations, governments, and scholars around the world. The designation of UNESCO World Heritage Sites configures heritage preservation as a ‘global’ issue, allowing the value and significance of these sites to transcend national borders. Conversely some forms of heritage preservation serve to bolster national pride, strengthen local communities, and maintain elitist institutions. Cultural heritage is a commodity that is crucial to the tourism industry yet at the same time threatened by it; indeed, preservation strategies can often cause more harm than good. Marco D’eramo (2014) believes a UNESCO status can be the ‘kiss of death’ for ancient sites, and George Monbiot (2017) wrote that the England’s Lake District UNESCO designation would be a ‘betrayal of the living world’. The organisation’s homepage lists over 1,000 heritage sites, designated as ‘natural’, ‘cultural’ or ‘mixed’, ranging from mountains, to jungles, to cathedrals (UNESCO ‘World Heritage List’). It furthermore distinguishes between ‘tangible’ heritage – objects such as sculptures, monuments, and historical cities – and ‘intangible’ heritage, referring to oral traditions and cultural rituals (UNESCO ‘What is meant by “cultural heritage”?’). This somewhat rigid categorisation, however, does not always allow for the more complex and political nature of heritage. As Tony Whyton describes (2016), cultural heritage is ‘a contested subject, bound up with concepts of memory, belonging, cultural value and the politics of power, history and ownership.’ The concept is beginning to be seen not as a static object or idea that signifies the past, but rather a dialogue or process, occurring in and inextricably linked to the present (Smith 2006, 1). Notions of cultural heritage are socially constructed; we assign meaning and importance – often sacred, nostalgic, emotive – to objects, places, and behaviour. All heritage, as Whyton argues (2016), is ‘intangible by definition’. This understanding is important for our analysis, not only when thinking about slavery-as-heritage, but also when considering the way in which meaning is assigned to different cultural heritage sites, for instance leisure spaces, festival spaces, or ‘guilty’ spaces. We would argue – in line with Sheller and Urry (2004) – that such spaces and their meanings or associations are not static. ‘Places to play’, as they refer to them, ‘are
continually reinvented, respatialized, and remobilized through the structuring narratives of colonial histories, through the legal frameworks of postcolonial law, and through the international frameworks of neo-colonial governance’ (Sheller and Urry 2004).

**Curacao and Dutch imperialism**

In 1997, the ‘Historic Area of Willemstad, Inner City and Harbour, Curaçao’ was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The organisation’s website states that, the ‘Historic Area of Willemstad is a colonial ensemble in the Caribbean, which illustrates the organic growth of a multicultural community over three centuries. It also represents a remarkable historic port town in the Caribbean in the period of Dutch expansion with significant town planning and architectural qualities’ (UNESCO ‘Historic Area of Willemstad’). The word ‘organic’ is rather odd since the development of Curacaoan society was based on the forced migration of enslaved Africans. This ‘period of Dutch expansion’ – proudly termed the Golden Age – roughly spanned the seventeenth century and saw the Dutch empire grow into an economic superpower. The Dutch conquered Curacao in 1634 and began exploiting its central strategic location and natural harbour. By the 1650s it had become an important slave ‘depot’, supplying human labour to the rest of the Caribbean (Blakeley 1998, 475). It is estimated that during the transatlantic slave trade between 500,000 and 1 million Africans passed through Curacao (De Jong 2010, 202). It is important to note however, that the island was not just a stopping place; many were enslaved on plantations there and treated abhorrently by landowners and government. When abolition occurred in 1863, almost seven thousand Afro-Curaçaoans were freed, yet for many the only prospect was to continue living on plantations ‘with very few rights and many obligations’ (Allen 2012, 52). Often, they were forced to continue supplying unpaid labour (Smeulders 2013, 154). As Allen (2012) notes, abolition ‘did not in itself mean that one was automatically considered a citizen of the society’: there was strict legislation against miscegenation, voting, and recreational or religious activity regarding. Keeping a strict distance between whites and blacks was part of government policy to ensure a ‘strong colonial constitution’ (van der Dijks 2011, 504), and this ideology of segregation would continue into the twentieth century, well after such policies were abandoned. Indeed, unequal treatment of black citizens was partly the cause for violent protests in 1969. The so-called May Movement, was an important moment in the country’s modern history. Arguably then, Curacaoan society is one ‘thoroughly structured by the processes of racialization’ (Pierre 2012, 1). It is helpful to note her argument (2012, 4) that local configurations of race are determined by global hierarchical relationships. Pierre (2012, 3) stresses the importance of European empire-making in cementing an ‘international system of power and the attendant White supremacy through which it is enacted and experienced.’ Indeed, considering Curacao in its wider context of imperialism, the African diaspora, and a global tourism industry, naturally leads us to a highly complex relationship between tourists and local residents, that is wrapped up in ideas about race, class, and identity.

