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Playing the Game: An Anthropological Exploration of Youth, Sport, and Play

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EDITORIAL: PLAYING THE GAME: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF YOUTH, SPORT, AND PLAY

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I am a distance runner, and one of the most essential pieces of being able to succeed as a distance runner is having an excellent crew; you simply can't run 50 kilometers or more without help. As the editor of NEOS, I am proud to present this issue to you. However, I would like to highlight the incredible team that has worked together to make it happen—a team I enjoy working with and would not be able to do this job without. Since the 2024 NEOS issue, this team has experienced incredible highs and lows, including completed dissertations, multiple international relocations, many, many job searches, and the publication of several books (Tender Labour: Migrant Care Work, Filipina/o Young People, and Family Life across Borders - Jennifer E. Shaw, 2025 and Anthropology in Sporting Worlds: Knowledge, Collaboration, and Representation in the Digital Age - Sean Heath, Co-Editor, 2025).

If you are in academia, you are likely familiar with navigating some of the things on that list, so you know how challenging and stressful these big moments can be (however rewarding they also may be). The NEOS Editorial Team tackled all of those things and still showed up to put together this issue. For that, I want to say a huge "THANK YOU" to Jenny Shaw, Alexea Howard, Manya Kagan, Anne Marie Bedard, Alana Walls, Sean Heath, and Jessica Chapman.

In this issue, "Playing the Game: An Anthropological Exploration of Youth, Sport, and Play," we present anthropological and interdisciplinary research focused on children's and youths' experiences with sport, play, recreation, and physical activity. We requested submissions that incorporated the various elements of controlled, free, and divergent sport and play. Collectively, the pieces that you will read address a range of children's and youths' experiences navigating agency and identity through their engagements with sport and play.

The issue begins with an invited commentary by Shamira Naidu-Young, who provides a concise overview of the relationship between the field of anthropology and the fields in which children and youth participate in sports and games. Naidu-Young helps make a case for why sport is a valuable focus of study for anthropology.

The first two research articles examine situations in which youth utilize their experiences with sport to challenge existing social and structural limitations. Julia Faulhaber's ethnographic study shows how, through the shared experience of playing football, young men in Jamaica forge connections across social boundaries, revealing how sport can be used to reshape oppressive structures. Sebastián Fuentes and Franco Balaguer's ethnography takes place in a private Argentinian high school with a sports-based curriculum, showing how sport in education becomes

a way for youth to navigate societal values around competition, discipline, and success, while often reinterpreting norms related to those values.

Next, Xiaojie Tian's article about Maasai children in Kenya invites us to consider how work and play may blend together, challenging our understanding and definition of the concept of sport. Tian argues that physically demanding chores are actively shaped by Maasai children to function as sport-like activities, highlighting children's autonomy and embodied learning practices.

The next two articles take us to Brazil and Madagascar, where we see children navigating gender through games. Fernanda Müller and Rafaela Nunes Marques walk us through a schoolyard checkers game in Brazil, where the game becomes a stage for reconfiguring gender hierarchies. Valentina Mutti shows how girls in Madagascar use play and a storytelling game (*kitantara*) to explore and question gender roles, mobility, and morality. Both pieces demonstrate how play becomes a medium for gendered cultural production, resistance, and envisioning change.

The theme of play as a tool for resistance and reinvention is continued in Nicole Sanches's piece, showing how Statian youth in Sint Eustatius use costume, dance, and playful performance at a Christmas parade to reconfigure and renegotiate expressions of tradition and post-colonial identity through symbols like Sinterklaas and Santa Claus.

Our issue concludes with a pair of connected commentaries. Angel Sobotta explores how play, story, and movement can be harnessed as powerful educational tools in teaching the Niimíipuu (Nez Perce) language and culture to Niimíipuu youth. Sobotta introduces us to the land-based learning practices that are part of culturally responsive teaching, as exemplified through the Nez Perce Language Program. Sobotta's commentary is paired with a creative writing piece by our NEOS Intern, Jessica Chapman, based on an interview with Sobotta and a retelling of the story of 'iceyéeye (Coyote), a Niimíipuu character who embodies curiosity, creativity, and play.

I hope you enjoy reading and reflecting on these pieces as they connect the world of sport and play to the world of children and youth. This collection of articles highlights how useful sport can be as an arena for young people to exercise agency and challenge overplayed social and structural norms.

Finally, I invite you to consider joining the fantastic team that I began this column talking about. NEOS is looking for new team members! We will be sending out an official interest form and call for volunteers for the positions of Co-Editor, Assistant Editors, Peer Review Coordinator, and Peer Reviewers in the Fall through the ACYIG ListServ, so make sure you are signed up for that. In the meantime, if you think you would be interested, please feel free to reach out to me for more information (acyig.editor@gmail.com).

These are trying times. Remember, in order to tackle difficult things, we need people supporting us. Who are you supporting today?

Take care,

Chelsea Cutright
NEOS Editor

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ACYIG ADVISORY BOARD UPDATE

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NEOS Readers,

ACYIG has been steadily plodding along but has been stymied by the need for more Board Membership: we are looking for a new Convener (my term is ending soon), a new Convener-Elect (a new position mandated by the AAA for Interest Groups), a new graduate student representative (our last one has become a professor!), and a webpage manager. Membership on the ACYIG Board is not strenuous and is a great way to demonstrate national-- and international-- service, which is often required for successful tenure and promotion consideration. Email me at Ida.Leggett@mtsu.edu if interested.

In other news, the ACYIG Board is organizing a childhood/youth conference, we are investigating the process required to transform ACYIG from AAA Interest Group into a Section, and we will be sending out a call for our ACYIG Book Prize at the end of the year.

If you are attending the 2025 AAA Conference in New Orleans in November, we will have some events for you:

- Our Zoom ACYIG Business Meeting will be held the week before the Conference to avoid scheduling around travel plans and presentations
- The ACYIG Board has organized a Roundtable on Methods in Childhood and Youth Studies
- We will be holding an ACYIG Reception at the AAA Conference, at which we also invite you to bring flyers of your research monographs for display and promotion

If you have recently published research on children or youth, please consider participating in the Spotlight on Scholarship feature on the ACYIG website created by Julie Spray. Take a look at the latest feature at https://acyig.americananthro.org/spotlight-on-scholarship/, and if you would like to showcase your research, please visit the author guidelines page to submit your work. For more information, you may contact Julie at julie.spray@universityofgalway.ie.

One final question for NEOS readers: Are you part of a 2025 AAA Conference panel, workshop, or roundtable on childhood or youth? Please let me know if your session has been accepted for presentation at the Conference, and ACYIG will publicize it to our community. Again, my email address is Ida.Leggett@mtsu.edu.

Ida Fadzillah Leggett

Convenor – ACYIG Advisory Board

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THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN ANTHROPOLOGY AND SPORT (FOR DEVELOPMENT)

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The Connections Between Anthropology and Sport (for Development)

Over the past decade, there has been a huge increase in interest in what anthropology can bring to the study of sport, recreation, and physical activity. Despite this, sport has traditionally occupied a tenuous position within anthropology (Besnier et al. 2018). Within anthropology, sport has tended to either be perceived as detached from the seriousness of everyday life and therefore not a viable area of study, or, when deemed to be socially relevant, it has typically been viewed as undeserving of serious contemplation due to its associations with play, and is therefore seen to be frivolous (Carter 2002). In order to explain the increased interest in the anthropology of sport, in this commentary piece, I will discuss the innate connections between anthropology and sport. I suggest that anthropology is suitable for studying various phenomena within sport and that considerations of sport can also inform broader questions within anthropology. I will highlight Sport for Development (SfD) as a specific area of sport that anthropology is particularly well suited to researching, but has received relatively little attention to date. Of particular relevance for this publication, the study of SfD also has important implications for the anthropology of children and young people, given that young people are the focus of most SfD interventions. Finally, by way of a conclusion, I will discuss the increasing formalisation of the sub-discipline of the anthropology of sport.

The Anthropology of Sport

Modern sport has become a global phenomenon. This geographical spread is one of the fundamental connections between sport and anthropology. Anthropologists have historically studied societies in the Global South, making them well equipped to study sport in diverse cultures and locations. ‘Universal’ or ‘modern’ sports were imposed upon many Global South countries by the Global North, and as such have clear ties with colonialism (Bale & Sang 1996; Carter 2002). However, it has been shown that indigenous people adapted colonial forms of sport to suit their own aesthetics and conditions (Cunningham 2016; James 2013 [1963]). In many contexts, these adaptations of ‘universal’ sports are played alongside indigenous sports and movement practices. Such cultural and embodied practices have long been the remit of anthropology. As Carter (2002, 413) notes, “sport is one way for people to embody locality as well as to locate bodies in socially and spatially defined communities.”

The challenge of reconciling and understanding both local sport practices and global sporting power chains reveals another way in which anthropology is useful for studying sport. Anthropologists are concerned with the details or the "imponderabilia of everyday life" (Malinowski 2014 [1922]) in defined communities, while attempting to place these concerns within larger global processes and movements. While anthropologists have not traditionally been concerned with sport, ethnographic methods as well as holistic and cross-cultural theoretical perspectives common in the discipline can provide critical insights into the study of sport at both the local and global scale (Carter 2002).

'Sport *for* Anthropology'

Besnier et al. (2018) suggest that sport can be used *for* anthropology, meaning that we can ask broad questions through the lens of sport. They contend that "a distinctly anthropological approach, with its specific research methods, theoretical frameworks, and holistic thinking, can utilize insights from the constitution of sport as human action to illuminate important social issues in a way that no other discipline can" (Besnier et al. 2018, 7). In support of this contention, recent research within the anthropology of sport has explored issues that have played a central role in anthropological theory such as global mobility (Besnier et al. 2020; Hopkinson 2020), kinship (Hopkinson 2019), trust (Crawley 2024), and gender (Sehlikoglu 2021; Willms 2017). These concerns are also fundamental aspects of sport, indicating that the central concerns of anthropology and sport are interwoven. As such, anthropological approaches to studying sport may help us better understand the social relations, economic webs, political processes, and symbolic structures in which sport operates and is embedded (Besnier et al. 2018).

Anthropology and Sport for Development

The anthropology of development is an established subdiscipline of anthropology, and one that is intimately linked with the anthropology of sport in the context of the growing field of SfD. SfD can be defined as "a global field of activity that uses sport and physical activities as tools or areas of social intervention, primarily with young people, to promote non sporting social goals, such as gender empowerment, peace-building, health education, employment skills, and the social inclusion of marginalised communities" (Giulianotti et al. 2019, 412). SfD differs from broader development in that it tends to focus its efforts primarily on children and young people. As such, ethnographic methods are well-suited to studying SfD, as they capture everyday practices rather than relying only on interview data or monitoring and evaluation reports, which inevitably provide only a partial picture of participants' lived realities. SfD interventions also often claim to have a wider sphere of influence than solely the participants themselves. An anthropological approach

allows researchers to engage with community members beyond the intervention, allowing them to understand broader perspectives and gain a more in-depth understanding of the impact that SfD interventions may have on the communities in which they operate. In my own research, a socio-anthropological approach to studying SfD enabled me to establish meaningful relationships with my interlocutors and interact with both young participants and community members, gaining insights that likely would not have been possible had I taken a different methodological approach.

The Formalisation of the Anthropology of Sport

The growing interest in the anthropology of sport (or sport *for* anthropology) and the inherent connections between anthropology and sport, which I have highlighted above, have led to the subdiscipline beginning to formalise. In 2020, the International Network of Sport Anthropology (INSA) was founded and now has over 200 members. While there is no peer-reviewed journal for the anthropology of sport, a growing number of articles from within the sub-discipline are being published in both sport and anthropology journals. Additionally, INSA aims to establish a journal dedicated to the anthropology of sport in the future. While sport traditionally held a tenuous position within anthropology, the growth of the subdiscipline seems unstoppable, and the inherent connections between sport and anthropology are undeniable.

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Author Biography

Shamira Naidu-Young is a PhD Researcher at Durham University. Her current research focuses on understanding how Sport for Development (SfD) interventions impact the lives of girls and young women who participate through an ethnographic case study of Boxgirls Kenya, a SfD organisation based in Nairobi. Her PhD research is funded by Laureus Sport for Good. Her wider research interests focus on the intersection of inequalities and sport. She is a member of the Editorial Board for the Journal for Sport for Development.

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Original Research Articles

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BEYOND VIOLENCE AND STRESS: HOW FOOTBALL PROVIDES A SAFE(R) SPACE FOR YOUNG MEN IN JAMAICA

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Abstract

This article explores the role of football as a multidimensional safe space for male youths in Kingston, Jamaica, against the backdrop of systemic challenges such as classism, homophobia, and everyday violence. Drawing from extensive ethnographic research conducted with a youth football academy in Kingston, this study investigates the social dynamics that foster care, inclusion, and safety within football teams. It demonstrates how football, as a communal activity, challenges entrenched socioeconomic divides and hypermasculine norms, providing opportunities for mutual support, emotional safety, and identity negotiation. The findings highlight football's potential to temporarily mitigate the effects of societal violence and class-based segregation, promoting an environment of solidarity and empowerment. By examining football through the lens of safe(r) space theory, this article underscores the importance of leveraging sports as a tool for community regeneration and social cohesion in post-colonial societies like Jamaica.

Keywords

Football, Jamaica, Safe Space, Sport, Youths, Care

Introduction

The day I started writing this article, a three-minute video from the Jamaica Premier League in cooperation with the Arnett Gardens FC popped up in my Instagram feed. The video, uploaded for the occasion of International Mental Health Month, aimed to make a statement about the importance of taking care of each other to prevent suicide. It featured two footballers, one apparently successful player and another who struggled with his performance on the field. The end of the clip thematized the unexpected suicide of the supposedly successful player. The video underscored the importance of mental health awareness, not just in society in general, but in football in particular, a theme that resonates strongly within my ethnographic exploration of football as a safer space for young men in Kingston. This article investigates the social dynamics within football teams that challenge entrenched classism and homophobia, fostering spaces of care and inclusion. I want to discuss, through my ethnographic experiences, the potential of certain

football contexts providing a safe(r) space[1] for young men in Kingston, Jamaica, and why this might be needed. The guiding question is: Through which social interactions does football become a safe space for youths in Kingston, Jamaica? Drawing from ethnographic data, I argue that football fosters inclusion, mutual care, and resilience against systemic challenges such as classism, homophobia, and societal violence. I am not trying to argue that football provides a space free of homophobia. This is not the case for Jamaica, nor is it the case for Germany, Europe, or elsewhere in the world. Hegemonic ideals of masculinity and sexuality are prevalent and strong within football everywhere.

Methods, Ethics, and Positionality

This article is based on several years of research experience in Jamaica. The overarching interest of my field trips usually concerns topics related to gender, especially masculinities in Jamaica. For a little over a year, I have been collaborating with a football academy in Kingston. There, I accompanied one under-seventeen team to games, training sessions, and many other activities. The team consisted of players with diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Some of them came from well-educated, affluent, and privileged social backgrounds, others from inner-city areas with difficult social and financial circumstances. This team composition is because members of the football academy have to pay an annual fee that typically only financially well-off families can afford; however, the coach occasionally accepted boys in his team who perform extraordinarily well in football but whose parents cannot afford the membership fee.

Through participant observation, informal interviews with players and parents, and detailed documentation of training sessions, I examined how football contexts shape social interactions and identity formation. I normally attended three training sessions a week, each lasting two hours. I always tried to get to the football field first and be one of the last to leave so I could "chill" with the boys before and after training. In addition to the training sessions, there was usually a game on the weekend that I accompanied them to. During the training sessions and games, I took quick notes on my phone that I wrote up as proper field diary entries in the evenings. I also audiotaped some of the conversations I had with the team (after asking for permission). This longitudinal approach allowed for nuanced insights into class dynamics and the negotiation of masculinity within Kingston's football culture. Given the sensitive nature of topics such as homophobia and

[1] Referring to (Spaaij and Schulenkorf 2014) *safe space* is conceptualized as a multidimensional process that involves physical, psychological/affective, sociocultural, political, and experimental dimensions. The term "safe" raises some critical thoughts. While "safe" implies an absolute state where harm is entirely absent, "safe(r)" acknowledges that efforts can reduce harm and risk but do not guarantee total safety. The latter framing is considered more accurate and honest since no place can be entirely free of risks, dangers, or discomforts.

violence, building trust with participants was essential. I addressed this by maintaining transparency about my research objectives and ensuring confidentiality in all conversations.

On a very practical level, I had a great experience spending time with the boys. They were funny, charming, entertaining, joking, intelligent, inspiring, and very talented. I enjoyed every minute that I spent with them. From my first encounter with them, it was less than a week before I got my first fist bomb as a greeting, another few days until they called me "auntie," just a few more training sessions until they told me I was part of the team, and another month until they were braiding my hair on car rides. Even though I am not very useful when it comes to football, I tried to help wherever I can. I shared my water, food, and sunscreen; I eventually paid for bus fares, or took care of their valuable belongings during matches or training; I brought back missed balls during training, sewed ripped apart bibs, offered my care to injured players, or carried and prepared the water, ice, and other things they needed on the field during game day. But most importantly, I took pictures. I brought a small but decent digital camera to the training sessions and games, with which I took pictures of the boys. In the beginning, I asked for permission and explained my plan to later upload the pictures to an online cloud where they could download them from. They loved the idea and agreed to me taking pictures.

Nevertheless, there was a certain power dynamic that is apparent, as I am a white, European researcher doing research in a postcolonial setting. I needed to be aware that my presence potentially evoked situations or statements that needed to be understood in relation to my person and position. It was crucial to identify and reflect on the multiple, diverse, and even contradictory positions of power and privilege that I occupy in the field. Identifying my position and the characteristics that situated me both inside and outside my research site are important factors in scientific inquiry and interpretation. Further, there is the question of representation, responsibility, and entitlement. Who am I, and what gives me the credibility to represent and write about the lives of my interlocutors? To write about the everyday life experiences, dreams, challenges, and aspirations of teenage boys in Kingston?