An important and controversial event in Curacao’s more recent history was the construction of an oil refinery operated by Royal Dutch Shell in 1918, which became a lifeline for Curacao’s economy and employment in the twentieth century. Today it is falling into disrepair and the government is currently seeking foreign investment in order to save it and the two thousand local jobs it provides. Located a stone’s throw away from the island’s tourist ‘strip’, it has been heavily criticised for its appearance and toxic impact.

The port of Curacao, then, that once saw the arrival of slave ships and was crucial to the triangular trade, remains busy. Today, colossal tankers and cruise ships litter the horizon, waiting their turn to pick up oil or deposit tourists. In July 2018, members of the Dutch Royal Family visited Curacao to attend the grand opening of a new cruise terminal, the Mega Pier Tula.1 Costing around fifty million dollars, it can receive the world’s largest cruise ships, meaning up to four thousand passengers in a single day could potentially visit Willemstad. This investment, like
Curaçao’s festival scene, is part of an attempt by the government to boost the economy after years of decline in all sectors. In the past, Curaçao has usually fared better than other Caribbean countries, mainly due to its oil refinery and financial services industry. However, currently it is facing difficulty due the uncertain future of the refinery and the Venezuelan crisis, bringing potentially thousands of refugees to an island with a population of 160,000. The unemployment rate has risen to 14% – among the highest in the region – and there is a feeling of resentment from some citizens towards the Netherlands. As one resident expressed to a local paper in September 2018, ‘This is not right, somebody made a mistake while negotiating our political status fifty years ago. We are in a Kingdom together, we should all be on a high standard of living’ (‘Arab Business Owners Are Suffering’). This reflects the contentious relationship between post-colonial societies and their former colonisers; gaining independence and increased autonomy does not, of course, mean a clean and easy ‘break’ from the motherland. Curaçaoan society continues to navigate confusing economic, political, and cultural ties to the Netherlands.

**Culture catalyst**

The Curaçao North Sea Jazz Festival was established through a collaboration between the Dutch corporation Mojo Concerts and Curaçao-based Fundashon Bon Intenshon (FBI), with the specific intention of attracting more tourists to the island. This was not a new idea; both St Lucia and St Kitts in the Caribbean had been successfully holding tourist-oriented festivals since the 1990s (See Weyer 2011; Baker 2015). The first edition of CNSJF was held in September 2010 at the World Trade Centre, a conference location outside Willemstad. The two-day event featured Lionel Richie, John Legend, George Benson and Simply Red. Ten thousand people attended, of which over two thousand were tourists (Croes, Rivera, and Semrad 2010, 7). The total, accumulative, contribution to Curaçao’s economy since the festival began is estimated at over $80 million and the event has been called a ‘rare accomplishment in the global music festival landscape’ (Croes et al 2013, 1, 4). Since 2012, FBI and Mojo have established two more festivals on the island, a Curaçaoan edition of Rotterdam’s International Film Festival, and the island’s own Curaçao International Blue Seas Festival. It is FBI’s mission to put festival tourism on the island at the ‘forefront of the international arena’ (Croes and Rivera 2013, 6), and through these events they aim to ‘put Curaçao on the map as a holiday entertainment destination in the Caribbean’ (Williams 2014, 24).

In order to assess the CNSJF’s impact, FBI, and the Curaçao Tourism Board organised research through the University of Central Florida, which published six reports (by Croes et al) specifically about the CNSJF, highlighting the successes and failings of each festival, and offering recommendations to the organisers for subsequent years. These culminated in another report in 2015 titled *Curaçao: Building on the Power of the Past*, which outlines a new tourism strategy for Curaçao, citing the CNSJF as the ‘crown jewel’ of the tourism industry and emphasising Curaçao’s entertainment and nightlife opportunities (Croes, Rivera, and Semrad 2015b, 5). This particular report will be discussed in more detail later, but it is our view that the CNSJF had a catalytic effect on the growth of festival tourism on the island. Indeed, travel writers and tourism agencies tend to portray Curaçao as the entertainment ‘capital’ of the Caribbean region. As the *Events Curaçao* website states, the CNSJF ‘has become a signature event to be proud of, since it places Curaçao in the international spotlight and cementing [sic] the island as a must-go Caribbean destination.’

**North Sea Jazz’s ‘tropical edition’**

The CNSJF website states that ‘good music combined with the tropical atmosphere on the island makes the formula a huge success.’ Reviews and travel websites promote a similar ethos: “Taking in this event on this glorious island can offer a dream-like experience: fantastic beaches; the inviting waters of the sea; fine food; plenty of activities by day; and fine music in a great setting by
night’ (DeLuke 2011). Arguably then, the event’s selling point is not so much the perfect or ideal location for jazz music, but rather, music in paradise. It is also clear that such reviews are not aimed at Curacaonoan residents. The CNSJF website supports this as it introduces the location to potential consumers:

What is so unique of Curacao? Authenticity. For centuries there is a rich, hospitable and vibrant culture. The heritage is partly European and partly African and the island has more than 50 nationalities. . . . The greatest thing about exploring Curacao is that you get the feeling that not everything has been discovered. The island is . . . a piece of untouched paradise. Relax and feel yourself at home between the working, playing, and enjoying inhabitants – do the same as they do for generations: relax! (‘On Curacao’)

Despite its globally connected port and sizeable oil refinery, Curacao is depicted as a quaint, colonial town, to be discovered by tourists. As Meethan (2001, 165) argues, presenting a place as ‘authentic’ and pre-modern is a typical strategy of the tourism industry: ‘the apparent lack of economic and industrial development in certain places is ‘assumed as a state where social identities and cultures are considered to be “natural” and hence unproblematic’. Indeed this representation of Curacao echoes the way in which the image of the Caribbean has been constructed in the western imagination since colonialism. Jaffe argues:

The pearly white beaches with swaying palms and the lush tropical forests have constantly served as a background for European and North American profit and pleasure, adventure and romance. The orientalist, exoticising gaze of early adventurers and colonists is replaced in the twentieth century by that of tourists in search of hedonistic escape from their built-up homelands. (Jaffe 2006, 116)

But part of Curacao is heavily industrialised, and hence there is a contradiction between the tourist image and reality. Jaffe further notes that ninety percent of Curacaoans live in urban areas, and citizens from low-income neighbourhoods often don’t consider their surroundings as ‘edenic’, but rather as ‘cityscapes that can be characterized as blights: marked by a combination of social, economic, and environmental ills’ (Jaffe 2006, 116). Indeed, considering the island’s history, it is anything but the ‘untouched paradise’ the CNSJF website advertises. Such representations reflect a contradiction at the heart of the tourism industry, since such untouched places, sold to consumers, cease to exist.

Jaffe argues that in the global imagination, the lives of Caribbean locals (mentioned in North Sea Jazz’s depiction of Curacao) consist of ‘fun and games on the beach’ (Jaffe 2006, 115). This utopian image, however, ignores Curacao’s history of slavery and brutality during colonial rule. The idea that Curacaoans have been ‘relaxing’ for generations either erases enslaved people and their descendants from the country’s history (and by default, most of Curacaoan society), or reduces them to simple, happy, and exotic. This text, then, is implicated in what Sheller and Urry (2004) call the ‘politics of the picturesque’: Curacaoans are objectified as part of the natural landscape, which ultimately constitutes a form of subjugation.

In silencing Curacao’s past, the CNSJF website links to a much wider discourse about the mainstream acknowledgement of slavery. This is especially meaningful in a Dutch postcolonial context, which includes the myth that the Netherlands have a ‘clean’ colonial history of trading, rather than enslavement. That myth builds on ideas of ‘Dutch tolerance’, that the Netherlands are ‘colour-blind and anti-racist, a place of extraordinary hospitality and tolerance toward the racialized/ethnicized other’ (Wekker 2016: 1). She argues that this tolerance can be stubbornly maintained among the white population, whilst ‘denial, disavowal, and elusiveness’ regarding Dutch colonial history reign supreme’ (Wekker 2016: 1). Indeed, while the Dutch Golden Age is an important focus for school history classes, its connection with slavery and colonialism tends to be lacking (Lin et al).

Curacao has seen similar issues. Smeulders (2013, 153) notes that up until 1998 not a single museum on Curacao exhibited the experience of being enslaved, despite being located at sites that were closely linked to that history. The island’s past was presented entirely from a white Dutch perspective, and brutal aspects of it were glossed over or ignored. Thanks to pressure from
activists and government interest in ‘cultural tourism’, progress has been made in bringing the Afro-Curaçaoan experience to prominence in society, in the form of museums, monuments, and cultural events. However, there remains an interesting spectrum of heritage displays on the island. We saw the impressive Landhuis Ascencion, a privately-owned house open to the public that was listed on Curaçao Tourist Board’s website as an old plantation with a short history regarding its role during slavery (‘Landhuis Ascencion’). This information was entirely void at the house itself, however, which functioned as a gift shop, and showed pictures of tourists having barbeques, advertising the home for holiday rentals. Another was Landhuis Savonet, again who’s history was stated on Board’s website (‘Landhuis Savonet’), but had a vague and confused focus at the location. The museum – funded by the Dutch government – featured information about former Dutch residents that seemed to romanticise aspects of colonial life, alongside information about post-abolition practices of Afro-Curaçaoans, but nothing about experiences during slavery, though hundreds of slaves lived and worked there. McKay (2018) gives similar examples of silencing a slavery-tainted past in tourist promotion for Georgian cities in Britain.