Here, the hierarchy and the power of the academic came into play. Some dynamics unfolded in the field that are specific to each of the mentioned "characteristics" of mine, which affected the way people interacted with me in multiple dimensions. Those dynamics were predominantly to my advantage, since I was seen as an outsider most of the time. This excluded me from representing a threat, as I was not seen as competing with them for status, reputation, career, or material values. Most of the time, people were interested and open about interacting with me and discussing topics and ideas with someone from a different social and cultural context. While being white is the most apparent feature of me, it was not necessarily the most outstanding. The boys "are used" to white people. Most of them have white classmates, white teammates, and the coach is white. So, while being white is outside the norm, it is still normal. Even being a woman on (or next to) the football field is nothing unusual. Being a foreigner doing research was the most special feature and issue of interest for my surroundings. Usually, at the beginning of every encounter, I was assumed to be

a scout. After clarification, the boys and their parents were usually really interested and open to talking to me.

Doing research with underage persons (rather than on them, about them, or without them) comes with special theoretical, ethical, methodological, and legal requirements (Christensen and Prout 2002). Theoretically, beginning with the Chicago School of Sociology that rose to importance in the early twentieth century and continued throughout the 1960s, interest in youth began to emerge but tended to reinforce the view of youths as primarily passive agents (Kaya 2001). In more recent studies (Bucholtz 2002; Marshall 2016; Stodulka 2017; Lancy 2018; McAteer, Loudon, and Higgins 2023), notions of young people have changed. Youths are no longer seen as passive receptors of parental culture but rather as active agents who are capable of producing, reproducing, and articulating their cultures (Kaya 2001). It has even been argued that the study of children and adolescents is crucial to understanding key cultural values and conflicts (Gilliam and Gulløv 2022; Hardman 2001 (1973)). This line of thought influences my analysis, in which I attempt to understand Kingstonian adolescents not just as passive respondents to social pressures, but rather as active agents in reproducing and bargaining values and cultural practices.

Football—Context of Care

It was on a very hot morning in February 2024 that I went to a football game of the under-fifteen team of a football academy in Kingston. They played in a friendly game against one team of another Kingstonian football academy. After the game, the coach distributed new jerseys to the boys. They had an upcoming Europe trip, where they would play against different teams of European clubs. Therefore, it was important to have new and good-looking training suits and jerseys. They were given three sets of clothing, varying in color and sleeve length. This was a good occasion for the boys and the coach to shoot some pictures for social media, the team's homepage, and any other occasion footballers would need pictures of themselves for. I had the honorable task of helping out and taking the pictures, which meant that I was taking the pictures of the boys in arrangements that the coach was directing me to do. Individual pictures, whole team pictures, pictures in groups according to the position of play, and so on. The whole action turned out to be a lot of fun for the boys. They could pose, make fun of each other, and showcase their new pieces of clothing.

Then, the coach and the boys decided it was time to take pictures of the boys according to the high schools they attended: one picture with the Kingston College boys, one with the boys from Ardenne, one with the boys attending Jamaica College, one with the Campion College boys, and so on. Finally, the turn was to take a picture with the students from Vauxhall High School. It was only one boy. Vauxhall High School is known as an inner city, or "ghetto," school. Out of all the boys on the football team, this student was the only one who attended a school known for its less privileged and affluent social context. The boy went in front of the camera to get his picture taken.

Just before I could take the picture, another boy jumped beside the first boy and said with a big smile on his face, "I stand with Vauxhall." I found this remarkable. With this small interaction and sentence, he challenged Kingston's deeply entrenched classism, symbolizing football's potential to bridge socioeconomic divides. In a city and a society that is highly classist, as well as spatially and socially segregated, this boy had no problem publicly supporting his friend, who was obviously from a less privileged background. This moment underscored the disruptive potential of football in challenging Kingston's socioeconomic segregation.

When considering that in Jamaica in general, and Kingston in particular, society is highly classist, where there is spatial-local class segregation, it is, to my knowledge, not usual to have youths from different socioeconomic backgrounds in one place, building one team. Kingston is a post-colonial city, Jamaica's capital, and home to around eight hundred thousand people. It is still generally divided into Uptown and Downtown. Downtown comprises the districts south of the city center of Half-Way-Tree. Uptown is the name given to the districts in the north of the city above the Half-Way-Tree. "Uptown" and "Downtown" are commonly used as synonyms for socioeconomically better and socioeconomically deprived social strata (Clarke and Howard 2008, 137). Even after emancipation and independence, the city remains highly segregated by neighborhoods and spatial districts.

After taking the Vauxhall picture, it was time to take the Hillel picture. Hillel is a private Uptown school. Due to high fees, only students from extraordinarily affluent backgrounds can afford to attend the school. The boys joked that only the white people could go in this picture. It was the coach, who is white, the goalkeeper of the team, and one other light-skinned boy. One darker-skinned boy tried to sneak into the picture, and all the other boys laughed and told him he was "one shade too dark" for the Hillel picture. The connection between skin color, class, spatial segregation, and unequal access to education and careers remains to this day[2]. The symbolic gesture of solidarity ("I stand with Vauxhall"), as well as the common joking about skin color and Uptown-belonging within the football team, contrasts sharply with the stark socioeconomic divisions in Kingston, as outlined by Clarke and Howard (2008). Such interactions may momentarily challenge the entrenched class hierarchies that dominate Jamaican society.

On another occasion, a few weeks later, I attended a training session of the U17 team. It was a hot and sunny afternoon. I took my usual place on a wooden bench under a tree next to the training ground, to observe the boys' training session and talk to the parents in the meantime. One training exercise immediately caught my attention, where the boys had to run towards each other, hold on tight, and hug each other. The boys who were too late had to perform push-ups. The exercise seemed to cause a lot of fun and entertainment with the boys, since their waves of laughter were

[2] It is important to mention that *skin color,* as well as *race* and *class,* are invented social categories that were implemented to manifest "white" supremacy during colonial times in Jamaica. They persist to this day .

easily audible across the football field. I have never, in six years of visiting Jamaica, seen teenage boys hug each other, let alone grown men.

Jamaica is an extremely homophobic country (Hope 2010; Helber 2015), especially when it comes to male homosexuality. The aggressive rejection of homosexuality manifests itself in three points: Firstly, homosexuality is still a legally punishable offense ("buggery law"); secondly, physical and verbal violence continues to occur in public in Jamaica (and can become life-threatening); thirdly, homophobia is one of the most prevalent narratives in the omnipresent Jamaican popular culture (Helber 2015, 106). Homophobia in everyday life takes on radical proportions[3]. Above all, they would not run towards each other and hug another man. The hugging exercise exemplifies how controlled sports environments can subvert traditional norms of Jamaican masculinity, creating a rare context for physical expressions of care and friendship among young boys.

This resonates with another situation that I observed while talking to a Jamaican footballer playing in Western Germany for a minor league football club. He grew up in Jamaica and spent most of his thirty years of life in Kingston, playing for several Jamaican Premier League clubs. At the time I met him, he had been playing for the German club for a little over a year. The player, his cousin, and I were sitting in the locker room of the German football club, talking about his life story, his experiences in German football, the multiple meanings of sports for Jamaican youth, and how he perceived potential differences between German and Jamaican football culture. Just then, one of his coaches entered the locker room to greet the player and welcome me to the club. He walked up to the player, playfully grabbed his face, and said, "Man, I love you." Both of them laughed while the footballer tried to wind away to escape the physical touches of the coach. After exchanging a few words, introducing ourselves, and having a short conversation about the forthcoming training session, the coach left the room.

The footballer was still laughing when he said, "This is another thing. This cannot happen in Jamaica," clearly referring to the physical display of affection from the coach towards him. His cousin commented with a laugh, "He [the player] had to get used to that first. In football, you know, sometimes you get slapped on your ass, yes… he had to get used to that." I told him that he shouldn't bring this behavior to Jamaica if he did not want any problems, to which the player answered, "I will die. I will die. Here?! They kiss you here [*shows his neck*], they slap you there [*points to his backside*]. In Jamaica, you cannot do that. It's against the law, you know [*all of us are laughing*]. It's against the law." The resistance to physical affection among Jamaican male athletes reflects the entrenched norms of hypermasculinity described by Hope (2010). Football training exercises that challenge these norms may serve as small but significant disruptions to this cultural framework. This highlights what value it can have when boys can move freely among

[3] For further information on homophobia in Jamaica, read Patrick Helber 2015: *Dancehall und Homophobie. Postkoloniale Perspektiven auf die Geschichte und Kultur Jamaikas*.

themselves and leave aside dysfunctional ideas about heteronormative masculinity, at least in training exercises.

Jamaica has one of the world's highest murder rates (Jamaica Constabulary Force 2022), domestic violence rates (Institute 2022), a high number of mental health issues amongst men (Hickling and Walcott 2013), and ranks high in suicide attempts among high school students (McFarlane et al. 2013). A recently published article hinted at the fact that 90 percent of children, by the age of four to five, have experienced physical and emotional violence in Jamaica (Samms-Vaughan et al. 2024). All of these data indicate the dangers, pressures, and often dysfunctional dynamics when it comes to growing up in Kingston.

The reasons for these worrying figures are complex and cannot be fully explained in this article. In short, Jamaica and Kingston have a long history of structurally implemented and politically employed violence and crime. Starting during colonial times, Jamaican society has developed an ambivalent and multidimensional relation towards violence, punishment, and crime. This has led to varying degrees but regular outbreaks of, on the one hand, general crime in public places, and on the other hand, everyday exposure to physical violence that, today, often takes place within families, amongst intimate partners, or in schools/classrooms. To conclude, there are multiple dangers for young children and teenagers. There is an omnipresent threat of being physically punished, robbed, raped, or murdered. Not every boy experiences all of these threats, but no teenager will experience none. And every threat is one too many for young people trying to maintain their physical and mental well-being. Few alternative options to escape from crime (as either victim or perpetrator) are left for young men, especially from the inner cities in Jamaica. Patrick Chukwudike Okpalaeke (2022) described through an ethnographic study in a community-based club how youths in Nigeria's most notorious slum, Ajegunle, have adopted the "football alternative" to actualize their personal aspirations. He argues that irrespective of the myriad challenges that characterized the Ajegunle slum, certain youths who are considered vulnerable to a life of crime have adopted the football alternative as a way out of the typical slum life and make for themselves a life that includes hope. Sport, Chukwudike Okpalaeke concludes, presents "more than a dream of fame; it is a tool for social inclusion, re-engineering, and a beacon of hope for the downtrodden" (Okpalaeke 2022, 69).

Football as a Safe(r) Space

> I know a lot of youths. I train youths in Jamaica. As long as I am in Jamaica I am a trainer. And for some youths, football help[s] them a lot. Because their dad is a criminal or their mum is not home, playing football gives them an alternative to being at home. That way there is less of an opportunity for them to turn bad themselves. And football in Jamaica is not just to play football, it is trying to achieve something in the highest level. […] My mother has six kids. When I was growing up she didn't have time for everyone. So, when

> I was playing football at least she had one person off her back. So, I can play football and she know[s] that I am on the ball field. It's easier. So, a lot of people play football just to take stress away. Or because of their family, they try to reach a high level so they can earn money to send back home. (Personal Conversation, November 2024)

This is what the Jamaican footballer who plays in Germany answered to my question about whether football in Jamaica can be seen as a safe space. Even though I wasn't sure if he fully understood what I meant by "safe space," his response did answer my question in a very rich way, combining several aspects that scholars would subsume under the concept of "safe space."

While the concept of safe spaces originally came from feminist and educational scholarship, it found its legitimacy in wider academic fields, such as sports sciences. Here, recent research has explored sport as a tool in community regeneration and development, social inclusion, peace interventions, and reconstruction efforts in post-conflict situations. The actual meaning and definition of safe spaces is still contested.

> A useful starting point for conceptualizing safe space is to imagine it not as a physical space, but as a figurative, psychosocial space constructed through social relations. Thus, safe space refers to a way of acknowledging and relating to others. (Spaaij and Schulenkorf 2014, 634)

According to Spaaij and Schulenkorf (2014), who worked on how sports events and sport-for-development projects can create and sustain a positive social impact on communities, "safe space" refers to a way of acknowledging and relating to others. They detect five dimensions of safe spaces (Spaaij and Schulenkorf 2014):

1. The physical dimension of safe spaces relates to safety from physical harm and the provision of a secure, accessible, and accommodating environment.
2. The psychological/affective dimension refers to the protection from psychological or emotional harm.
3. The sociocultural dimension of safe spaces is based on familiarity, acknowledgment, and recognition, such that participants feel comfortable and supported as part of the group.
4. The political dimension refers to an environment based on mutual acceptance, tolerance, and respect for one another.
5. The experimental dimension is concerned with the feelings of being safe enough to take risks and be creative.

In my own observations on the football field in Kingston, this multidimensional nature of safe spaces is evident: the football field becomes a place where young men, through the promotion of teamwork, respect, and mutual care, can develop their athletic abilities and experience social belonging and protection. By creating such spaces in football, the negative effects of violence and

social exclusion can be at least temporarily mitigated. An example of this is the training session mentioned earlier, where young men were able to show physical affection through hugs—something rare in a society like Jamaica, where homophobia is deeply entrenched. This form of care on the football field not only serves as support but also as a foundation for empowerment and social change. Research on safe spaces and social belonging through relating to others highlights how mutual care plays a central role in creating safe(r), supportive environments where people experience belonging, recognition, and protection. These spaces are especially important for marginalized groups who face discrimination and violence in other social contexts. In Kingston, a city with deeply rooted social class divisions, as Clarke and Howard (2008) describe, such acts of solidarity on the football field are significant. The football field, in this case, becomes a space of inclusion where, through care and mutual support, social bonds are formed that transcend the socioeconomic and geographical boundaries of the city.

In addition to understanding football as a potential safe(r) space, anthropological perspectives on embodiment and performativity offer valuable lenses through which to interpret the dynamics I observed on and around the football field. Embodiment, as theorized by Thomas Csordas (1990), centers the body not merely as a vessel for social experience but as the very site of cultural production and meaning-making. In Kingston, where dominant ideologies of masculinity often suppress physical vulnerability and emotional expression, football drills that involve touch—such as the hugging exercise—allow young boys to engage in embodied practices that defy normative masculine codes. These bodily acts are not incidental but central to how care, camaraderie, and affiliation are communicated. Similarly, Judith Butler's theory of performativity (1990) helps illuminate how masculinity is not a fixed identity but something continuously enacted through socially sanctioned—and occasionally subversive—practices. On the football pitch, when boys laugh, touch, joke, or position themselves within social hierarchies (e.g. in the Vauxhall photo incident), they performatively reconfigure class, gender, and kinship norms. These are not just symbolic gestures; they are performative acts with material consequences, momentarily remaking the social world they inhabit. Spaces such as the football field can become sites of both social reproduction and transformation. Here, training exercises, team photos, and sideline conversations are performances through which boys both reproduce and contest hegemonic norms. Rather than merely being a backdrop for athletic development, the football field becomes a performative arena where alternative masculinities and solidarities are imagined and embodied.

To conclude, safe(r) spaces offer a spatial, ideological, psychosocial, and figurative space that provides protection from physical, emotional, and psychological harm. They foster opportunities where participants feel safe enough to openly express their individuality (Holley and Steiner 2005), feel supported and socially integrated, are empowered to take risks, and playfully negotiate tensions (Hunter 2008).

Conclusion

These specific snippets of my experiences within football in Jamaica are not meant to generalize the experiences of young boys within football. My research took place almost exclusively in one specific context, which is not representative of every football setting in Kingston. And as mentioned in the beginning, I do not try to make a statement about the absence of homophobia during my research or within the team; my aim was to highlight that the boys felt safe enough to share physical touch, which is due to homophobia, not the usual mode of interaction. So, while the football field may not eliminate systemic issues such as classism or homophobia, it can, under specific circumstances, offer a temporary and spatial reprieve—a safe(r) space where young men can redefine masculinity, question classism, and avoid violence through collective care and mutual respect.

Football, I argue, emerges as a safe(r) place for male youths in Kingston for five main reasons.

1. Football appears as a critical arena where young men can engage with and negotiate local ideals of masculinity. It provides a space to fulfill certain social expectations and strategically navigate or even subvert others, ultimately allowing individuals to define their path through complex social and cultural landscapes.
2. The physical football field offers a spatial space and distance to (potential) violence and stress.
3. Young boys who are busy playing football cannot engage in crime or roam around in the streets, which would potentially mean physical danger to them.
4. Football enables youth to become self-effective and individually successful. This is important in societies where academic and career chances and opportunities to create one's future are limited.
5. Last but not least, the football team provides a safe(r) space of social inclusion and belonging, and can create an atmosphere of mutual care and fun. This is important since "safe" does not only mean the absence of trauma, stress, violence, abuse, and fear, but also includes emotional and psychological safety (Brady 2005).

To conclude, understanding football as a safe(r) space requires not only recognizing its protective and relational dimensions but also appreciating how it functions as a stage for embodied and performative negotiations of identity. The moments of physical closeness, playful gender transgressions, and class solidarity observed in training and competition are not just anecdotal—they are embodied practices and social performances that reveal the capacity of youth to reshape social norms. Football, then, is not only an escape from violence or stress; it is a cultural site where bodies, emotions, and identities are continually rehearsed, reimagined, and sometimes transformed.

Coming back to the Instagram reel with which I started this article, I believe there is more to the connection between football and mental health than the clip originally intended to show. It is not just that footballers are public figures with a certain role model function when it comes to (financial) success, but by relating to each other and caring for one another, they create an example of social cohesion. It is up to institutions, organizations, clubs, or individual persons to be aware of the social potential of sports in communities and to create, implement, and foster opportunities for youths to feel safe(r). Football clubs in Kingston and beyond could actively implement practices that encourage inclusion and care.