The Kura Hulanda museum is the first on the island to include slave histories (as of 1999). Dutch entrepreneur Jacob Gelt Dekker had purchased an entire neighbourhood and had intended to finance the building of a hotel and spa. Discovering the location was a former docking place for slave ships, he then envisaged a museum. Though the importance of this location is discussed in online news articles (Ceaser) and tourism websites (Lonely Planet), it was unclear at the site. A signpost welcoming guests was titled ‘The Restauration [sic] of Paradise’ and celebrated Dekker for bringing a ‘beloved, historic neighbourhood back to life’. It was inviting guests to experience the beauty of Dutch colonial architecture, rather than delve into a painful history: ‘We call it Paradise Restored... why don’t you go ahead and make it Paradise Explored’. Beyond this was the museum which, though informative on the transatlantic slave trade and the African diaspora, did not address Curaçao’s unique role. In contrast, an excellent museum called Kas di Kunuku was completely Curaçao-specific. Through a guided tour from local scholar Jeanne Henriquez, we learned about the physicality of everyday life in colonial times, from the perspective of Afro-Curaçaoan citizens. As if to correct UNESCO’s glossing over the painful history of Willemstad, Kas di Kunuku welcomes its visitors with a hand painted mock-up of a UNESCO heritage-site sign.

The Parke di Lucha pa Libertad (fight for freedom) – a park and monument dedicated to the memory of slaves – was difficult to find. Located well away from the city centre and UNESCO site, it was hidden behind an industrial plant (no signposts, Google maps drew a blank) – and poorly maintained. Finally, a fairly new museum that is dedicated to the story of Tula, a slave who led a revolt in 1795 and is considered a national hero, was closed on a Saturday (we were there at the end of the tourist season). These sites stir up many questions, such as: who are these museums actually for? Tourists or residents? Presenting slavery as cultural heritage and effectively selling it to the public is problematic; whom does this history belong to, and who has the authority to talk about it? Assuming it is only ‘right’ for such histories to be prominent and accessible can be shortsighted. As Smeulders notes, some Curaçaoan residents find museums that present slavery offensive, since that reinforces certain racial and class hierarchies related to the roles of the enslavers and the enslaved. She asks:

Do these new slavery representations bridge, or rather reconfirm, boundaries like education, income and age between classic museum audiences and non-museum regulars? Consequently, do they bridge, or rather reconfirm, boundaries related to the subject of transatlantic slavery, such as racial identification and national identities between classic museum audiences and non-museum regulars? (Smeulders 2013, 166)

It seems that some of these museums simply represent tick a box of sorts, with the exception of Kas di Kunuku. These ‘guilty’ spaces were usually owned by (white) Dutch enterprises which serve tourists’ needs, thus any engagement with history is likely to be aimed at visitors rather than residents. For us, one very contrived moment was the ‘Historical Walking Tour’ located at the grounds of the four-star Renaissance Hotel and Spa (atop a fort dating back to the seventeenth
century). Plaques spaced around a patch of grass gave a short history of Curaçao. Though well intentioned, it was feeble, and perhaps an attempt to create a fully self-contained resort with everything holidaymakers need – including some ‘cultural’ aspect. With its private beach and shopping mall, guests don’t necessarily have to venture out into the ‘real’ Curaçao.

**Jazz roots, festivals, and slavery**

Does North Sea Jazz then have a responsibility to engage with the island’s past? As a Dutch enterprise profiting from a former colony, the simple answer might be affirmative. More conceptually, as a European company showcasing African diasporic art to an international audience in Central America, this festival is a continuation of the centuries of transatlantic exchange, and is ultimately implicated in a cultural dialogue that dates back to the slave trade. George McKay writes that jazz is ‘historically, firmly, in fact violently, located, in the forced and murderous mass migration of transatlantic slavery’ (McKay 2018).

Remarkably, another festival conceived by Mojo Concerts and Fundashon Bon Intenshon (FBI) a few years after CNSJF’s success chose to directly engage with slavery in its marketing. The Curaçao International Blue Seas Festival began in 2015 and hosted blues and rock and roll artists, mostly from the US. FBI’s homepage advertised the event claiming that ‘the blues’ were ‘finding its way back home!’ to continue that,

> While New Orleans holds the position as the main blues and jazz festival centre in the world, Curaçao has the ambition to take that position for the Caribbean and Latin America. After all, Curaçao has played a special role in the development of the blues. In the 17th century, Curaçao served as an intermediary in the trade and transport of slaves from West Africa to, among other countries, North America. The slaves brought along their own stories and music. Continuing to share these expressions was the only way to communicate among themselves and to show solidarity in their suffering! (‘Curaçao International Blue Seas Festival’)

In stark contrast to the North Sea Jazz example, this festival is almost boasting its connection with slavery, and by default, with an authentic kind of blackness; an attempt to legitimise the production of a blues festival on the island. Bares argues that North Sea Jazz reflects ‘postpolitical’ European ideology. ‘Hardly overtly racist, [yet] patronizing in its rational appropriation and apportionment of the world’s cultural inventory according to European worldviews’ (Bares 2015, 368). We might extend this argument to other festivals produced by Mojo Concerts which, in both ignoring and exploiting the heritage of slavery, reflect the aforementioned contradictions in Dutch society regarding its unacknowledged, unresolved colonial past.

**The tourism master plan**

That the CNSJF is seen to play a fundamental role in the tourism industry is made clear by the aforementioned 2015 report, *Curaçao: Building on the Power of the Past*. It outlines a five-year ‘Tourism Master Plan’ that will make Curaçao ‘the most desirable destination in the Caribbean’ (Croes, Rivera, and Semrad 2015a, 3), and suggests a new ‘identity’ for the island – ‘Curaçao, a Different Dutch Caribbean’ – all thanks to the CNSJF:

> The festival has become the crown jewel of the Curaçao tourism industry and has opened the door for the island to promote itself as the destination that owns the nights in the Caribbean. Curaçao has the opportunity by way of the festival to fulfil the tourists’ need for nightlife better than any other island of the sun, sand and sea destinations in the Caribbean. (Croes et al 20156, 5)

It seems that the CNSJF has given the tourism industry the cultural capital needed to target a wealthier audience, and the report makes it clear where this audience should come from:

> ‘Curaçao, A different Dutch Caribbean’ is an appropriate tagline for Curaçao in that it captures many elements that the American tourist looks to consume while on vacation. The ‘Caribbean’ component of the
tagline represents the ‘sun, sand, and sea’ that is pre-set and desired in the American consumer mind. The ‘Dutch’ component of the tagline represents the stability, safety, and organization that is appealing to American tourists. And, the ‘different’ component in the tagline represents the emergence of a new destination that possesses the eclectic culture and charm that is unique to Curaçao. (Croes, Rivera, and Semrad 2015a, 73)

It goes on to describe the desires of the American tourist, who ‘would like to have access to the beach and water activities during the day and would like to shop, dine, socialize, and engage in entertainment activities at night where they may interact and mingle with locals’ (Croes, Rivera, and Semrad 2015a, 73). The report establishes a clear tourist-local dichotomy, based on what Sheller (2012, 212) calls ‘unequal relations of looking’. She argues, that

The way tourists and local people face each other, look at each other, hear each other, smell each other, or touch each other are all part of the power relations by which forms of gender and racial inequality are brought into being along with national boundaries of belonging and exclusion. (Sheller 2012, 210)

In fact, in all seven CNSJF reports produced by Croes et al, the residents of Curaçao are consistently referred to as unique, eclectic, vibrant, colourful, and authentic. As hooks states, ‘within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture’ (hooks 1992, 21). Similar to the CNSJF’s depiction of Curaçao, the heritage of the island is glossed over and turned into a desirable trait, a ‘rich history’ anchored in ‘deep Dutch roots’ (Croes, Rivera, and Semrad 2015a, 73). This Dutchness prevents Curaçaoans from being too exotic. Ultimately it is black difference packaged in white familiarity, for the safety and enjoyment of tourists.

Also problematic is the ‘demobilization’ of locals according to tourists’ freedom (Sheller and Urry 2004, 18). They write that Caribbean bodies are scripted as ‘perpetual service workers within the global economy’ (Sheller and Urry 2004, 17). Indeed, the report states that Curaçao’s offer of a ‘memorable experience’ is the ability of tourists to ‘freely encounter locals and interact with Curaçao’s culture. Due to the nature of the tourism industry, many of these tourist encounters with locals are made through service-based employees’ (Croes, Rivera, and Semrad 2015a, 80). However, the report deplores that employees often lack ‘service mindedness’ and ‘approachable and engaging body language, mannerisms, or communication’ (Croes, Rivera, and Semrad 2015a, 38). The report advises an ‘aggressive conversion of the status quo’ regarding the service skills, attitudes, and mind-set, and ends with a series of rather dramatic warnings, worth quoting:

Today’s [tourism] market [should] provide … raw and untouched cultural authenticity … [which] should make locals proud. The history and the heritage represented should give reason and cause for locals to celebrate. And, if the locals are willing to create a platform that invites tourists to share and feel the local Curaçao culture, the experiences will be memorable for all involved. (Croes, Rivera, and Semrad 2015a, 91)

If the people of Curaçao cannot fathom the beauty of the natural resources that Curaçao possesses, or the eclectic culture that has emerged from an ethnicity fusion that is so rare … [then] Curaçao may never emerge as the tourism powerhouse that it is capable of becoming. (Croes, Rivera, and Semrad 2015a, 95)

On the one hand, Curaçao may opt to do nothing. However, the price will be steep and irreversible with regards to impact rates on high unemployment, wasted talents, and increased pessimism amongst locals. On the other hand, Curaçao may choose to operationalize the proposed plan … The power of tourism may well be Curaçao’s greatest hope to free its people from the pain of unemployment, wasted talents, and pessimism. (Croes, Rivera, and Semrad 2015a, 5)

The idea that locals are uncooperative with the ‘vision’ of the tourism industry and thus choosing a disadvantaged lifestyle is fairly insulting, and the implied credo of conservative capitalism – work hard and you will succeed – obfuscates any wider socio-political barriers. For instance, the report attributes the presumed lack of ‘service-mindedness’ to perceptions among residents that service industry work ‘is somehow akin to servitude, and is therefore neither a desirable nor respectable employment’ (Croes, Rivera, and Semrad 2015a, 38). This is the closest the researchers come to engaging with Curaçao’s past. Clearly, the insinuation of laziness or indifference on the
part of Curaçaoan locals perpetuates a racist stereotype. A UNICEF study of Curaçaoan society from 2013 noted that the other social and ethnic groups on the island consider Afro-Curaçaoans to lack discipline, drive, and independence, and that this stereotype incites much of the racial discrimination that occurs in Curaçaoan society (UNICEF 2013). van der Dijs found that low self-esteem and an ‘inferiority complex’ was a prominent social issue among Afro-Curaçaoans, and that other ethnic groups saw this as ‘adherence to a history of slavery’ (van der Dijs 2011, 220).