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YOUNG PEOPLE, STUDENTS, AND ATHLETES: COMPETITION REDEFINED IN CONTEXTS OF INTENSIFIED SCHOOLING IN SPORTS

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Abstract

Based on an ethnography carried out in an Argentinean high school that is located in a sports club and oriented to physical education, this article analyzes appropriations of sport by young people in terms of their school experiences, related competition, curriculum, and aspirations. Techniques such as semi-structured interviews, field observations, and norm analysis were used. It was found that students contextually appropriate available, legitimate, or dominant meanings and practices regarding norms/regulations coming from school, sports, or even adult expectations, produce alternative or slightly transformed values. They build a critical relationship with the curriculum, with sports, and with the school itself, signifying in a different way the emergence of sports competition values (based on individual success) and the enrichment of the cultural production of the educated person in a more collective way. For many students, sports are valued as a place to develop a professional career, but they are also in tension with youth, student, and curriculum expectations. Sports in these types of schools provide an appealing experience for young people, helping the institution meet their objectives by offering valuable knowledge, discipline, and companionship.

Keywords

Physical Education, Sport Education, Values, Competition, Argentina

Introduction

What about becoming a professional athlete? Or maybe a physical education teacher? A sports journalist? Are sports just a hobby? What is the use of sports in school? These are some of the questions that young Argentinians enrolled in high school are asking themselves. But not in just any school. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, a type of school that had been absent in the educational system until then has been expanding throughout the country: one oriented towards physical education.

The National Plan for Compulsory Education—developed in 2009 by the National Ministry of Education, following the 2006 National Education Law (No. 26,206), which established compulsory secondary education—defined the political guidelines for secondary education and established the necessity to create school formats that responded to the lack of completion of this level, the diversity of youth interests, and that would create opportunities to guide them towards the labor market and higher education. It proposed new options for oriented secondary education[4], like the orientation in Physical Education, along with fields such as Art, Agriculture and Environment, Communication, Languages, and Computer Science.

Physical education was gradually incorporated into the modern school in Argentina towards the end of the nineteenth century (Aisenstein and Scharagrodsky 2006). The expansion of primary schooling, which was involved in the construction of a national identity, deployed corporal techniques in order to instill a social order and discipline to diverse population groups. Thus, physical education was established as a subject: a privileged space for the formation of the body. But towards the first decades of the twenty-first century, physical education and the expansion of secondary school encountered a new sociocultural context. The creation of a school organized in (and from) physical education and sports intensification responds to a broader process (Balaguer 2025) linked to the hegemony of sports in social life, beyond its role as a device for national identity or moral disciplining.

Sports are no longer only an instance for the production of identities and social collectives on a national, class, gender, and even racial scale (Besnier et al. 2018; Archetti 2001). Sports permeate contemporary youth sociability: their daily lives are often organized in the sociability of clubs, or in informal spaces in neighborhoods, where they gather to practice sports. But sports are also deployed as a multimillion-dollar business, putting into circulation images, bodies, experiences, and materialities—from a soccer jersey to a sticker—within global reach. Those images then produce desires and projections: the sports industry attracts millions of young people who dream of sporting success, which in turn can be (in increasingly precarious and unequal life contexts) an economic victory (Besnier 2012; Garton 2020; Majul 2021). Preparing to be the best and reaching an elite level in a professional career (Fuentes 2021) is an increasingly legitimate possibility for many young people. Moreover, sport and other physical practices increasingly have become an instance for the production of the self and of athletic, healthy, and aesthetic bodies, given the fitness logic that prevails in the social production of contemporary subjectivities (Costa 2015). This confirms Guedes's (2009) research: sports understood as privileged signifiers—producers of meaning in contexts of social change—for both those who practice it professionally and recreationally, as spectators or students.

What would such a school intensified in sports and physical education offer to contemporary youth? Two young people from a privately managed school oriented in physical education, among

[4] Traditional options for the oriented cycle at the secondary level in Argentina were Economics and Administration, Social Sciences, and Natural Sciences.

whom we deployed an ethnographic study during 2021, compared this offering to other types of schools and curriculum: "It's very different from the school I went to, but I really like the orientation more than anything else, above all the sports," one student reported. Another student, Carlos, agreed: "I prefer to be at the gym a thousand times; for example, now that we have a volleyball tournament from 11:40 a.m. to 1:40 p.m., rather than sitting there studying economics or psychology, I enjoy school much more. I see it as more flexible and I like it." The comparison with a "regular" high school illustrates a youthful expectation that seems to be fulfilled in this type of oriented school: the taste for sports, movement, and competition as core organizers of the school experience. What they value outside school is now happening inside its walls.

What appropriations of sport and schooling are made by young people in this type of oriented schools? What meanings about competition and success are put into play among young people and adults, and how are they articulated with their future projections? Our theoretical approach considers these perceptions as a way of objectifying social values (Graeber 2018), addressing, at the same time, a power relationship in the construction of meanings grounded in the category of appropriation, as developed in the field of anthropology and education in Latin America (Rockwell 2009). Students contextually appropriate available, legitimate, or dominant meanings and practices regarding norms/regulations coming from school, sports, or even adult expectations, produce alternative or slightly transformed values. That's why it is also helpful to incorporate the encounters, conflicts, or articulations of the points of view (Neufeld 2000) from families, schools (authorities, teachers), or even what "society" as a whole demands from students regarding what they say about sports.

We grasp meanings as a form of value that speaks about how desires (Graeber 2018) and aspirations intertwine with what schools and sports as institutions, practices, and values have to offer them. If modern sports already possessed a formative expectation in the shaping of amateur ideology, we ask which value constructions are made by young people in a new context, where sports are both a tool for economic projection and an instrument to present themselves as competent and capable people. Are sports a new type of cultural production of educated people? (Levinson and Holland 1996).

Methodology

The ethnography was conducted on the fourth grade level of a private high school (located within a sports club) oriented in physical education[5]. The fieldwork focused on involvement in the daily life of the school and was conducted over the course of four months in 2021, consisting of twice-weekly visits participating in classes of different subjects related to physical education, recesses, and institutional events. The observation focused on interactions among students and between students and teachers. The ethnography aimed to identify the meanings and value perceptions of

[5] Franco Balaguer carried out the fieldwork as part of his master's thesis in educational research, directed by Sebastián Fuentes.

young people regarding the role of sports in their schooling process. We conducted six open individual interviews: one each with the principal, the legal representative, a preceptor, and three teachers, and two open group interviews with mixed groups of male and female students. Documentary information—such as educational laws and the curricular design of the high school oriented in physical education from Córdoba[6]—were collected to analyze the regulated expectations of the public educational policy about this new type of school and the role of sports. We carried out a thematic content analysis based on the theoretical categories of the research (Guber 2005), contrasting the native perspectives of students and teachers with the selected norms.

The school, which we will call "El Ceibo," belongs to and is located within a traditional sports club founded at the beginning of the twentieth century in the city of Córdoba, one of the most populated in the country. The selection of this school allows for explaining and deepening the intricate relationship between education, sports for young people, and the educational system. Schools in sports clubs are a novel type of institutional organization in the Argentine educational system. Clubs capitalize on the relationship they have with families and their infrastructure to offer a formal school experience. This relationship is structured according to the interest of varying sectors of society in sports, which seek in them spaces for sociability, sports competition, the disciplining of children and young people, or the search for fit and healthy bodies.

Club schools are not state-run, but they also do not have the characteristics of a traditional private school, run by a proprietary, a public limited company, or a religious congregation. In Argentina, sports clubs operate as non-profit civil associations: the "owners" of the clubs are their members. The phenomenon of club schools has been little studied at the local level; therefore, there are no concrete surveys on their number at a national level. In Córdoba, there are twelve schools—eleven created in this century—that operate on the premises of sports clubs. The rise of club-based schools converges with the establishment of physical education oriented schools: two phenomena that occurred at the same time and have sport as their central axis.

The expansion of this type of school is explained not only by their symbolic capital as sports institutions, but that they are seen as "private" institutions, which large sectors of the population value as an instance of the production of social, moral, and economic distinction in relation to the state and the public (Fuentes 2013; Servetto 2014). The option that families have of choosing a school in a club with a vast sports infrastructure and a way of bonding with young people is attractive in principle because of the playful, physical, and experiential aspects, and is produced by a fragmented educational system (Tiramonti 2008) where each social fragment seeks a singular type of schooling adapted to their preferences and expectations. The families that attend El Ceibo belong to middle and upper-middle social classes, taking into account the employment status of the adults in the family group and their educational levels.

In Argentina, secondary school is compulsory by law. It consists of two cycles—basic and oriented—and depending on the province and the type of secondary school (common or technical),

[6] In Argentina, each province develops its own curriculum designs based on national guidelines.

it can last from five to seven years. In the province of Córdoba, common secondary schools last for six years; each cycle lasts three years, and the oriented cycle in El Ceibo is focused on physical education with several sports subjects[7]. As in all Argentinian secondary schools, all students follow the same annual path and subjects in each year.

Ethical safeguards were maintained: the names of the interviewees were withheld, and the names used here are pseudonyms. In addition, it was decided to keep the name of the high school and the homonymous club confidential, to make any possible identification of the actors more difficult. All permissions and consents necessary were requested during the ethnography.

The Contentious Meaning of Competition: Nuances in Youth Appropriation of Sport

In their daily school life, students go through different moments where they put into practice body techniques to play with and against others. The pedagogical intentionality of teachers can focus on the technique or on the physical exercise itself. Student appropriation occurs around competition, transforming an exercise into a display of speed and physical expertise in order to win:

> The teacher divides the group into two large rows. She tells them that they must run, perform a roll, go under a bench and then jump on a mat. When they return, the next partner runs out. The students take the activity as a competition: [they] do not perform the indicated jump, perform the roll with great speed and, when they pass under the bench, they hit each other. Those waiting in line shout "go, go, go" to the classmates who are doing the activity. When the activity is over, the winning group gathers, grabs each other's shoulders in a circle, and jumps up and down, celebrating the triumph. A student sits down and says "It happens that I am very competitive, too much," to which I answer "Why?" "Because I like to win," she replied (Field Note 2021).

Social norms are learned, centrally, from the students' appropriation of their bodies and legitimate values culturally produced. As is common in many schools, students appropriate the indication to train and learn a body technique as a way to search for success—one of the most extended meanings of sports in contemporary life—transformed into value as a way to show oneself in a school setting.

During the student's week[8] celebrations, young people divided into three "tribes." The activity planned by the teachers aimed at playing a variety of both non-competitive and competitive games and sports. In competitive sports, the students had to sign up in teams respecting the tribe to which they belonged, but could be integrated with classmates from other years.

[7] The fourth grade is the first one of the oriented cycle. Fifteen out of forty curriculum hours are courses related to physical education/sports, such as Physical Education and Training for Life and Work, Sports Practice, Gymnastic and Expressive Practice, and Physical Education and Environment.

[8] September 21 is Student's Day in Argentina, the same day as the beginning of the spring season in the southern hemisphere.

> In the soccer area there were more students, either as players (mostly boys) or spectators (mostly girls). A female student approached the teacher to tell him that she wanted to play soccer but was not signed up, to which the teacher replied that she should join a team from her tribe. When the teams are changed, they are still all boys. Some girls remain seated on the edge of the court, cheering on their teammates. A few minutes pass, and the student who wanted to play leaves the area (Field Note 2021).

Team building is left to the self-management of the young people, limiting the pedagogical action to the presentation of the proposal. Teachers expect students to develop a learning process that values collaboration and broad participation beyond the competitive logic, but competition attracts the most attention. The formal sports environment of a club attributes to competition a differential and teleological value, understanding that it is there where a person or a team can show their skills, achievements, abilities, and everything they trained for, in the search for winning. Competition, as seen here, is gender embedded: if the objective is to win and perform their own skills, homosociality and the subordination of women (Fuentes 2021) organize the scene. Male students perform for and among the girls, showing off their abilities for the female audience, who are associated with the lack of sporting abilities and ambition to compete (Wenetz 2007).

Androcentric sports and competitive logics are installed in the school specialized in sports, with a stark absence of adults' regulations and against curricular orientations: national and provincial regulations address gender hierarchies[9], instructing teachers to intervene in everyday practices of gender-based discrimination and violence. Social gender hierarchies and sports-dominant values on competition seem to prevail over non-competitive and gender justice values in the way young people and adults transform meaning into values (Graeber 2018). The taste for winning is appropriated in this direction and produces practices in accordance with the dominant representation of current sport.

We found nuances regarding the prevailing legitimacy of competition as a native way of valuing the different appropriations between the so-called individual and group sports:

> Antonio: And in group games you want to be more competitive.
>
> Natalia: You always want to win; you always want your team to be... I don't know, you always want to do well. Individually, I don't feel that way so much. I mean, I want to do well, but in the group I feel more obliged to do well (Field Note 2021).

In the case of collective sports, the expectation to win works as a bond between individuals who feel a kind of moral obligation to perform the best for their mates. But it is not only moral: the interdependence of individual and group actions allows for the emergence of mimetic tensions

[9] National Law of Sexual Comprehensive Education (N° 26.150) and Córdoba´s curriculum design: "subsequently and progressively (...) scenarios closer to formal sport will be encouraged, maintaining a sense of inclusiveness and equal opportunities for genders in school practice" (2012, 238).

based on disputes between groups, which generates a pleasant emotion as it unfolds in a controlled tension (Elias and Dunning 1992). In the case of individual sports, the focus is on the registration of one's own body and self-control, where all the expectations concentrate on a sole individual.

The students recognize this difference: when a group game situation is presented, the tension revolves around performing positive actions for the team; when an individual learning situation is presented, the social pressure generated by the group is left aside and the tension appears with respect to the use of one's own body and self-demand. Students say that when playing a group sport, if they fail a movement or technique, they would not be blamed or expelled, but supported and cheered up to do it better. Emilio, a teacher, agrees with this view, remarking that opposite to what happened in other schools, students here not only have specific "sporting skills," they also deploy a way of "being with their teammates and [understanding] that things don't work out, [learning] a lot of patience; these are the things that, for me, sport develops" (Field Note 2021). The responsibility of being part of a team can be rewarding and demanding, and this prioritizes the valuing of group sport over individual ones. The meaning of competition emerges as a value constructed in collective terms.

The attribute of "playing well" (*jugar bien*) in a group sport—a frequent moral expression among the students—does not guarantee a position of privilege or prominence, given that, in addition to the physical aspect, other values considered legitimate in group coexistence come into play, such as companionship, solidarity, and a sense of team unity. -"Playing well" is appropriated by young people as morality and as an orientation of individual action towards the good of the team. This is even more critical in an institution that, despite being a club, is still a school, which shades and contextualizes the model of sporting success as the only objective.

Competition as an end in and of itself is presented in the curricular design as an objective that must be problematized in the school: "It is imperative to assume a critical stance regarding the aesthetic patterns or competitive performance that the media transmit as a model" (Government of Córdoba 2012, 235), to which a teacher recounted: "Everything that is formal—that which may imply rigor, that which may imply a connection with the possibility of sports success—is denied, today, in our physical education. It is not like that worldwide; in ours, it is." The curricular design seeks to deploy in school the construction of values different from those that focus only on individual competition and the maximization of the value of individual performance (Ziegler 2008).

The comparison made by the teacher on the subject of sports success is made with reference to the performance of athletes who dedicate their time to training and competitions of a specific practice, while at school, the pedagogical intentions transform these practices and the meaning and value given to the competitions, where student appropriations intervene. For Octavio, this curricular orientation appears contradictory, because it would erase a characteristic of modern sport: "We want to bring part of formal sports, but we want to take out competition and... if the main characteristic of sport is competition, then do we or don't we give sport?" Sport as competition is also a contentious meaning between normative discourse and teachers' views.

The orientation of the school intensified in physical education and sports does not imply a harmony of objectives and experiences. The appropriations of young people sometimes go in the direction of individual competition and the (androcentric) taste for just winning, others in that of group competition, but not necessarily in terms of the value of success. Sometimes it is the "thrill" of playing with others and trying to win that prevails, a value coming from the bodily and group experience. The quest for victory does not always speak of the victory of the values of competition and individual success as the only principle that organizes the practices of young people. There are some moral marks of the cultural production of the educated person (Levinson and Holland 1996) that point out the weight of the school as a place to transform these cultural objectives of sporting success and to favor the differential appropriation that young people make of these sporting values, although teachers may be blind—in spite of gender-based curriculum—to male hierarchies at play.

Careers, Curriculum, and Sport Disciplining

Young people critically construct the moral association between sport and competition, looking at the effects that the teaching of competitive sport has on their relationship with other constructions of value. These other "values" are presented to them when they find that sport demands more of their youth and student time, as Natalia states:

> I recently got my first horse, something I dreamed of all my life, and I was very happy. Then everything became more serious; it started to be more competitive. I have competitions almost every weekend [and] I train every day except Sundays and Mondays. Lately, I'm not going because I have my fifteenth birthday party, I'm [busy] doing all my homework, and it's hard for me.

Natalia holds an upper social class position, as horse riding and the possession of such an animal reflect. Like many of her classmates, she chose this school because of its sports intensification, an experience that clashes against her routine as a teenager practicing additional and family-related sports outside the school, like Juan, who was chosen for the *doguitos*[10], but "didn't make it because [he] had school stuff, so [he] couldn't attend all the training sessions." Whether privileged sports or sport played at an elite level, the intensification of sports may compete with the practice of competitive sports, in the always difficult encounter between family, school, young peers, and other peoples' demands (Neufeld 2000). The school—schedules, attendance, and learnings—and the juvenile aspect are strained when the interest in sports that motivates many young people to enroll in El Ceibo leads them to the deployment of an incipient sports career that will demand more time than the school itself.

This tension is representative of the specialization that the professional sports career has taken on in the global and local industry that sustains it (Besnier 2012), with intensive training and competitions at an increasingly younger age. Our data indicate that a school intensified in physical

[10] Córdoba's flagship rugby team.

education does not necessarily facilitate the development of a professional sports career: the values associated with academic school and youth time place a limit on the expansion of professional sports as the most valuable horizon for young people.