Finally, the implication that Curaçaoans do not understand or appreciate their own landscape – or how the exploitation of it can benefit them – harks back to colonial ideologies. As Jaffe writes:

Amazement at the untouched character of such regions morphed into a justification for European subjugation of the landscapes and even humanity. Precisely the fact that the ‘natives’ had not managed to alter and subdue the natural landscape, as the colonisers had done at home, proved their inferiority and served as rationale for colonialism. (Jaffe 2006, 114).

The report reduces Curaçao and its people to serving the needs of tourists. It thus links to Sheller’s argument that political, economic, and cultural ‘ties’ that bind the Caribbean to other places are premised only on ‘practices of consumption’, specifically of the region’s landscapes, cultures and people (Sheller 2003, 4). She explains that early explorers, colonialists, and tourists,

Enjoyed privileges of moving through the islands both by land and sea, gaining a kind of overview (or ‘viewing platform’) that allowed them to construct ‘local’ people as rooted to the place, unchanging scenery as ‘natural’ as tropical nature itself was made to appear . . . such relations of asymmetrical gazing continue to inform relations between tourists and Caribbean inhabitants. (Sheller 2003, 4)

The festivals: Curaçao North Sea Jazz

We analyse the examples above as a form of place-making by the festival and tourism industry, in which some characteristics of Curaçao and its people are promoted, while others are ignored, in order to create an attractive image to wealthy international tourists. Though the Tourism Master Plan promises to benefit residents, it will not do so on their terms. The locals must adapt in order to serve the needs of visitors, and to make the industry a success. The festivals, which attract mostly Curaçaoan residents, are actually not intended for them, but rather are designed to give the island global cultural capital by attracting the right crowd. The CNSJF has a ticket price of 195USD per night, which will close the door to many residents.\(^5\) Perhaps the island’s small size in relation to the economics and infrastructure supporting the (global) brand of North Sea Jazz intensifies this. With high-end hotels offering all-inclusive ‘VIP’ holiday packages that include CNSJF tickets, transport to and from the festival and access to private beaches, many attendees can avoid contact with the urban reality of Willemstad entirely. Curaçaoan journalist and resident Jermaine Ostiana argues that the festival organisers are well aware of the country’s social inequalities, thus the event promotes ‘social exclusion with pride’ (Ostiana 2013). He argues:

Four years straight consistently the [NSJ] organization has been wilfully neglecting the working-class, 95 per cent will not save money to buy a $195 ticket (one evening) even if rough economic times allows them to. Obviously most people never heard of Raphael Saadiq, they don’t know who The Roots are and can’t recite any Erykah Badu lyric . . . simply because media platforms don’t play their music and festival organizers until now never saw the value in schooling Black poor folks to these ‘new’ U.S. Black musical sounds . . . No, they won’t go to a Jazz fest after party in Renaissance even if Questlove from the Roots will be on the one and two’s spinning wax. Probably that’s the organizers goal too, to keep the class apartheid intact. (Ostiana 2013)

Some residents, however, are proud that such a high-profile event is held on Curaçao, especially because internationally renowned musicians are able to see the island (Williams 2014, 25). Curaçaoan scholar Rose Mary Allen comments that people save up in order to attend, and there is pressure to look your best (Allen 2016). This was certainly evident when we attended the event in 2016. Both men and women were dressed to the nines – long gowns, sharp suits, perfect hairdos; contrary to our
expectations, the jazz festivalgoer cliché of the middle-aged white man in shorts and a festival t-shirt was hard to find. The large majority of attendees were young, black, and glamorous. In the outside seating area beside cocktail bars and craft beer stands, the Curacaoan language of Papiamentu was prominent, suggesting there were many locals attending, and surprisingly there were lots of children, also in their best clothes. Though an expensive family outing (there was no discounted children’s ticket) this was clearly an important event on the island’s social calendar. It felt as if everyone knew each other – this was place to be and be seen on a Friday night in Curacao.

People queued up near a large CNSJF logo in order to have their picture taken in front of it, and there was a photo booth where groups were taking snaps with ‘jazz’ props – cardboard trumpets and saxophones – against a backdrop of sponsors’ logos. The merchandise stall was busy from the moment the festival gates opened, with people browsing CNSJF branded items – t-shirts, coffee cups, hats, and baby clothes. Clearly, attendees displayed pride and ownership over the brand of the festival, but seemed to care less about some of the music it represents. Kurt Elling and Branford Marsalis’s concert – arguably the most ‘jazz’ on the bill – was used by many audience members to loudly catch up with their friends, reducing the performance to background music (which visibly irritated Marsalis).

The main attractions were artists from the surrounding Caribbean region. An all-star Cuban line-up opened the Friday night with a concert titled ‘Our Cuban affair’, and the Columbian artist J-Balvin drew the largest crowd on the Saturday. Many artists spoke Spanish to the audience and would call out countries, asking people to identify themselves (‘Make some noise if you’re from Cuba!’). A celebration of Caribbean or Central-American music and identity ran through the whole event, far more than the glorification of American or European jazz found at other festivals. This not only highlights the significance and power of the North Sea Jazz brand but also the complex relationship between jazz, festivals, and place. For those who can afford it, this event is a chance to engage in the sophistication that ‘jazz’ affords – not necessarily its music – all well away from the urban reality of Willemstad.

**Punda Jazz Vibes**

Our second festival experience on Curacao was Punda Jazz Vibes (PJV), an event first held in 2015 that, according to the festival reports, was evidence that locals were accepting the presence of the North Sea festival and cooperating with the tourism industry’s vision:

Finally, the host destination stakeholders other than the festival organizers are grasping the ‘connect’ value … facilitating the creation of a destination-large ambience that enhances the experience of festival attendees both at and outside the festival! (Croes, Rivera, and Semrad 2015b, 4)

The ‘outside the festival’ experience refers to PJV, an event organised by the local bars and restaurants in Punda, the capital’s oldest historic urban district – a UNESCO Heritage World Site full of narrow streets and open squares surrounded by colonial architecture. However, contrary to the kind of utopian picture that the tourism industry paints, and the impression of World Heritage status might give, Punda is also a busy urban centre. There is an abundance of neon-signed shops, casinos, fast-food outlets, dilapidated buildings, and construction sites, and heaps of traffic. As online promotion for the event advertised, this festival brought the music ‘downtown’, in a distinct contrast to the uptown, suburban location of the CNSJF. The festival was held two nights before the CNSJF and was partly geared towards creating excitement for the ‘main’ event: bar staff wore CNSJF t-shirts, the programmes included the CNSJF line-up, and each night there was a raffle to win tickets. Entrance was free, and you could easily move between the small stages located within the historic district. The line-up comprised of just four local bands playing jazz standards, blues, funk, and pop, and the audience consisted of friends and relatives supporting their local performers (tourists were the minority).
JJ COOL and the Jazz Collective was advertised as a ‘legend’ of Curaçaoan jazz on home-made posters stuck up around town, and the Gedion Chandler Jazz Trio boasted the ‘the best pianist in Willemstad’. Indeed, the home of the musicians was celebrated during their sets, which lent this event a feeling of local pride. This was a chance for the city’s musicians, who have no access to the CNSJF stages, to play for a decent audience – including some who had travelled to the island for the prestigious CNSJF.6

While promoting the CNSJF, PJV offered a starkly contrasting festival experience that in retrospect was crucial to our analysis of Punda, and how jazz, heritage, festivals, and tourism are connected on the island. While it was no match for the size, glamour, and globalism of the CNSJF, this local event embodied different sentiments and historical meanings of ‘jazz’ and ‘festival’. Both audience and performers dressed and behaved informally: the former requesting tunes, the latter inviting friends onstage, and the bands stuck around to watch one another. Tourists and residents, performers, and spectators, all seemed to participate in this festival on an equal footing, and this inclusivity made it a success. Punda Jazz highlighted that this UNESCO World Heritage Site is the living and working home of its residents, rather than a time-locked colonial town on display for visitors.

Not only physically, but also culturally, the two festivals occupy different spaces, and interact in such different ways with the tangible and intangible heritages present on the island, that they help us to ask questions around tourism and heritage. For us, as outsiders, Punda Jazz Vibes interacted in meaningful ways with the complex colonial site in which it took place. Contrary to the report’s aims of creating more events and thus a ‘destination-large ambience’ for tourists, PJV’s main outcome – in our view – was creating a space for residents to reclaim ownership of their city centre. In its blurring of the tourist-local dichotomy, then, this festival seemed to subvert, if only very briefly, the ‘colonial matrix of power’ (Baker 2015, 88) that the tourism report upholds. North Sea Jazz may loom large on T-shirts and programs, and PJV may be positioned as an appetizer, but in the music and audience interaction that whole world was absent or was reconfigured, and PJV steered away from tourism narratives and big festival economic models. For us, attending Punda Jazz seemed to highlight the foreign and temporary nature of the large festival across the bay: North Sea Jazz will pack up and disappear, the local musicians will stay.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined a complex relationship operating in Curaçao between tourism, festivals, and heritage. The first discussion outlined the confusing and conflicting ways in which slavery is presented in the public sphere, and analysed a tourist-oriented narrative that is wrapped up in an unacknowledged colonial past, which therefore perpetuates certain (colonial) relations of power. The second discussion presented our experience of two festivals, neither of which subscribed to the vision of the ‘Tourism Master Plan’. At both festival sites, the one-sided, unequal relationship between tourist and local, in which locals are reduced to supporters rather than participators, was either inverted or reconfigured. While the CNSJF was the exclusive event of the year for the middle class and up, Punda Jazz Vibes – though not cast in protest language – felt like a polite rebellion for everyone and anyone else.