Young people at this type of school must cope with curriculum and teaching demands. As they advance in their school path, the curricular load of sports subjects increases. What also increases is the possibility to widen their sports-related knowledge and experiences. Antonio, a student, recounted that: "From the fourth grade onwards we no longer have the games and sports we had before, and we played all the games that were unknown to us (...) We always played games in those classes that we had never played in our lives, and it was good." Likewise, Matías (another student) expressed: "We were really excited, because there were games we didn't know and they were very good, but these last [few] years we have been getting more into some specific ones. For example, we are watching volleyball, [doing] more with the technique, organizing the rules, and things like that."

The learning experience and the construction of what is valuable is done by pondering the unknown of the sport they learn at school, which aids in the deepening of knowledge on the subject. The curricular assessment made by young people is also a critical appraisal of the place of sport in school and its relationship with what the school brings them, as expressed by Natalia: "For me, they should spend less time on each game, teach it faster, because it is as if they used many classes to teach low handling[11], when they could have used one or two."

The school time devoted to physical education, sports, and the learning of body techniques allows the students to develop a position of knowledge that looks critically at what the school offers them: they critically appropriate these experiences, as they value new learnings, setting themselves in a power position to assess what they learn. While Matías valued the intensification of volleyball learning, Natalia had a more distant position on how this teaching is organized. There is a similarity between the two perspectives: the criticism is made from the acceptance of the teaching of sport, its learning, and its value in general terms. The tension about how much and how to teach sports in schools is common in secondary schools with the subject Physical Education (Kirk 2006).

Young students and teachers also appropriate the curriculum proposal by converting the meaning and objectives of sports into desires and future aspirations. For some of the latter, teaching competitive sports reinforces a historical function of the modern school: discipline. "One of them says that children who play competitive sports are more respectful of the rules. The higher the level of competition, the more respectful, more humble, and more focused" (Field Note 2021). Discipline becomes a key capital for their future in any position in the labor market.

For students, the aspiration—built in the encounter among crossed expectations from families, sports media and culture, schools, etc.—is varying: they may imagine a future as professional athletes, like Natalia and Juan, or talk about becoming a professional trainer or a physical education

[11] A volleyball technique.

teacher. Others, like many young people, do not either talk or imagine how meaningful a future may be in sports (or in any role or position). Generally, students and teachers agree about the goodness of sport to educate (disciplined) persons while opening and depending their chances in the sports industry and in school services.

Conclusions

Sport, when offered as an orientation of secondary education, is appropriated by young people, especially with regard to the competitive dimension prevailing in the global industry. The cultural construction of competition as an individual value is present in this type of schools, nuanced from both the youth and adult perspective and from the curricular design. Young students in El Ceibo critically appropriate competition as a way to bond and support each other, manifested in collective sports more than in individual ones: they experience the value of enjoying the youthful, recreational, and sociability aspect, the excitement of playing with others in a group sport, and strengthening their companionship, enriching the cultural production of the educated person (Levinson and Holland 1996) in a more collective way. Although regulations and norms critically address gender hierarchies and dominant individualistic values related to competition, the appropriation of this meaning into values to foster in schools are neither seen nor played by teachers.

Sport as a schooling system device still appeals to and interests young people beyond the economic and success goals it may promise them. The intensification of sports education allows them to enhance their knowledge of sports, develop a critical perspective on the teaching of sports, and transform the contentious meanings of sports into aspirations for the future, although this conversion is not automatic: while some may aspire to become professional athletes, others do not. Meanwhile, teachers value the intensification of sports as a discipline, as a practice linked to the internalization of norms, and as a convivial experience. This is where an educational offer that proposes diverse sports practices makes sense, being possible in increasingly fragmented educational systems. Clubs transformed into schools offer a novel articulation of dominant values and practices that update educational experiences that students—and their families—consider meaningful.

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CHILDREN'S SPORTING LIFE IN CONTEMPORARY MAASAI SOCIETY

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Academic Paradox in Childhood Sport Participation and Physical Activity

When discussing sports and children in indigenous or small-scale societies, current academic debates often present a dominant image of marginalized childhoods. Despite indigenous children demonstrating higher levels of physical activity compared to their peers in urbanized settings (Guthold et al. 2018; Marques et al. 2020), they are frequently portrayed as lacking adequate sport facilities, equipment, access to organized sport activities, and professional physical education instruction (Hardman 2008). Studies examining the broader consequences of these conditions—particularly those adopting macro-level analyses—raise concerns about the balance between play and work in children's lives. For instance, they criticize children walking to school as being due to underdeveloped infrastructure, or frame high levels of physical activity as a subsistence necessity rather than a choice (Lambert et al. 2020; Varela et al. 2021). While these studies rightly call for a reevaluation of the relationship between childhood physical activity, play, work, and well-being, they rarely address whose perspectives should guide such investigations.

The cautionary narrative surrounding the lack of sporting environment reflects this underlying issue of perspective. It stems largely from the value systems of Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) societies, which tend to associate healthy childhoods with playful sport activities rather than subsistence tasks. This perspective overlooks anthropological insights into the sociocultural and educational significance of children's chore participation, the rich and varied landscape of childhood play, and other place-based empirical experiences in small-scale societies worldwide (Chick 2010; Lancy 2015, 2018). Indeed, these aspects together construct the sporting lives of children in these societies.

This study explores the sporting lives of children in a Maasai community, a pastoralist indigenous group in East Africa, by considering local perspectives on childhood work and play, as well as their daily empirical experiences. My research began with an investigation into children's acquisition of ethnobiological knowledge in everyday routines and expanded to examine their participation in play and chores, local parental norms, and, more recently, children's physical activity and sport participation in school settings. Although these topics are often discussed independently in distinct academic fields, they are, as we will see in the following review, inseparable elements that together construct children's everyday routines, development, and sporting world.

A closer look at anthropological investigations into children's acquisition of ethnobiological knowledge offers a useful lens for understanding the connections between childhood play, work, learning, and sport. Ethnobiological knowledge, also referred to as indigenous knowledge or traditional/local ecological knowledge, encompasses the systems of understanding and social values that indigenous groups have historically and empirically developed concerning plants, animals, and broader ecosystems (Hunn 2007). Anthropological research has long explored how children learn about their biophysical environments through social participation, and how this experience-based cultural knowledge is embodied and applied in everyday practices that blend work and play (Gallois and Reyes-García 2018; Quinlan et al. 2016). In pastoralist communities, for instance, children acquire ethnobiological knowledge of livestock through routine tasks such as boys' herding and girls' firewood collection. While engaging in these activities, children take initiative, make decisions, and often weave playful elements into their chores (Tian 2017, 2019). This feature of childhood development is similarly observed in many other small-scale societies (Crittenden 2016; Dyson 2014). In these contexts, childhood work and play are not distinct or opposing categories, contrasting sharply with the Western conceptions that separate play and leisure from wage-earning activity and distinguish physical activity and sports from productive work (Alpenfels 1948; Chick 2010). This work-play complex in small-scale societies highlights children's agency and the embodied learning directed by children themselves in daily routines (e.g. Tian 2024b), which surely encompasses many sport-like and physically demanding activities. Understanding this integrated nature of children's everyday physical activities provides a crucial foundation for rethinking childhood sport beyond conventional, Western-centric models.

Building on this academic paradox surrounding childhood play, work, and sport, this paper argues for the importance of reframing unique childhood sporting experiences, moving beyond the narrowly confined concepts of school-centered and/or play-oriented sport. This aligns with the recent redefinition of physical activity as a term that "involves people moving, acting and performing within culturally specific spaces and contexts, and influenced by a unique array of interests, emotion, ideas, instructions and relationships" (Piggin 2020, 5). To better understand this phenomenon in childhood, inquiries should be made taking an emic approach and moving beyond the boundaries of disciplines (Gibson and Atkinson 2018), reflecting both global concerns and local perceptions and norms.

Drawing on the aforementioned theoretical considerations, this study focuses on two main questions to explore the sporting lives of Maasai children. First, how do Maasai children's work and play practices embody local understandings of physical activity? Second, in what ways are these embodied practices related to broader concepts of sport within their community life and schooling contexts? In the sections below, I examine these questions by attending to local perceptions on sport and childhood fitness, parental norms that shape children's engagement in work, play, and organized sport activities, and the potential correlations between sport and childhood learning in this community.

Local Perceptions of Sport and Childhood Fitness

Maasai people are generally known as pastoralists or agro-pastoralists who live in the arid and semi-arid lands across the boundaries of Tanzania and Kenya. Since the late nineteenth century, Western explorers and colonial officers have produced abundant writings describing the supposedly natural athletic abilities of Maasai male youth, a stereotype that continues to exist today (Bale 1998; Bale and Sang 1996). The ongoing tourist reproduction of Maasai warriors' high jumping performances, framed within the discourse of imperialist nostalgia (Bruner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1994), for instance, vividly reflects this point.

This paper focuses on Maasai village children, based on intermittent fieldwork conducted over the past decade. This consisted of a series of field visits across different seasons and years, primarily following the same group of children, while involving other child and adult participants depending on the research focus (Tian 2024b). I employed participant observation and mixed methods, including focal behavior observations, ethnobotanical surveys, geographic mapping of children's living environments and mobility, and, more recently, accelerometer-based assessments of physical activity levels. Revisiting the same community over time allowed me to observe changes in children's daily routines, and to capture the variability of their work, play, and sporting experiences across different environmental and socio-economic contexts. During the fieldwork, I used both English and the local Maa language for communication and data collection. As I am not fluent in Maa, I worked with local youths and children who are fluent in both English and Maa to assist with data collection and interpretation during each research period.

The targeted Maasai community is located in the Kuku Group Ranch in southern Kenya. Local people primarily engage in livestock grazing while also adapting to other forms of subsistence such as farming, tourism, wage labors, and small business ownership. Most children attend school and, at the same time, actively participate in pastoral chores and housework as part of their daily lives.

In this community, there is no single Maa word that perfectly matches the English term sport. Instead, local people often use the term *enkiguran* (meaning play) to refer to modern sport competitions and other playful activities, such as hide-and-seek or the chasing and running games of children. In schools, physical education is translated as *enchatata osesen*, which literally means "body construction," a term that also applies to purposive exercises of people associated with different life stages. Being physically and mentally fit is highly valued in Maasai communities. The local term *agol* well reflects this integrated concept of body-and-mind fitness, describing a person who is strong, capable of enduring difficulties, and courageous.

For Maasai, age is not counted numerically but is recognized in a local age system and an androcentric age group concept. Both men and women pass through three life stages: childhood, gender-specific adulthood, and elderhood. For women, adulthood is marked by adult

womanhood after marriage, and for men, by institutionalized stages of male youthhood (*murrano*). Purposive exercises are well mentioned in the life stage of adulthood and differ by gender. The young men (*ilmurran*) engage in various physical activities, such as spear or stick throwing, singing and jumping, running, and wrestling both for fun and to maintain fitness. They also engage in informal competitions when gathering, such as carrying calves or lifting up spears. Women likewise maintain an active lifestyle, even during pregnancy. Tasks like collecting firewood and walking are believed to help build physical strength in preparation for childbirth. In addition, many energy-demanding daily tasks are also considered essential for building physical and psychosocial fitness. Activities such as lifting sick cattle to stand, branding livestock, fencing, herding young livestock, fetching water, house construction, and associated long-distance walking are regarded as physically formative for women Activities such as lifting sick cattle to stand, branding livestock, fencing, and herding are regarded as physically formative for boys and young men, while for girls and women, tasks contributing similarly to physical conditioning and endurance include fetching water, house construction, and associated long-distance walking.

In children's daily lives, physical activities blur the lines between work, play, and exercise, collectively forming the essence of childhood sporting experiences. Adults assess children's fitness through their gradual mastery of various subsistence tasks. As one elder explained, a strong boy is someone who can travel long distances and graze livestock effectively, while a strong girl is one who can energetically assist her mother with household chores. In his time, when girls also participated in herding, strong girls were recognized for their skills in that activity as well. He further noted that, for them, there are no formal exams (like those in Western schools) to assess children's fitness. Instead, parents gauge their children's development by observing their performance in daily chores. For boys, this includes their ability to catch and control sheep or goats, or to cooperate with others in managing livestock; for girls, it involves the efficient and skillful completion of household tasks.

Although adults emphasize children's chore participation, Maasai children have ample opportunities to play. In previous observations, I collected 295 instances of play among Maasai children, with variations across gender and age (Tian 2024a). Play is regarded as the children's own domain, largely free from adult intervention. In daily life, adults not only refrain from participating in children's play, but sometimes deliberately avoid observing it. Children maintain significant autonomy, deciding what to play, how, and when, and they also take the initiative to balance play with chore responsibilities.

This independence in childhood reflects a set of core values that are central to Maasai life: *naboisho* (unity), *enkanyit* (respect), *empijan* (courage), and *enkitoria* (autonomy), all of which also closely tied to the concept of *agol*, or childhood fitness. Sport-like activities, both in daily play and work, provide children with opportunities to practice these values while constructing local knowledge and subsistence skills, not only independently but also playfully and sensuously.

For example, boys make herding sticks for both work and play, through which they empirically learn ethnoknowledge of plants. During herding, they whip and direct the livestock toward grazing areas. While moving with the herds, they also throw sticks for fun, either enjoying solitary play or competing to see who can throw higher and farther. Elders recalled a targeting game they used to play in childhood: a boy would throw a stick while murmuring the name of a girl he liked, aiming for a predetermined target such as a knot in a tree or a forking branch. It was believed that successfully hitting the target would bring him the love of the girl. Among boys, competition in play is less about winning or losing and more about exchanging knowledge—about the plants used to make sticks, the craftsmanship involved in making them, and the techniques for using them in different ways. Boys store their favorite sticks at home and exchange them with peers to foster friendship and social ties. Through this playful and empirical process, children construct detailed ethnoknowledge, including the geolocations of specific plant species and their seasonal changes; the flexibility, hardness, and weight of twigs and branches; the shapes and patterns of leaves and bark; and even the plants' smells and tastes.

Above all, ethnobiological knowledge is essential for the embodied childhood learning, including the development of various physical skills situated in this environment. In the following section, I present a detailed vignette, combining observations collected across multiple field visits, to illustrate how this form of empirical childhood learning plays a crucial role in helping children adapt to new sporting experiences introduced through local schooling.

Vz's Sport Experiences in Primary School

Vz, an 8-year-old boy, attended second grade at a primary school in 2022. Situated on communal lands, his school is comprised of two buildings with four classrooms each, an office, and a kitchen, but it has no fence or gates. The schoolyard, blending seamlessly into the surrounding environment, spans approximately fifty thousand square meters. It features a flat, sandy area in front of the classrooms and extends into unmodified grasslands reaching nearby homesteads. Scattered with acacia shrubs and trees, the landscape is frequented by cattle, goats, and sheep wandering toward grazing fields. The sandy areas and grassy bush serve as playgrounds for children during class breaks, physical education sessions, and after-school recreational and club activities. The school possesses one volleyball and a net, and despite limited sports equipment, its volleyball team has qualified for the subcounty-level competitions.

Vz was a core member of the school volleyball team. He described how children engage in various organized sports at school, including volleyball, handball, football, running, and relay races. A lack of equipment does not dampen their enthusiasm; children craft footballs and handballs from dried grass or discarded cloth. The sandy ground served as the main area for playing volleyball and handball. For volleyball, they prepare the court themselves by measuring distances, drawing boundary lines, and setting up the net between two long wooden trunks.

During club time, teachers generally allowed children to organize their own volleyball or handball competitions, occasionally joining in for fun and exercise. Children acted as both players and referees, deciding roles among themselves. Beyond the sandy grounds, in areas where teachers typically did not intervene or organize formal activities, children continued to manage their own sports and play. Boys played football on the grasslands, using thorny shrubs as goalposts and maneuvering skillfully around them. Girls engaged in make-believe, constructing homes under acacia trees and gathering plants and seeds for play-cooking. Some children also climbed trees or participated in singing and dancing.

During a visit to Vz's family, I observed Vz and his older brother making their own batons for an upcoming school relay race. In the evening, after herding the family's goats and sheep back home, Vz and his brother climbed a small hill near their home. There, they each selected a fresh branch from the *olporokuai* tree (*Dombeya kirkii*). After cutting the branches to about thirty centimeters, they peeled off the bark and smoothed both ends using stones and sandpaper. They meticulously polished the batons, heating them over a fire to straighten any curves, and further smoothed them before packing them into their school bags. The boys intentionally chose branches from the *olporokuai* tree because it has no thorns, is easy to shape, and resists deformation—knowledge they had gained through herding experiences, where the same tree is used to make herding sticks.

Making batons was a task assigned by their schoolteachers, an assignment not commonly found in urban Kenyan schools. Local teachers encourage such tasks, recognizing that village children are adept at tool-making and self-organizing their play and sports activities as part of their daily routines. The ethnobiological knowledge that children acquire outside of school thus enables them to participate in, enjoy, and adapt to sporting activities within the school setting.

Above all, the episode highlights how everyday embodied practices, rooted in ethnobiological knowledge, shape children's ability to engage with organized sport. Such practices reveal the broader interplay between work, play, learning, and sporting life among Maasai children, themes to which I now turn in the concluding discussion.

Conclusion

Maasai children's physical activity and sport-like experiences are unique and inherently playful, defying simplistic interpretations that frame them as mere necessities devoid of choice. An ethnographic approach reveals the complex sociocultural contexts of childhood physical activity in small-scale societies, uncovering local logics and rationalities often overlooked in academic discussions. In concluding this paper, I highlight several elements that warrant careful consideration for understanding childhood physical activity and sport participation in such contexts: local parenting norms, children's agency, children's daily routines, and their place-based knowledge and bodily experiences. Returning to the case of Maasai children, respecting

the nuanced ways in which they engage with play and work in their daily lives is a crucial first step toward developing a culturally sensitive understanding of local sporting lives.

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"NEVER SEEN A BOY WHO CAN'T PLAY": GENDER, POWER, AND SOCIABILITY IN CHECKERS GAMES

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"Ladies First?": An Ethnography Of Checkers Games At School

In the game of checkers (*jogo de damas*), the light-colored pieces move first. Each player begins with twelve pieces arranged on the dark squares of the board, and each piece may advance only one square at a time, always diagonally and forward. Checkers is a game of constraint: pieces cannot move backward, and captures are mandatory. When multiple capture options are available, players must choose the move that removes the greatest number of opponent pieces. When a piece reaches the final row on the opposing side, it is crowned *dama* by stacking another piece on top of it. From that moment, the rules shift: the *dama* gains freedom of movement, able to travel diagonally in any direction.

Among the many activities observed during fieldwork, the game of checkers stood out for its frequency, performative intensity, and symbolic richness. This article focuses on a single emblematic episode—a match involving two girls and one boy—selected for the clarity with which gendered positions emerged and were negotiated through language, gaze, and movement. While the English term checkers neutralizes the game's gendered connotation, the Portuguese feminine noun *damas* [ladies] provides a serendipitous entry point into broader reflections on how gender operates as a structuring axis of children's sociability. Within this frame, the game board becomes more than a surface for play: it is a stage where gestures, glances, and utterances materialize social positions, mobilize *damas*, and enact both contestation and alliance. The rules of the game are not merely followed—they are interpreted, subverted, and redefined, revealing the political and creative dimensions of children's interactions.

The episode took place during a school break—an everyday interval often overlooked in the anthropology of children and childhood, though it has recently begun to receive increased scholarly attention (see also Marques and Müller 2019; Müller, Marques and Nascimento 2024). In Drawing on Goffman's (1963) concept of a "social situation"—originally not applied to childhood—we describe a setting in which children interact with relative autonomy from adult supervision. Far from being a marginal or chaotic interlude in the school day, the school break emerges as a structured time-space that children collectively shape and regulate. It operates as a microsociety (Delalande 2001), governed not only by institutional norms but also by peer negotiations, informal rule-making, and shifting alliances. Within this dynamic setting, spatial

constraints, resource scarcity, and peer hierarchies intersect, offering a privileged site for examining how children appropriate, reinterpret, and at times subvert dominant norms.

Tracing these moments required close attention not only to verbal exchanges, but also to the children's glances, gestures, and bodily orientations. Attending to these expressive modalities was key to understanding how children assert preferences, align with peers, and navigate exclusion. This attention to the full range of communicative practices represents one of the key contributions of this study.

This article draws on an ethnographic study conducted over one academic year in a government-run primary school located in Vila do Boa, a neighborhood within the administrative region of São Sebastião, on the outskirts of Brasília, the federal capital of Brazil. Officially established in 1993, São Sebastião has a population of approximately one hundred thousand residents, many of whom work in informal or precarious sectors and commute daily to the central districts of the capital. Vila do Boa is a subdivision of a large rural property that developed into a densely populated area marked by irregular land tenure, inadequate infrastructure, and pronounced social vulnerability. Most homes lack access to basic sanitation, piped water, and stable electricity.

The school—*Escola Classe Vila do Boa*—is the only school in the neighborhood offering early years education (grades 1–5). Its immediate surroundings include housing, a small market, a disused brick kiln, a precarious playground, and a community-run art project for children. The schoolyard thus became a key ethnographic site, offering insights into how children, through play, navigate symbolic orders and negotiate social positions in a context of structural inequality.

Approximately 130 children enrolled in the morning shift participated in the broader research project. Fieldwork was conducted in two stages. In the second semester of 2017, daily participant observation focused on understanding the spatial organization and social routines that shaped children's school break practices. In the first semester of 2018, audiovisual data were produced with selected peer groups using handheld video cameras and lavalier microphones discreetly worn by the children. The analysis focused on interactional episodes, transcribed using Jeffersonian (2004) conventions and examined through the lens of Ethnomethodological Conversation Analysis. The integration of audiovisual data allowed for a microanalytic understanding of how children negotiated positions, alliances, and exclusions through multimodal resources.

All research procedures followed ethical protocols, including a collective explanation of the study, written informed consent obtained from parents or legal guardians, and verbal and written assent from the children, which included permission for the academic use of photographs. All proper names mentioned in the manuscript have been changed to pseudonyms to protect participants' identities. The project was reviewed and approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB), ensuring compliance with established ethical standards for studies involving minors. The researchers were already familiar with the dynamics of the school environment and known by many children before the audiovisual phase of the study began. Their role in the field was

reflexively constructed over time, navigating ethical tensions around proximity and presence while striving to build relationships based on trust and respect for the children.

The article unfolds in three interconnected sections. The next section introduces the ethnographic context and methodological approach, including audiovisual data collection and the use of Ethnomethodological Conversation Analysis. The central analytical section explores how gender is relationally and performatively constituted through children's embodied practices and interactional alignments during school break. In the final section, the analysis is situated within the broader political and legal context of Brazilian public education, highlighting how micro-level interaction enables children to engage with, contest, and reconfigure dominant gender norms.

The Board And The Stage: *Damas* And Gendered Play

A group of approximately eight children, mostly ten-year-old girls, gathered around the only complete checkers board available during school break. The scarcity of materials turned the board into a highly valued object and a focal point of interaction—not only for those playing, but also for those observing. In this context, the board mediated a range of social dynamics, becoming a stage for both cooperation and conflict.

Across the span of a single 28-minute-and-46-second school break on 07 December 2017, six matches were played by a rotating group of fourth-grade students, with Amanda consistently occupying one of the seats at the board. What began as a casual game among three girls—Amanda, Ana Beatriz, and Mônica—gradually evolved into a layered scene of social negotiation and exclusion. Felipe was the only boy to actively participate in the matches. Captured in full on video, the episode offers a situated and continuous record of interactional sequences that form the empirical core of the analysis developed in this article.

In the first match, Amanda faced Ana Beatriz in a highly competitive and silent game, marked by intense concentration and few verbal exchanges. Amanda emerged victorious. In the second match, she faced Mônica, now with Ana Beatriz and Felipe offering suggestions from the sidelines. Again, Amanda won. A third match saw Amanda and Ana Beatriz once more in close competition, ending in a draw and resolved by a game of chance—*par ou ímpar*, a Brazilian version of odd-or-even—that allowed Amanda to continue playing.

The fourth match, selected for close analysis, marks a significant turning point. Documented in a five-minute-and-twenty-six-second recording, this episode introduces Felipe, a previously marginal participant, whose presence escalates the interaction into a new frame marked by irony, realignment, and gendered positioning. Unlike the previous games, which were characterized by parity and silence, this episode unfolds as a moment of performative tension and shifting alliances.

At first glance, the match appears to follow the conventional two-player format, with Amanda (blue t-shirt) and Felipe (blue t-shirt) seated at the board. However, Ana Beatriz (yellow t-shirt)—

positioned beside Felipe and ostensibly a spectator—quickly emerges as a central figure in the unfolding interaction. Through increasingly frequent verbal and gestural interventions, she transforms the match into a triadic and asymmetrical encounter. Quantitative data reinforces her predominance: out of sixty-four turn-taking sequences identified in the episode, Ana Beatriz holds the floor thirty-five times, Amanda twenty, and Felipe only nine—clearly positioning Ana Beatriz not as an observer, but as a participant.

The shift in dynamics is also visually and interactionally observable in the excerpt presented below, which captures the moment when the tone of the match transforms entirely. The still image (Figure 1) shows the seating arrangement and spatial positioning of the players, while the transcription that follows highlights how embodied reactions, tone of voice, and laughter contribute to a shared ironic stance between Amanda and Ana Beatriz.

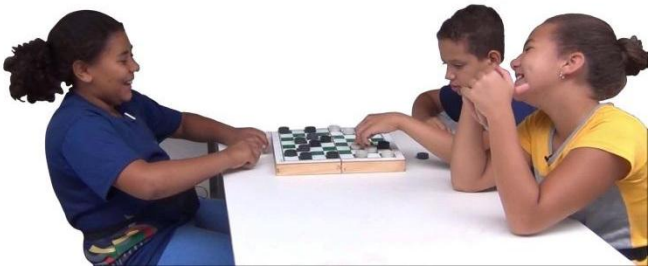

Figure 1. Amanda, Felipe, and Ana Beatriz around the checkers board. Video still by Rafaela N. Marques

Ana Beatriz:	hhh Felipe(h)? <como assim Felipe(h). hhhh>
Ana Beatriz:	**hhh Felipe(h)? <how come Felipe(h). hhhh>**
	>?=eu vou ter um ataque de ri(h)so hhhh
	>?=I'm gonna die lau(h)ghing hhhh
Amanda:	<ele vai mexer a minha pedra> hhhh
Amanda:	**<he's gonna move my piece> hhhh**
	((*risos de ambas*))
	((*both laugh*))

This excerpt reveals a marked shift in Amanda's footing, a concept defined by Goffman (1964) as the speaker's alignment with the interaction, the co-participants, and their own projected self. Having previously maintained a serious and concentrated stance in earlier matches, Amanda now adopts a playful, ironic, and performative position—signaled by her change in tone, rhythm, and the embodied gesture of leaning back while laughing.

Such transformations are made intelligible through what Gumperz (1982) calls "contextualization cues"—verbal and non-verbal signs, including prosodic elements (tone, rhythm, emphasis), gestures, gaze, and posture, that guide how participants interpret the situation. In this episode, Amanda's expressive laughter, vocal inflection, and bodily movement signal a redefinition of the interactional frame. These shifts are not spontaneous: they occur in response to Ana Beatriz, who initiates the ironic stance and reinforces Amanda's amusement, creating a moment of interactional alignment and complicity between the girls.

This alliance marks a turning point in their interaction. While previous matches between Amanda and Ana Beatriz were characterized by mutual respect and restrained competitiveness, the dynamic here is entirely different. No longer opponents, they now coordinate speech, laughter, and gesture in a synchronized performance—an alignment that excludes Felipe and amplifies his symbolic marginalization.

The episode exemplifies the fluid boundaries between competition and cooperation among girls. Drawing on Goodwin's (1990, 2006) work, we observe that girls' peer interactions often shift between assertiveness and solidarity, shaped by situational configurations and interactional opportunities. Here, the presence of a less competent male opponent becomes the trigger for a performative alliance, through which the girls reassert control over the game—not only as players, but as co-narrators of the event's meaning.

These dynamics marked by ironic alignment between the girls become especially salient in the interaction captured in Figure 2.

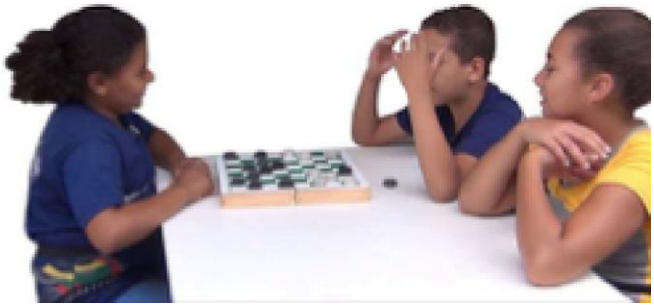

Figure 2. Felipe gestures in response to a perceived lack of options. Video still by Rafaela N. Marques

Felipe:	[qualquer] peça que eu mexer aqui.
Felipe:	**[whatever] piece I move here**
Amanda:	tá morto?
Amanda:	**so you're dead, huh?**

As the match progresses, Felipe, increasingly aware of his limited position in the game, voices his resignation: “whatever piece I move here.” His gesture—both hands lifted in a display of doubt or rhetorical surrender—visually reinforces his verbal expression of defeat. Amanda immediately responds with a sharp, ironic question: “so you’re dead, huh?” Her tone and timing signal not concern, but amusement, affirming her superiority within the interactional frame. In this moment, Amanda is no longer merely playing; she is performing commentary and judgment, consolidating her alignment with Ana Beatriz. The checkers board thus operates not only as a field of strategic play but as a symbolic stage, where gendered relations are reorganized through mockery, exclusion, and laughter. Rather than a neutral game, this episode reveals a configuration in which the girls assert control over both the rules of engagement and the meanings produced in the scene. What unfolds is not merely a game, but a socially meaningful episode in which interactional cues, gendered hierarchies, and symbolic control are co-constructed in real time.

Figure 3 captures the final excerpt of this episode, showing the three children still gathered around the board at a moment just before a sequence of utterances that would mark the conclusion of the interaction.

Figure 3. Final moments of the fourth match. Video still by Rafaela N. Marques

Ana Beatriz:	infelizmente você perdeu dá licença >dá licença
Ana Beatriz:	**unfortunately you lost, excuse me >excuse me**
	dá zzzz< num sabe jogar, Fiˈ LIpe, eu hei::n::
	excu::zzzz< you can’t play, Fiˈ LIpe, I we::ll::
Amanda:	EU FALEI!
Amanda:	**I TOLD YOU!**
	(10.0)
Amanda:	hhh nunca vi um menino que num sabe jo(h)gar
Amanda:	**hhh never seen a boy who can’t pla(h)y**

The sequence that unfolds in Figure 3 begins with Ana Beatriz's rapid, assertive dismissal—"unfortunately you lost, excuse me >excuse me excu::zzzz<"—a move that not only denies Felipe's legitimacy as a player, but also positions her as an authoritative voice within the interaction. The repetition and acceleration of "excuse me" function as both a command and a gesture of symbolic expulsion, reinforcing her control over the space of the board.

Immediately afterward, Amanda delivers a loud, emphatic "I TOLD YOU!", which echoes her earlier warnings and performs a stance of superiority and vindication. The ten-second silence that follows this outburst operates as an interactional punctuation—a pause heavy with dramatic effect. It is in this silence that power is allowed to settle: Felipe remains silent, while Amanda prepares her final blow. Her laughter-inflected comment—"Never seen a boy who can't play"—delivers both a gendered critique and a public ridicule. The laughter embedded in her voice transforms the comment into a performative act, co-produced for Ana Beatriz, and indirectly, for any surrounding audience.

What we see here is not simply teasing, but a coordinated effort to establish a gendered boundary: the girls are not just mocking Felipe, they are redefining who belongs in the game, and under what conditions. Control over the game's symbolic meaning, therefore, is not granted by formal rules but enacted through affect, timing, and ironic speech. By the end of the episode, the checkers board is no longer a shared space—it becomes a stage from which Felipe is excluded.

Serious Games And Symbolic Struggles

Gender, in this framework, is understood both as a relational marker of difference and as a normative and symbolic structure, continuously produced and contested through institutional, discursive, and embodied practices. In Brazilian government-run schools, this marker intersects with class, race, and territorial inequalities, shaping children's experiences and expectations from an early age. We also approach gender as a relational and performative construct—one that is not only reproduced but also contested in everyday interactions. Schools become privileged contexts where such contestation unfolds: not only through institutional structures such as curricula and discipline, but also in the social worlds that children themselves create through play and peer relations.

From this perspective, gender is not merely enacted but constituted through situated social practices. As Ortner (1996) argues, gender should be understood both as a positional structure—that is, a historically sedimented arrangement of symbolic and material asymmetries—and as a serious game, wherein actors, including those in subordinate positions, engage in strategic and relational actions within asymmetrical fields of power. In this view, children's play is neither trivial nor derivative. It constitutes a social context in its own right, where children not only absorb dominant norms but also reinterpret, negotiate, and at times subvert them.

The checkers game analyzed here becomes a fertile moment in which two girls challenge normative assumptions by asserting control over the board, teasing a boy for his perceived incompetence, and collaboratively performing a stance of dominance. Their actions destabilize conventional gender hierarchies and expose the fragility of normative masculinity. Utterances such as “Never seen a boy who can’t play” are not merely teasing comments; they are performative acts that contest dominant gender scripts, producing new configurations of power and visibility among peers.

Ana Beatriz frequently interrupted Felipe with commands such as "Go!", positioning herself as an authoritative voice in the game. Amanda, in turn, aligned herself with Ana Beatriz through laughter, irony, and synchronized gestures. This dynamic illustrates what Goffman (1964) described as changes in footing and what Gumperz (1982) termed contextualization cues—elements that shape how interactions are interpreted in real time. In this context, the girls’ alliance transforms the board into a symbolic stage where power is performed, contested, and redistributed. Their coordinated interaction contrasts sharply with Piaget’s (1994) earlier interpretations of girls’ games as passive or less rule-bound and instead aligns with Goodwin’s (1990, 2006) work, which highlights the complex negotiation of stance, status, and exclusion among girls in peer settings.

Segato (1997) deepens this understanding by framing gender as a symbolic order that organizes the intelligibility of the world through asymmetrical relations. For Segato, such asymmetries originate in a "foundational scene" and are reproduced through seemingly mundane practices. The school break, in this view, becomes a privileged symbolic terrain where deep structures of gender are not only enacted but also momentarily displaced. The girls’ ironic alignment and symbolic expulsion of Felipe expose the permeability of these structures, revealing their reliance on continuous reiteration and performative reinforcement.

This episode also reflects how material culture mediates and amplifies these dynamics. As Miller (2001) argues, the value of studying material culture lies not in reducing objects to fixed symbols of social categories, but in attending to the specificity of material domains and the culturally situated ways in which particular things come to matter. The checkers board—scarce, highly desired, and spatially central during school breaks—is not merely a backdrop to social interaction, but an active medium through which children negotiate relationships, assert dominance, and perform gendered identities. Rather than treating the board as simply part of the category of games or recreation, the ethnographic approach adopted here focuses on what the board is doing within this context: how it becomes a contested object, invested with meaning through children’s actions, gestures, and speech.

In line with Miller’s emphasis on mattering, the analysis foregrounds not only what children say about the game, but also how they embody attachments to it—claiming space, issuing commands, and establishing hierarchies through it. The material specificity of the board and its pieces—their weight, tactility, and visibility—are not incidental but central to the way power is enacted and felt. Appadurai’s (1986) concept of the social life of things complements this view, suggesting that the

board's meaning emerges not from its form alone, but from its circulation, use, and transformation within the lived world of the playground.