Our analysis has shown the power of festivals, in their occupancy of a certain space, and the social activity they promote, to reconfigure certain traditional or assumed relationships to history, cultural heritage, and heritage sites. Not only does the CNSJF exploit the historical relationship between Curaçao the Netherlands, but that the festival’s specific purpose was to improve tourism further implicates the event in the island’s history of consumption by external forces (Sheller 2003). North Sea Jazz needs the island’s heritage in order to promote the event and its location as unique, and enhance its own first world modernity (Baker 2015, 96). The actual event, however, is detached from this local history – both physically and metaphorically – lending itself rather, to a pan-Caribbean expression of identity, and perhaps
also the performance of an international construction of blackness (see Pierre 2012). Though the line-up might not reflect jazz to so-called ‘purists’, it could be said that the event facilitates an afro-diasporic connection to the roots of the music and by default, the slave trade. Like other festivals in the region, the CNSJF may well be capitalising on the Caribbean as a popular destination for African Diaspora heritage tourism (Wever 2011, 180). This entanglement of tourism, festivals, and heritage, then, undoubtedly stirs up questions about ownership, identity, and colonial aesthetics (see Baker 2015).

Unexpectedly, the 2017 edition of the CNSJF was cancelled, reportedly since not enough artists confirmed (‘Curaçao North Sea Jazz 2017 cancelled after all’) which highlights not only the fragility of festivals but also of the tourism industry on Curaçao. The festival(s) then, perhaps cannot be seen as sustainable, long-term investments. Returning to the social impact of festivals and the tourism industry at large, ultimately it is big business that claims to benefit the local people, yet its activity is rarely for them and never on their terms. As Ostiana argues of North Sea Jazz:

The festival expose[s] how Dutch-Creole white supremacy operates. That’s not helpful to advance the blackness of Curaçao on a national level. The moment the organisation realizes that black folks need to run their own festivals you will see how identity politics will have a prominent place within these spaces. [The organisers are] in it for the money, not for the validation of black lives. (Ostiana 2016)

It would have been a powerful outcome if Punda Jazz Vibes had taken place without the presence of the CNSJF in 2017, but it was cancelled too. The 2018 CNSJF edition went ahead (featuring Sting, Shaggy, and Christina Aguilera) and dates have been announced for the August 2019 edition. Punda Jazz is back on as a one-day event on the calendar for July 2019 with no clear connection to the CNSJF. However, the partnership of North Sea Jazz and Fundashon Bon Intenshon continues to organise new festivals on the island: Festival di Pueblo, for example, was held on the 2 July 2018 on Curacao Flag Day, a public holiday that celebrates the founding of the island by the Spanish in 1499 (over a century before Dutch colonisation). With the program advertised in the local language of Papiamento, featuring local music and dance groups, this free one-day event aims to celebrate the island’s cultural heritage. Whilst stirring further questions regarding the island’s power structures the role of North Sea Jazz in Curaçao’s tourism industry, this can perhaps be seen as a small step towards a more holistic, grassroots, and inclusive tourism industry in Curaçao.

Notes
1. Tula was a slave who famously led a revolt in 1795 – and was then brutally murdered by governors of Curaçao. He is considered national hero. The name of the pier was chosen by the public.
2. While decolonisation occurred in 1948–54, in 2010 Curacao became a fully autonomous country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands.
3. North Sea Jazz is owned by Mojo Concerts, which is owned by Live Nation Entertainment, an American company worth over $11 billion.
4. It is unclear how this research was financed. On some of the reports it says the researchers did it ‘pro bono’ and on others it says ‘prepared for’ by the Curacao Tourism Board, or FBI.
5. By comparison, a three-day festival pass for the 2018 edition of the North Sea Jazz Festival Rotterdam (15 stages, over a thousand artists) costs €215.
6. The CNSJF used to have a stage dedicated to Curaçaoan artists, but this was discontinued in 2013, which we were told disappointed some residents.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.
Funding

This work was supported by an EU Cultural Heritage Joint Programme Initiative award for a project entitled Cultural Heritage in Improvised Music Festivals in Europe (CHIME); European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme [Grant agreement No 699523].

Notes on contributors

Bethanie G. Aggett is a music teacher. She has a bachelor’s degree in Music from Durham University and a master’s degree in Cultural Musicology from the University of Amsterdam, through which she specialised in jazz historiography, postcolonialism, and festivals.

Dr Walter van de Leur is the first Professor of Jazz and Improvised Music in the Netherlands, at the University of Amsterdam (UvA) on behalf of the Conservatorium van Amsterdam (CvA), where as co-founder of the school’s master’s research programme, he is research coordinator and teaches various jazz historiography electives.

References