That the game is called *damas* in Portuguese—ladies—adds an ironic layer of meaning: while conventionally dismissed as a simple or even "feminine" game, the scene analyzed here inverts these assumptions. The girls do not merely play the game, they rule over it. Their performative control re-signifies the space of the board, subverting expectations of male strategic superiority and inscribing their own authority into the material and symbolic texture of the interaction.

Moreover, Felipe's reactions illustrate how subordinate positions are not passively accepted. His gestures of surrender and ironic verbal resistance ("That makes no sense") reflect attempts to reassert agency, even as he is narratively and interactionally marginalized. Yet, the alliance between Amanda and Ana Beatriz reinforces temporary hierarchies that delegitimize his participation. Gender here is not a stable identity but an emergent configuration negotiated moment to moment, shaped by the flow of interaction, the control of material resources, and the performance of irony and ridicule.

If, as Segato argues, gender is naturalized through repetition, then its disruption—especially by children in playful contexts—sheds light on its fragility and the possibility of transformation. The performative exchanges documented in this episode exemplify how gendered norms are not only reproduced but reworked through peer interaction. They also reflect how children actively engage with and contest the broader cultural logics that frame their social worlds.

These dynamics resonate with broader institutional contexts. Recent legal and policy developments in Brazil—such as the Supreme Court ruling in ADI 5.668 and Law 14.986/2024—explicitly recognize the role of schools in preventing gender-based discrimination and promoting inclusive pedagogies. Within this evolving legal framework, episodes like the one analyzed here gain further significance: they not only reflect the reproduction of social norms but also the micropolitical ways in which children, through play, resist, adapt, and reshape them.

Reconfiguring the Board

The game of checkers, while governed by formal rules, proved to be far more than a structured pastime. In the hands of children, it became a dynamic context for negotiating social positions, enacting authority, and subverting normative expectations. The ethnographic approach adopted in this study made it possible to capture how power, irony, and exclusion unfold in the microgestures, turns of phrase, and shared laughter of a playground interactional episode.

Rather than illustrating fixed roles or developmental stages, the episode analyzed here revealed how gender is relationally and situationally constructed. The ironic alignment between Amanda and Ana Beatriz not only redefined the interactional frame but also reconfigured symbolic hierarchies, destabilizing normative masculinity and claiming authority over the board—both as

object and stage. Their actions echoed what Ortner (1996) called serious games: relational and strategic enactments within asymmetrical fields of power. They also activated what Segato (1997) describes as a symbolic order—one that can be inhabited, reproduced, but also momentarily dislocated.

This relational and strategic alignment resonates with Mendoza-Denton's (1996) analysis of *cholas* in Californian schools, who similarly subvert dominant gender and racial norms through stylized performances of stance, voice, and aesthetic markers. Like the *cholas*, Amanda and Ana Beatriz deploy everyday resources—tone, timing, laughter, and ironic commentary—not to reject the symbolic order, but to reconfigure it from within. In both cases, the micropolitics of resistance emerge not as grand gestures of refusal, but as embodied and relational practices woven into the texture of ordinary interaction.

The checkers board was central to this process. As Miller (2001) and Appadurai (1986) remind us, objects are never neutral: they acquire meaning through use, trajectory, and investment. Here, the board emerged as a scarce and symbolically charged artifact, mediating forms of access, recognition, and exclusion.

By tracing the layered interactional choreography of a checkers match, this study shows how children do not passively absorb gendered expectations; rather, they reinterpret and contest them through relational creativity and embodied stance-taking. School breaks—often dismissed as informal or marginal—emerge here as a privileged context where the everyday politics of gender and recognition are played out with precision, irony, and force. In this sense, *damas* becomes more than a game: it is a generative site for understanding how children inhabit and remake the social world.

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PLAYING WITH STONES: SOCIAL CHANGE, MOBILITY, AND MORALITY AMONG THE SCHOOLGIRLS OF HIGHLAND MADAGASCAR

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"...child play not only involves the absorption of knowledge about the world, [it] also provides a means of action within it" (Argenti 2001, 71)

In Madagascar, playing with stones and speaking through them is a widespread practice among girls aged 6–14 that has lasted for at least four generations[12]. In both urban and rural areas, the play called *tantara vato* (literally "stone story") or *kitantara* (from *mitantara*, "to tell stories") is the favorite activity of Malagasy girls when there is a free moment from school and domestic chores, sometimes done when just waking up at dawn, or on Sundays before mass. In the courtyards of the houses, by the side of the rice fields, my young friends would pick up a few stones, organize the space, and start playing.

I began to participate in these performances and became interested in the content and framework that governed them, asking questions and recording the stories; the intertwining of the ways in which the stories were expressed and the construction of the narration itself also allowed me to explore this practice as a "technique of the body" (Mauss 1935), which is acquired among peers and incorporated in repeated gestures. This paper intends to explore the narrative production of Malagasy girls from the analysis of a specific play, which consists of staging stories using small stones[13].

[12] A paper on Malagasy games from 1911 (Camboué 1911), for instance, makes no mention of it. From oral sources, the origin of this game seems to have come from another one, called *tamaboho*, which consisted of making marionette dolls that were animated by the hands of the participants, later replaced by stones.

[13] The fieldwork with Malagasy children aged 8–16 and their caregivers, initially conducted between 2004 and 2006 in the city of Antsirabe for a total of fourteen months, was part of a PhD project in Social Anthropology at the University of Milan Bicocca. In return visits in 2011, 2012–2013, 2019, and 2023, other stories were collected and recorded both on the Highlands and in other areas of the country. Methodology included participant observation and interviews with adult informants (teachers and parents). The names of the research participants are given in the form of pseudonyms.

Narrative Production and Children's Knowledge

In the *kitantaras*, each character is identified with a stone, which is presented by the girl who prepares the setting, choosing the size and strength of the stones and their arrangement on the ground. The girl who moves the stones is the narrator and is the only one who can give voice to the story: this is made clear when she concretely gives the stone-character the word by tapping another stone on top of it, a "narrator stone." Every time she knocks that stone on top of another, it takes on the body and voice of a character. Similarly, it is only the child narrator who can give hints about the plot as a voiceover.

On some occasions, I observed them draw a kind of semi-circular arena on the ground with chalk, where the stones (in coastal locations often replaced by shells) were placed. Sometimes the girls do not have an audience and tell the story to themselves in a lower voice; more often, they are seated on mats or on the floor with friends. Both the narrator and the other children are seated in a crouched position where the backs of the thighs adhere to the calves and are often in a circle. The audience is not expected to interact with the plot of the story, although it sometimes happens that someone suggests a new action, the name of a character, or even encourages them to continue.

A girl's ability is judged according to the length of the story, the speed and strength of her hands in beating the stones, and, only lastly, the content of the story itself. Listening again to the recordings, the beating also marks the rhythm of the narration, as if the voice were in tune with the gestures and the flow of the plot: as if there were an aesthetic dimension of speaking, in which rhythm, speed, and words are in harmony (Duranti 1992).

It is a game entirely structured by girls, in which adults do not participate or control its development: the preparation, staging, and performance are all managed by the participants. This aspect reinforces the idea that peers are the real partners in play, engaging in face-to-face interaction and the exchange of intense emotions (Scheidecker 2023), while the participation of adults is difficult to see, as there is no shared idea that the relationship between adults and children also passes through playing together (Lancy 2015; Mezzenzana 2020).

Like other African pretend games, such as the similar *masekitlana* in South Africa (Kekae-Moletsane and Mokgadi 2008; Ofenste Phetlhu 2014) or the Angolan corncob-dolls play (Ponte 2017), it is non-competitive and links children's engagement with available materials to the imaginative worlds they develop. Another characteristic is that it is a female activity. Adults see its gender exclusivity as both the cause and the effect of its existence. They often say that "women are more open and talk more": it is the "essence" of being female that leads girls, not boys, to approach this game. There is no male counterpart as boys play marbles, basketball, or football,

build objects, and participate in gender-mixed games such as *kapoka* (hide-and-seek) or *kisabaka* (hopscotch)[14].

Gendered *habitus* affects not only the nature of leisure activities, but also that of everyday lives, including schooling, domestic chores, and work performed by children (Astuti 1998; Devine et al. 2021) in a context where the economic role of boys and girls is highly visible. The body seems to be at the center of this expressive medium, where creativity and caring attitude, considered appropriate to the female gender, merge (Coffey and Watson 2015): to put it simply, one of the ways of performing the "being girl" is to play with the stones.

Listening to the stories, there is an apparent absence of a fantasy world, but a strong connection to reality: the stories tell of family life, problems in finding food, conflicts, love relationships, and school life. It is a theater of everyday life: the stories are set at the market, at school, or at home. There are vendors, peasants, *pousse-pousse* drivers, but also complaints about homework, shopping, and rice to be cooked. They talk about the allocation of tasks and responsibilities: who must buy coal, who goes to the market, and who must look after the *zebu, b*ut also of unexpected events to deal with, such as the theft of gold, the arrival of the police, a traffic accident, or an act of witchcraft.

It is therefore a "symbolic game" (Ofenste Phetlhu 2014; Goldman 1998) where improvisation is central, but at the same time embedded in a reproducing narrative structure: actions are generally followed by a climax (represented by an unexpected event) that is followed by a resolution. Narrative competence and language vary depending on the storyteller's age, as Jirata observed (2019). Children's storytelling is less coherent than the adult standard. In any case, narratives appear to be both a way to incorporate and question social norms.

A more detailed analysis reveals, in fact, the presence of "imagined worlds" which often function as plot-solving spheres, a co-presence of real-life elements with dreamed or less realistic aspects. The paper presents three stories that illustrate salient aspects of the social and projective realities of the girls who participated in the research.

Seduction and Change

The first story was told by Nialy, an eleven-year-old girl of Betsileo origin, on the outskirts of the city of Antsirabe.

[14] The traditional board game *fanorona,* played mainly by boys and men, has been regarded as an apprenticeship for future political leaders, encouraging young men to improve their analytical skills (Kneitz 2022), but it is not a children's game. As for *kitantaras*, boys do not perform them, and they are not very welcome even in the audience.

Presentation of the stone-characters: Mr, Mrs, three daughters, and the father's employer. The narrator explains that the father receives his salary every Friday. An argument begins between the couple over money: the wife asks for money to buy *laoka* (all that accompanies rice), [and] he says there is none. They eat rice without *laoka*. The wife accuses him of giving the money to his lover. The narrator says they no longer love each other. The three sisters pray and go to sleep.

The mother goes to see the employer and becomes his lover. After another quarrel, the husband leaves. The mother and the lover have an accident in the car [trace on the earth the junction and the dynamics of the collision], they break an arm, and by chance the husband passes by and discovers them. The employer goes home, offers the girls a snack, and tells them that they are going to the Saturday market to buy clothes; he asks if they [would] prefer to go by bike or by car. The employer and the mum get married, says the narrator. They go to the market and buy a T-shirt and a dress.

The ex-husband sells vegetables and his lover starts begging.

Since they are fed up with living in Madagascar, the five protagonists leave for abroad.

As Nialy has experienced several times, lack of resources is a common situation in Malagasy family life. In this story, the escape from the situation of poverty, complicated by marital quarrels, begins with the seduction of a powerful man by her mother: after the car accident that marks the caesura between the past and the future, the man turns into a caring and attentive father. This man, in fact, triggers a path of social mobility that sees the improvement of the initial situation, through the acquisition of a series of goods—the snack, the car, and the clothes—and finds its climax in the departure for abroad.

It is interesting to underline how wealth and social improvement, objectified as commodities, become accessible through the instrumental use of seduction: the mother begins an affair with her husband's employer, who allows her to redeem her poverty. In Madagascar, sexuality has also been studied as an arena in which young women experience the possibility of changing social hierarchies and transforming the balance of power. Cole's studies of youth in the coastal town of Tamatave, for example, speak of changes in gender relations related to the globalization phenomena that have taken place since the adoption of a free-market capitalist policy (Cole 2004; Cole 2005). While not clearly referring to the growing market of transnational sex, the stories do, however, refer to the gain that can be made from a relationship with a powerful man, sometimes much more profitable than that which can possibly be obtained through educational credentials.

Social and Imagined World

Presentation of the stone-characters: mother, father, and two daughters.

The parents separate and the girls move in with their mother, who remarries another man. The daughters go to school, and when they come back, they ask their stepfather for a snack; he does not give it to them and tells them to go and ask their mother. The new couple always quarrels. The daughters are always sad because no one takes care of them. They continue to study, are close to getting their diplomas, and start having their first boyfriends. One day when the parents are not at home, a boy goes to visit the eldest daughter; when the father returns and finds them, he gets angry. "You're close to succeeding and you start doing things that shouldn't be done." [Scene change] The mother, who has a stall in the street, is walking with a heavy bag and collides with a passerby. The bag falls and the contents are broken. [Long time passes]. The mother goes to Paris, where she bumps into a Malagasy man: when she gets closer, she realizes it's her first husband.

He asks her where their daughters are; she gets angry and says "They are grown up now!" He apologizes for everything. She says that things have changed and "maybe you too will have made progress, you will always drive and no longer walk." She does not have a good salary and works as a maid. He says he is not interested in her work and that "they had never broken up."

The mother goes back to Madagascar and she hardly speaks to her daughters; in the end, she tells them that she met their father in Paris, and he will come the next day. They then decide to leave. When their stepfather comes home, he sees that they are preparing to leave and gets angry. They explain that they are leaving to prevent their father from finding them. He is so furious that they say, "We are only taking the clothes, not the furniture, and then we are leaving with our feet, not yours."

They leave the house, and a car is passing on the road. The little girl remembers that she is the passerby who collided with her mother. The woman stops, lets them into the car, listens to the whole story, and decides to take them in. The next day, the father arrives from Paris and finds only the stepfather; he manages to find the house where they are staying and tells the daughters that their stepfather is a liar. When the hostess returns, the girls tell her that their father has been there. When the mother returns, he apologizes again, convinces her, and the two get back together. They move to Antananarivo and the eldest daughter marries the boy who had been visiting her at home.

In this second example, the cultural context and the imagined world seem to merge. Several key elements of the social life of Malagasy families can be found: The formation of new households and the subsequent transfer of children to different care (or neglect) contexts. The status of female children making power marginal, just as the ability to obtain resources, symbolized by the snack, was considered a surplus by my young informants. Female solidarity, born from the desire to repair a conflict represented by the episode of the passerby, contrasts with male authority, which is expressed in the control of the girl's love life. Connected to this, school success is contrasted with the girls' entry into sexual life: the female students risk failing in their project of "success" by starting a romantic relationship. It refers implicitly to unwanted pregnancies, a topic discussed at

the school, the main reason for girls' dropouts and a concern for rural families about their daughters being exposed to "urban temptations." Finally, the foreign city is not only an imaginary location but also functions as a key factor in the reintegration of the order. France is the European country most present in the Malagasy reality and the first migration target: in this story, the girls seem to be familiar with the integration process in the destination country, where the first stage is low-skilled jobs, and then the availability of goods increases the quality of life and adherence to Western models, where "you no longer walk but drive."

Education and Power

The third story is told by Rova, a ten-year-old girl of Vakinankaratra origin, in a meadow near the rice fields.

> There are two bratty children who play hooky from school. One day they tell their mother that there is a computer course on Saturdays: the first two months are free, then the monthly fee is fifty thousand Malagasy Franc. Then they steal from their father's wallet and wander around. The mother, on her way to the market, meets the friar who is the director of her children's school. She asks him about the course and the lie is revealed. The mother quickly greets the friar. The narrator says that "the mother is very ashamed." She returns home and scolds her children. Their cousin, on the other hand, is good and can go to study abroad. "It's a good opportunity," says the mother.

In this story, the narrator re-proposes the two categories that the school and adult world employs to talk about children, which can be translated as "good and bad" (*hendry* and *maditra*), and she stages adult morality through the voice of a mother who praises her diligent cousin and scolds her children who lie. The protagonists of this story, except for the mother, are all male: the friar, who embodies school authority, and the three students, who exemplify different educational paths.

The story opens the theme of families' investment in education as a place of progress and modernity, but at the same time of ambiguity and transformation (Bloch 1998; Freeman 2004): the children take advantage of educational credentials—represented by extracurricular courses—to obtain money from their parents that they would otherwise spend on other forms of consumption.

Schooling scenarios recur in the *kitantaras*: formal education is represented by the school itself and the development agencies as a "social legacy" (Stambach 1998), a body of knowledge that can take kids far (*lasa lavitra*) and contribute to the improvement of the country. Moreover, the school's cultural context seems to overcome gender dichotomies, and in national rhetoric it is through education that the new female generation will achieve emancipation.

In Madagascar, as elsewhere, studying also means moving away from home: as many of the life stories of the schoolchildren show, often after attending the first years of primary school in one's own village, one moves to middle school in the provincial town, to high school in a larger city, and

to university in the capital. In this journey, not without hiccups and comebacks, one also grows in power and symbolic capital, and encounters the "dangers" of education (Sharp 2002), exposure to foreign influences, mass media, gender relations, and even witchcraft, disease, and contagion, which function as "metaphors to represent the precarious nature of students' ambitions" (Freeman 2004, 104). Even in this brief story, we see how the lives of individuals are articulated with the power of institutions: from time to time, family, school, and church represent a frame within which children and adults move, not without contradictions.

Mobility and Morality

In their process of social world-building, Malagasy girls elaborate sociodramatic play (Goldman and Smith 1998), which moves through the production of imagination, mimesis, and play, and make the adult world their own by reworking some of its traits. Imagination, in this case, refers to the notion studied by Appadurai (1996), who recognized it as a characteristic trait of modern subjectivity distinct from fantasy, seen as a stream of individualistic thoughts.

The main themes of the stories are the making and unmaking of families (conflicts, separations, and new kinship nuclei), the dimension of sexuality (forms of control, use of seduction, and dangers) and female and male education.

These themes intersect with other recurring axes of development, namely those of mobility, morality, and social change. As far as mobility is concerned, we can trace a threefold use in which the category of "abroad" is employed: an escape from poverty and a channel for social improvement, the city of Paris as a setting for family recomposition, and Europe as a reward and continuation of studies. These are three models for thinking about mobility and three scenarios in which family and children move: geographical shifts, social changes, and important personal changes. Morality, on the other hand, leaks out in much of the rhetoric reported in the stories and carried out by the family, the school, and religious institutions. The process of the westernization of Malagasy women began in the nineteenth century with Christian missions' use of "missionary feminism" (Predelli 2000; Skeie 2005) to change lives. This "domestication" used control of sexuality and fertility, conversion, prayer, sewing, and literacy through Bible study.

Although the aspirations of Malagasy women and families have certainly changed over more than a century, the echo of the European model of femininity and the bourgeois nuclear family remains. Missionary and development projects organize embroidery workshops, and family planning campaigns and school curricula encourage a reduced number of children. New rhetoric has placed schooling at the center of development for the new generations, which often has to do with the control of sexuality and fertility. In Africa, in fact, one of the implicit aims of schooling has been to postpone the age of motherhood (Stambach 1998). Despite this, even today, pregnancies are among the main reasons why women drop out of school (Sharp 2002; Johnson-Hanks 2005). Female sexuality thus becomes a public ground on which girls' professional futures, school

discipline and reputations are at stake, and can significantly affect gender differences in school expectations.

As the second story suggests, educational itineraries are thus intertwined with marriage patterns, experiences of motherhood, and missionary logics. Consequently, being educated and postponing the age of marriage can also mean "being modern" locally. At the same time, precisely by retracing the suggestions provided by the *kitantaras*, we can locate education and sexuality at the crossroads of biographies. Seducing a man or chasing educational credentials may indeed be two possible options for Malagasy students. Both imagined mobility (geographical and social) and convey a specific idea of success. And again, becoming a nun or "finding a boyfriend" are two ways in which young girls represent their future and their relationship with religion, school, and family.

Social Change and the Questioning of Norms

Although adults recognize *kitantaras* as "an open book on family life," how does the knowledge of gender and age allow a particular social reality to be staged, with its peculiar narrative style?

As Keenan Ochs showed in the 1970s by studying language practices in the same region, women can "break norms" of communication. The norm of non-confrontation—according to which speech must never attack, criticism can only be made through allusion, and the demonstration of respect must govern communication—can be broken by particular groups, including children and women: in some cases, even, "women communicate feelings that men share but do not wish to express" (Keenan Ochs 1974, 137-141). *Kitantaras* might be considered as a tool for expressing childish and feminine themes that are shunned by adults and institutions. This intimate production is sheltered from the influence of the "dominant culture" and adult-centric norms. However, the stories can be a good ground for exploring gender and generational issues.

They are then not only an experiential game, nor merely mimetic (reproducing dialogues and situations seen in the adult world), but are a setting in which to address issues related to reality and one's own culture (Schwartzman 1976). If the Cameroonian children studied by Argenti (2001) construct performance masks appropriating the "material culture of modernity" and stage a "second world" with NGOs and opposition party members, similarly, the Malagasy girls recreate the scenarios of modernity they witness. School words are often in French, the urban and rural worlds sometimes overlap, and fantasies of mobility are intertwined with the emergence of local knowledge. Overcoming the dichotomies that set play against work and reality against fantasy, play can be seen as both a social action and a form of cultural production. Conversely, analyzing plays can be a way of gaining access to the complex child world (Spyrou 2011), by using children's knowledge rather than relying on them making a declaration of it (Astuti 2017), and the cultural variants that construct ethno-ludology (Goldman and Smith, 1998).

Kitantaras are a media through which Malagasy girls produce their social world and reveal their emotions and secrets. But they are also the exercise of skills and specific body technique: in the children's group I knew, it was common knowledge who was the best storyteller. The others would cheer her on, and sometimes her nails would break, or her hands would get calloused from the force of hitting the stones. But even in moments of tiredness or when she stopped to catch her breath, the performance was never in doubt. In this sense, one of my informants was right when she came up to me one day and said that by banging on the stones they were not playing: rather, they were telling stories.

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CREOLIZATION AT PLAY: IDENTITY, JOY, AND THE REMIXING OF STATIANNESS AT THE CHRISTMAS PARADE IN SINT EUSTATIUS

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Once we arrived at the playground, it was decorated with balloons in the colors of the Statian flag: blue, red, green, and yellow. The playground, roughly the size of two or three soccer fields, featured a music stage and picnic tables. Oversized candy cane lollipops, a giant gingerbread man, and huge gift boxes wrapped in cellophane adorned the grass. Instead of the traditional red-suited, white-bearded Santa Claus, a Santa-spirit was palpable through the many adults and teenagers wearing Santa hats and Christmas-themed attire. Some young men wore red waistcoats; others wore t-shirts with Santa hats printed on them, acting as Santa's "helpers." Their roles included creating balloon figures, managing the photo booth, and posing for holiday pictures. Children received juice boxes and popcorn at various food booths run by volunteers. The climbing frames and swings were popular among the children. The highlight of the event was a Zumba session led by teacher Shermayne[15], the local sports instructor. Everyone on the playground was called to join via the DJs microphone. The dancing session brought together the diverse characters from the procession—those dressed as crayons, cartoon figures, and holiday icons. Mrs. Claus and Sinterklaas danced on either side of Shermayne as hype men. Yet, Santa Claus had not appeared.[16]

Introduction

In the Netherlands and the Dutch Caribbean, December functions as both a period of celebration and a time of contestation. The arrival of *Sinterklaas*[17] and Christmas elicits joy, yet it also exacerbates entrenched tensions regarding the historical legacy of blackface in the Sinterklaas tradition. In this article, I explore the annual Christmas parade in Sint Eustatius (Statia), as a stage where costuming, play, and dance evoke possible new solidarities. This parade, with its blend of Christmas, Sinterklaas, playground play, Zumba dancing, and various depictions of costuming, provides an example of how Statian youth actively engage in reimagining and reinventing the rules of Statianness. The parade exemplifies that multiplicity cannot be contained: it resists adherence to established norms and classifications.

[15] All names of persons and organizations are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of interlocutors.
[16] Fieldnotes, December 5th, 2015
[17] Sinterklaas is a Dutch mythical figure, based on Saint Nicholas. It is traditionally celebrated on December 5th, with gift-giving and national and regional festivities. It has historically been accompanied by contested racial imagery.

I argue that the merging of Christmas, Sinterklaas, Disney, and Crayola characters in the parade demonstrates how Statianness, particularly as articulated by its youth, defies rigid or fixed identities. Instead, it reflects an ongoing negotiation between colonial markings and contemporary expressions of belonging.

The underlying sources of my analytical framework are Edouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* and Francio Guadeloupe's anthropological interpretation of relationality within the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Central to my argument is Glissant's concept of creolization (1997), as it describes the historical and ongoing processes of exchange and transformation that have shaped and continue to shape the Caribbean. The continuous process of creolization is driven by innate multiplicity, an existential refusal to become fixed. Guadeloupe's concept of a "shifting mix" (2013, 84) further emphasizes the fluidity of (Caribbean) identities, particularly in informal spaces like playgrounds, youth centers, and sports fields, where the lines defining "us and them" become increasingly permeable.

The findings presented in this article are derived from ethnographic fieldwork conducted between August and December 2015. During this period, I worked as an assistant teacher at a primary school and at an after-school program in Sint Eustatius. Through participant observation, I immersed myself in the students' daily routines, including morning prayers, lessons, and extracurricular activities. Beyond the classroom, I attended training sessions for educators and volunteered as a substitute teacher. I also explored different facets of Statian society through daily walks, visits to cafés and beaches, church services, and local celebrations. Following this initial fieldwork, I maintained contact with students through their teacher and returned to Statia for ten days in 2017, gaining further insights and context. This fieldwork is part of a broader research initiative (2015–2019) across Sint Eustatius and the Netherlands, drawing on observations, discussions, and findings from multiple research phases.

Situated in the northeastern Caribbean, between Saba, St. Kitts, and Nevis, Sint Eustatius stretches across approximately twenty-one square kilometers (eight square miles) in the Caribbean Sea. Historically, Statia has been a place of passage for many—for better or for worse. Following its initial colonization in the 1630s, the island emerged as a "world trade center" of the Middle Passage, witnessing the circulation of material goods and the bondage of African peoples (Enthoven 2012).[18]

Today, Sint Eustatius is part of the Caribbean Netherlands, directly linked to the Netherlands through its constitutional framework, alongside neighboring Bonaire and Saba. My research is motivated by an interest in the epilogue of this framework—the 2010 constitutional changes in the Kingdom of the Netherlands, known as "10–10–10". On that date, the Netherlands Antilles

[18] In naming Statia a "world trade center," I evoke its role as a pivotal node within the global networks of colonial expansion. In choosing the phrase "Middle Passage," coined by Kamau Brathwaite (1973), rather than "transatlantic slave trade," I aim to honor the incalculable suffering of enslaved peoples, instead of reducing their plight to a historical-economic event. Both choices seek to demonstrate the entanglement of global commerce with the violence of the Middle Passage.

officially dissolved and Sint Eustatius, Saba, and Bonaire became "special municipalities" of the Netherlands. This governmental reconfiguration continues to significantly affect Sint Eustatius' relationship with the Netherlands, a relationship haunted by questions of post- and decoloniality (van der Pijl and Guadeloupe 2015). Despite its geographical distance from mainland Europe, Statia's political ties subject it to Dutch governance through administrative and judicial systems, impacting its public institutions, including infrastructure, healthcare, and education. Considering this social fabric as the backdrop of expressions of Statianness is instrumental.

Scholarly analyses characterize 10–10–10 as a period of instability and uncertainty, highlighting perspectives that emphasize strained relations and the pursuit of sovereignty, alongside those that point to enduring power imbalances (Veenendaal and Oostindie 2018; Weiner and Carmona Báez 2018). It is important to note that the island's situation was not entirely different before 2010; however, the governmental changes since then have visibly impacted structural governance and the daily lives of residents. Some laws and policy changes were gradual, resulting from a longer legal process (Oostindie and Klinkers 2003). Life on Statia continues amidst these top-down structural changes. One frequently mentioned development during my research was the increasing presence of white Dutch individuals, perceived by some adult interlocutors as attempting to impose Dutch norms and diminish Statian sovereignty.

My research focuses on how young people in and from Sint Eustatius find meaning and joy through critical engagement with these changing political circumstances. This leads me to explore how primary school students convey their sense of Statianness—the behaviours and traits embodying the essence of Sint Eustatius, or what it means to be Statian—within the post-10–10–10 Kingdom of the Netherlands. Rather than viewing Caribbean traditions as colonial leftovers, I contend that we must listen for the living, shifting currents—the processes of creolization—found in practices like the Christmas parade.

Sinterklaas: Just One Character Among Many

It was during a casual, end-of-week conversation with students in my colleague Valerie's fifth-grade classroom at Harmony Hill Primary School that I first became aware of the excitement surrounding the Christmas parade. The students' collective advice was clear: witnessing the parade was essential. When I asked the students what to expect of it, Valerie looked at the group of girls in the classroom who usually took it upon themselves to explain things. Her suggestive smile was a signal for Justine, the group's unofficial spokesperson.

"Teachaaa, you just have to come and watch. See for yourself." Her classmates smiled and nodded in agreement and anticipation.

"It's gonna be a biggg parade! Right teacha?" Marcus added while seeking confirmation from Valerie.

Valerie then turned to the class, asking about the starting time. The responses were fragmented but informative:

"In the afternoon."

"One o'clock, teacher."

"It on the main road."

The girls then elaborated, explaining that the route from the main road led to the "big playground by the yellow school."

Accepting their invitation, I promised to find them amidst the festivities.

Later that same afternoon, my work at the Afterschool Youth Foundation (AYF) revealed a similar atmosphere of eager preparation for the next day's parade. Instead of the usual physical activities, Ezequiel, a teenager who often assisted the staff at AYF, had organized a movie session. This provided an opportunity for the other teenagers to finalize their parade preparations. Pillows and cushions were already arranged in front of the television in the AYF hangout room, while younger children vied for the best seats.

"Sit down and be quiet," Ezequiel instructed with a bright smile as The Polar Express *began to play. Jabari's immediate demand, "I want it in Nederlands!" was met with Ezequiel's* "Tranquillo swa *[chill out dude]*." *He paused the movie to impart a moral lesson: "Don't be shouting 'I want this, I want that!' Santa know who good, Santa know who bad."*

Just before Ezequiel restarted the movie, Izan, another teenager, added: "Santa uses your parents. So, your parents is your new Santa."[19]

The following day, December 5th, I arrived at the main road and soon spotted several children from the school. Some were positioned comfortably near their porches, while others, like me, had walked a short distance. The road in this area was partially paved, and as cars approached, we shielded our eyes from the blowing sand. With sunglasses in place, I took two steps back and stood ready to observe the unfolding spectacle. There was Shobana's older sister, and also Jade's—both girls from my fifth-grade classroom. They sat atop the truck alongside their friends, all adorned in brightly colored Crayola crayon costumes. They waved at us from high up, blasting Soca music from a sound system, and were met with cheers from the onlookers. The next truck pulled up shortly after, carrying teenage boys dressed as characters from Tom and Jerry, a wolf, and a Dalmatian. A few children proudly declared that they knew who was underneath the costumes. Children with parents began their gradual westward drift towards the playground, while unsupervised ones lingered roadside. My own slow pace allowed a quartet of familiar youth center boys to join me as I started walking in that direction as well. Subsequently, a third truck drove past, and we stopped

[19] Fieldnotes, December 4th, 2015

to engage in the ritual once more. On the back deck were Mickey Mouse, Mrs. Claus, and Sinterklaas.[20]

The absence of Santa Claus, given the prevalence of costumes, was unexpected. The presence of Sinterklaas was even more surprising, as I had encountered no prior references to him in the preceding weeks. It seemed incompatible for a fair-skinned local teenager to wear a Sinterklaas costume at the Christmas parade, even though it coincided with the official Sinterklaas celebration in the Netherlands. Being on Sint Eustatius, it hadn't fully registered with me that Sinterklaas, the (in)famous figure (depending on how one affiliates with the tradition), would be integrated into the local December festivities of an island with a history so intertwined with, but often resistant to, all that represents *Hulanda*—Dutch colonial spirits (Guadeloupe 2007).

The majority of scholarship on Sinterklaas examines the ingrained racism within the annual Dutch celebration, and the widespread denial of its discriminatory customs through the concept of "White Innocence" (Wekker 2016). While these critical analyses might be spot-on and pertinent to the growth of a more honest dialogue regarding the colonial echoes in the Kingdom of the Netherlands, this article makes the case for taking seriously alternative expressions of Sinterklaas within Caribbean contexts. Yet the sudden appearance of Sinterklaas at the Christmas parade complicated the scene and invited deeper reflection on how colonial symbols are reimagined, negotiated, and sometimes undone.

Some children ran across the field from one costumed character to another. Jabari, for example, dressed head to toe in fluffy red-and-white velvet, offered his assistance to Ezequiel and the other teenagers, asking if he could fetch anything or relay messages to the DJ, all the while requesting hugs from them as well. Occasionally, he would gather other children for photos with the costumed figures, taking on an informal hosting responsibility. He proudly sat on Sinterklaas's lap and posed, instructing me to take pictures as he playfully tucked the long, ill-fitting white beard. The obvious presence of one notable character (Sinterklaas) and the absence of another one (Santa Claus) had my remaining curiosity. The diverse cast of characters present at the Christmas parade, alongside Soca music, food stalls, and decorations created a space where seemingly disparate elements could coexist harmoniously. While filming and photographing the scenery, I inquired about Santa Claus's whereabouts. According to the children I spoke with, the sight of Sinterklaas and Mrs. Claus as a duo was because they were simply "colleagues for the holiday." Ezequiel, overhearing us, responded, "Santa working hard right now," and repeated with a playful widening of his eyes towards the children, "Santa, he know who good and who bad, huh?"[21]

I began to wonder whether the seemingly chaotic randomness of characters might be a carefully considered response to the intensifying public debate surrounding Sinterklaas. Beneath the light-hearted playfulness of the parade, the figure of Sinterklaas carries heavier historical and political resonances.

[20] Fieldnotes, December 5th, 2015
[21] Fieldnotes, December 5th, 2015

In the European Netherlands, Sinterklaas, annually celebrated on December 5th, is inseparable from *Zwarte Piet* (Black Pete), his subservient helper—a caricature rooted in blackface performance. The incarnations of racial imaging in mainstream media, children's songs, classroom materials, and supermarket products has long evoked contestation and public debate, initially led primarily by Black activists from the former Dutch colonies (Rodenburg and Wagenaar 2016; Chauvin et al. 2018; Soudagar 2024; van Roessel and Dumitrica 2025). From 2011 onwards, there has been a resurgence in protests, making it a flashpoint for broader conversations on race, belonging, and diversity in Dutch society. (Bahara 2014; Wekker et al. 2016). However controversial Sinterklaas is in the European Netherlands, the Christmas parade in Statia offered a different narrative around the figure. Rather than a centerpiece, Sinterklaas appeared as just one character among many. Alongside Crayolas, various cartoon figures, and Mrs. Claus, his presence was wrapped into a bigger scenario of celebration and play. The juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated figures at the Christmas parade might, at first, appear arbitrary. Yet, this article seeks to address how they operate in concert. Thus, the question is not so much why a mouse or a dog appeared, but rather: how do these elements work together?

The highly polarized climate surrounding Sinterklaas in the European Netherlands in 2015 contrasted with Sinterklaas's supporting role in Statia's Christmas parade. The parade's 2015 rendition occurred on December 5th, coinciding with the Dutch Sinterklaas celebration. That, and the increasing number of Dutch residents on the island (such as government workers and researchers), likely contributed to Sinterklaas's inclusion that year. But the event was never dependent on his presence, or clinging to it. The parade's history began with calypso performances of Christmas carols through town, and expanded into several public events during the month of December, with the parade specifically geared toward children. Organized with the involvement of local youth centers such as the AYF, teenagers contribute to the planning and execution of the event. Over the past decade, the parade has adopted different themes annually, reflecting contemporary tastes and local dynamics. Costume choices vary based on trends, availability, and the island's dependency on regional import routes.

The specific costume choices do not hold the same relevance for my interlocutors as they did for myself as an ethnographer. My interlocutors select what fits and what works, reeling in what they need at a given moment (Sanches and van der Pijl 2022). In prior and subsequent years, Sinterklaas did not play a role, as the parade took place on different dates and explored other themes[22]; most recently, a red-and-white candy cane theme. I came to realize that Sinterklaas played only a transient, supporting role, easily substituted by themes deemed more relevant each year. In 2015, however, it made sense to wrap a fragment of a Dutch story into a Statian one, supporting Guadeloupe's assertion that the Netherlands is a Caribbean island (2013, 84).

These pragmatics of remaking and remixing cultural elements as needed speak to the process of creolization and the persistence of multiplicity that characterizes expressions of Statianess. They

[22] Informal conversation with Elroy, December 9th, 2015

embody a shifting practice: improvisational and errant, where belonging is crafted moment by moment from the mix at hand (Glissant 1997, 214). In Statia's Christmas parade, new modes of belonging emerged, dancing between fragments—never fixed, always becoming. This understanding of belonging as contextual and in movement resonates with Guadeloupe's notion of the "shifting mix," where cultural expressions continuously reconfigure in response to changing contexts and multicultural encounters.

In the program of various festive days in Sint Eustatius, there was a clear space for children's participation in formal roles. Children performed on stage or took on roles as flag bearers. Movement was often involved through parade-walking, baseball, basketball, or dance. These events were typically formal and organized, featuring specific choreography, national attire, and official ritualizing acts involving local members of government. Such moments served to convey and teach Statianness. In variation, the Christmas Parade provided a much less formal setting for expressions of Statianness.

A few days after the parade, I visited my acquaintance, Elroy Smith, a 30-year-old landscaper and father of two kids who attended AYF. Having previously shared experiences of Sinterklaas-related racism during his youth, Elroy reflected on the importance of involving young people in local celebrations. He explained:

> Children learn in school about history and the nature of the island…[.] Education is always important, especially around our own history. If these young ones get the right education about their history, their ancestors, they know who we are, where we came from. *Sinterklaas-dingen* [Sinterklaas stuff] (chuups), let it thing be. But Christmas, especially Christmas, it celebrated big in Statia. All the houses light up with decorations. I think it is really good that they involve the youth, that the teens help do things for the young generation.[23]

Elroy acknowledged transnational influences on Statian culture, including those from the Netherlands. While aware of the history of racism tied to Sinterklaas, Elroy accepted the 'Sint' in his present reality. His chuups-making response to Sinterklaas proved irritation and dismissal; in contrast, he prioritized Christmas as a far more significant and meaningful celebration, choosing to set aside traditions he did not want to bother with. He aimed for a process of cultural maintenance, in which certain traditions are emphasized while others are let be. His focus was on aspects of island culture that he believed were essential to preserving Statia's heritage and maintain a sense of Statianness across generations. He was not passively assimilating or resisting, but exemplifying a Caribbean ethos of selecting and repositioning.

Discussion

[23] Informal conversation with Elroy, December 9th, 2015

What I observed during the Christmas parade resonates with Glissant's descriptions of multiplicity and Derek Walcott's conceptualization of the fragmented Antilles. Glissant writes, "Relationships of multiplicity or contagion exist wherever mixtures explode into momentary flashes of creation, especially in the languages of young people" (Glissant 1997, 105). Such remix-making encounters may occur anywhere, but they are particularly articulated in the Caribbean. The inherent multiplicity, much like Walcott's "gathering of broken pieces," (1998, 69) reflects the Caribbean's transcontinental history and a refusal to be confined to fixed categories or singular narratives, underscoring the openness and unpredictability of creolization. For Glissant, creolization "seems to be a limitless métissage, its elements diffracted and its consequences unforeseeable," something that is "never becoming fixed" (Glissant 1997, 34). This display of multiplicity, evident in the diverse array of costumes and the blending of local traditions with global popular culture, echoes Walcott's idea that Caribbeanness is a matter of reassembling disparate fragments (Walcott 1998).

To be Creole in this way is to be in becoming of change all the time, a consciousness that is well articulated in the Caribbean and extensively described in books and poetry of the Francophone and Anglophone. Dutch-Caribbean anthropologist Guadeloupe also suggests that the impossibility of becoming fixed is a matter of transcultural play, of being in the mix of things and shifting all the while. Furthermore, because this shifting mix is transculturally bound, inclusivity is required: there is no shifting mix without interplay, or as Guadeloupe writes: "I choose to imagine myself as an agent actively integrating with multiple others and therewith co-constructing the ever-changing imagined collective called Dutch society. So, without me, no Netherlands" (Guadeloupe 2013, 84). Similarly, without Christmas, there would be no Sinterklaas. The inclusion of Sinterklaas in the parade coincided with growing tensions around the increasing presence of white Dutch individuals on the island since 2010. Yet, this inclusion also occurred under specific Statian conditions, again echoing a Glissant's assertion: "I admit you to existence, within my system. I create you afresh—But perhaps we need to bring to an end the very notion of a scale. Displace all reduction" (1997, 190). Sinterklaas's participation in the Christmas parade disrupted ethnopolitical notions of difference in an ethical fashion, aligning with Guadeloupe's tenet, that "for anything that we have created, we can re-create differently" (2013, 86). To envision a future beyond the reproduction of colonial differences, we must awaken to alternative ways of being and doing.

With the weight of history and of the more recent 10–10–10 changes behind them, my interlocutors move forward with an openness to find, experience, and express joy. To experience joy in the shadow of oppression, in any form or capacity, is a mode of resistance (Derricotte 2008). Allowing oneself to experience joy under such circumstances offers a genuine possibility for change, as Audre Lorde writes: "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" (1984, 89). Statians did not have to forget about blackface—many, especially the older generation, grew up seeing it. They did not have to forget centuries of violent enslavement, decades of colonial oppression, or the continuation of political and climate inequality, as they live among the ruins and monuments of that truth.

The Christmas parade illustrates how Statianness functions in a flexible and informal environment through youth-led play. Miller (2013) suggests Christmas's integration into pop culture contributes to localized experiences, as seen in Trinidad. The Statian parade shares characteristics with this transnational reinterpretation. The merging of cartoon and Crayola-costumed participants, alongside Mrs. Claus and Sinterklaas dancing in a late-afternoon Zumba session, embodied a refusal to stay within fixed categories. Guadeloupe (2013) and Çankaya (2020) attest to this claim of diversity in their observations on fluid identity formation in Dutch inner cities. Both scholars highlight that identity formation is fluid, arising in environments where individuals gather to interact, engage in play, and learn—settings where they collaboratively establish a sense of belonging. Furthermore, the parade becomes such a site of play and informal learning (Dewey and Bentley 1960), where participation in the spectacle allows for the rearranging of cultural categories and the reassessing of what entails a distinct Statian tradition. Costuming at the parade did not merely reproduce tradition, it also engaged elements of satire and transcultural play. Through humor and exaggeration, parade participants critically reimagined figures like Sinterklaas, allowing for difference without erasure.

Ultimately, the parade adverts the value of playfulness in reimagining national identifications and creating more inclusive belonging, hinting at how creolization may open up new solidarities across the Caribbean. This is well captured in Derek Walcott's description of the Caribbean as a gathering of fragments, where survival lies not in restoring a lost whole, but in creatively reassembling broken pieces into new forms of belonging. As Walcott writes in his Nobel Lecture:

> Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole. [...] This gathering of broken pieces is the care and reverence of the restorer, not the original artist. That is the ethic behind the Antillean art: fragments are unified by their common relation to the memory of the broken whole (1998, 69).

Coda

On my way home, I walked with Jabari and his grandmother, who were also making their way home. Aside from chatting about his recent birthday, his new toy car, and his dog, I asked him about his experience at the parade.

"It was fuuun, I liked all of it!" he said.

I showed them the many pictures I had taken of Jabari as he had been running across the playground with excitement. His grandmother laughed warmly, proud of her grandson's joy.

"Show me that one again," she said, referring to a picture where Jabari and his friend Rayno sat proudly on either side of Sinterklaas.

I wondered about Jabari's grandmother's memories of Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet, and how these might carry negative feelings or pain. But before I could ask, Jabari skipped over to see the photo as well and said, "It nice, I like this one best."

His grandmother directed a smile at me and said, "Thank you."

"Of course, you're welcome," I replied, and we continued our walk home, talking about toy cars, dogs, and birthday parties.[24]

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Nicole Sanches (she/her) is a cultural anthropologist and a lecturer-researcher in social work. Her work centers on the scholarship of teaching and learning and feminist/abolitionist approaches to

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Commentaries

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'ICEYÉEYE [COYOTE] IS PLAY AND SPORT: INDIGENOUS METHODOLOGIES OF PLAYFUL PEDAGOGY FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING NIIMÍIPUU LANGUAGE AND STORIES.

Angel Sobotta (Washington State University)
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Introduction:

When teaching language through storytelling to children, the magic is through the play. Wáaqo' kex weye peẋeeléewis! [Now let's play!]

The two sík'em [horses] facing each other jump up in play, high-fiving each other with their hoofs. The pícpic [cat] plays with the yarn ball. The payóopayoo [birds] twirl in flight, playing against the wind current. Yes, it is true, "All animals play" (Graeber 2014, 3); even 'iceyéeye [Coyote] is always at play and sport. In search of knowledge, 'iceyéeye [Coyote] on a journey wanders around, going upriver. 'iceyéeye is on a nonstop adventure, a sport of sorts. 'iceyéeye is an athlete, getting in shape for the playing of sports.

'iceyéeye (ĭ-tsĕ-yæ-yĕ) can create magical things for his teammates, the Animal People. Imagine 'iceyéeye making a behind-the-back no-look pass assist to his best friend tilípe' [fox], or turning the ball over to tísqe' [skunk], fighting and getting a technical foul. Odds against him, 'iceyéeye can come back to life, like an athlete, and hit that last-second three-pointer buzzer-beater. Swish! Now a hero, 'iceyéeye saves the day, and the Animal People chant, "'iceyéeye! 'iceyéeye! 'iceyéeye!" That was a good game. Now wasn't that fun? This playful story captures the four character types of 'iceyéeye, "Heroes, Tricksters, Monsters, and Caretakers" (Borrows 2016, 825).

As teachers and students, we are 'iceyéeye [Coyotes] at Play and Sport, as we play the game of teaching and learning. 'iceyéeye is down to earth, so-to-speak, as he or she stays connected to the ground, wandering around searching.

'iceyéeye are storytellers and researchers investigating ways of knowing (epistemology) and doing (ontology), methodologies (the theory of how knowledge is gained), axiologies (ethics or morals that guide the search for knowledge) (Wilson 2008), and testing these theories and ways of knowing. These theories inform how I include Indigenous methodologies in teaching to guide playful pedagogy for teachers and students.

The subsequent sections will first provide an overview of my Nimipuutímt [the People's language] teaching and learning experiences and the background and importance of Indigenous Coyote stories, followed by an exploration of Indigenous methodologies, decolonizing, and Playful Pedagogy as a framework for teaching and learning the Niimíipuu language and stories.

Nimipuutímt [The People's Language] and Learning Experiences

I am Niimíipuu [the People], an enrolled Nez Perce Tribal member. I grew up on the Nez Perce Reservation in Lapwai, Idaho.

My love for learning nimipuutímt [the People's language], like a fluttering butterfly, fancy-danced in my heart in the third grade at Lapwai Elementary. Knowing how to say words in my own language was exciting, and my dancing heart further fluttered with excitement during language games. I was good at it. I felt smart!

In my twenty-eight years as a nimipuutímt teacher, I have witnessed students flutter with excitement, eyes sparkling like stars, engaged and having fun when I teach nimipuutímt through our traditional 'iceyéeye [Coyote] and the Animal People stories. My love for language and storytelling has put me on a journey, wandering here and there, searching for knowledge to find fun ways to teach our language and stories. This is how we as teachers are like 'iceyéeye. We search for Play and Sport in our teaching. We search for creative ways to teach and help the students connect to their gifts of ways of knowing and learning.

However, I recognized the tensions and challenges when teaching 'iceyéeye stories in a colonized space within the confines of a cold, institutional-like feel, caging in 'iceyéeye between the four walls. Many stories are place-based on the land, teaching lessons of how things came to be, like the rock formations of Miss Frog, the Mammoth, and Coyote's son. In the last section, I will share how I applied Play and Sport to teach nimipuutímt through story and other ways of learning language with movement, bodily-kinesthetics, and total physical response.

The Background and Importance of Indigenous Coyote Stories

What are Indigenous Coyote Stories?

I define Indigenous Coyote stories as stories from Indigenous, Tribal, Native Americans, and First Nations people. I also refer to these stories as "Coyote and the Animal People" stories, with the Coyote being the Trickster. However, for other Tribal or First Nations people, Raven or Spider are Tricksters in their stories.

Many of the stories were tied to the land and served as guideposts. According to Indigenous scholar John Borrows (Chippewa of the Nawash First Nation), Indigenous law is the Indigenous Peoples' legal system for dealing with human flaws, regulating behavior, resolving disputes, and having obligations to the natural world, like animals. Narratives or stories are also part of these regulations (Borrows 2016).

Indigenous scholar Aaron Mills (Couchiching First Nation) uses the term "Indigenous lifeworlds" to understand Indigenous law. According to Mills, lifeworlds refer to "ontological, epistemological and cosmological framework," an Indigenous lens or worldview. He contends that "lifeworld begins with creation stories" (Mills, 2016, 850).

As ’iceyéeye, we learn from the virtues and mistakes our teacher, ’iceyéeye, teaches us in the stories (Borrows 2016, 831).

What are the benefits of stories?

When understanding the deeper meanings of the stories, the experience can be transformative and serve as guideposts, build self-esteem, and nurture the spirit with good medicine. In *Teaching Indigenous Languages* for the Fourth Annual Stabilizing Indigenous Languages Symposium (1997), authors Heredia and Francis added, “Erdoes and Ortiz (1984) refer to the 166 legends that they recorded as productions from the heart and soul of the Native people of North America” (Heredia and Francis 1997, 46).

How did the Colonist Project interrupt Indigenous Peoples’ Way of Life?

The Indigenous People’s way of life included the ’iceyéeye and the Animal People stories, however “these long-standing systems of education that have helped our children learn the full spectrum of what it means to be human, to live ethically, and to take care of one another have been interrupted by colonial models of education” (McCoy et al. 2020, 3). Those models of education included the Indian Boarding schools, which were not in the “Indian” people’s best interest, as the “Colonist Project” was a deliberate design to colonize “Indian” minds to gain access to Indigenous resources (Grande 2008, 4). For example, “Indian children were taken from their parents and forced to go to Boarding Schools” (Kimmerer 2013, 318). Speaking their Native language was forbidden. If caught speaking their language, “their mouths would be washed out with soap, or worse, for talking that “dirty Indian language” (Kimmerer 2013, 50).

Similarly, in Canada, First Nations children were forced to go to Residential Schools in which, Kimmerer (2015) states, “Indigenous everything was erased and replaced with euro-colonial knowledge, values and beliefs” (Absolon 2022a, 45). The violent erasure of our traditional stories/Indigenous knowledge was “an explicit goal of the colonial project at the Indian Residential School projects across Canada with explicit goals to rid the Indian out of the child. These genocide projects sought to eradicate Indigenous knowledge” (Absolon 2022b, 46). When we think about how kids love to play, that spirit of play in hearing and telling stories was also suppressed. All kids deserve to play.

Our oral traditions may have been silent for a while, but today, the stories remain. By telling our stories, we decolonize and once again experience their transformative power.

Exploration of Indigenous Methodologies and Decolonizing

With ’iceyéeye [Coyote] as a teacher, growing up as Niimíipuu [the People], and teaching Niimíipuu students, my cultural background informs me of how our diverse students’ learning is influenced by their culture and language differences, and the understanding of how their ways of

learning can be made more meaningful through different approaches (Wiseman et al. 2005). This led me to expand my creativity in teaching and to consider standards and theories of teaching and learning.

In ethical, culturally responsive, and creative teaching, we recognize and consider the students' cultural learning methodologies and multiple intelligences. Howard Gardner's theory includes eight domains of learning: linguistic or verbal, musical, spatial, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist (Lane 1998; Wiseman et al. 2005). Therefore, it is ethical to implement pedagogy that includes multiple intelligences to reach the students' ways of knowing and learning.

Teaching Niimíipuu and other Native American students, culturally responsive teaching is not only ethical, but it is also more meaningful and effective, as it aligns with the students' ways of knowing. According to the Nez Perce Cultural Standards developed by the Circle of Elders and the Nez Perce Education Department, Niimíipuu students learn through Active Visualization, Community Orientation, Oral History or Storytelling, Learning from Mistakes, Personal Sovereignty, Teachers are Guides, Experiential Learning, Interpersonal Relationships, and Evaluating Mastery. In the development of these standards, Running Horse Livingston (Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa), a consultant on Indigenous pedagogy and culturally responsive curriculum, shared that there is a difference between teaching culture and teaching culturally (Nez Perce Tribe, 2013). Teaching stories culturally to Niimíipuu students aligns with their traditional ways of knowing, learning, and doing. This process involves:

1. **Active Visualization**: Drawing or acting out the story.
2. **Community Orientation**: Learning through story groups and collective knowledge.
3. **Oral History/Storytelling**: Listening to stories as a method of learning.
4. **Experiential Learning**: Telling the story at its original site for a deeper connection.
5. **Evaluating Mastery**: Demonstrating understanding by retelling the stories independently.

This holistic approach integrates the Nez Perce Cultural Standards with hands-on learning methods, and the story and language teaching and learning also align with Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences: linguistic or verbal, musical, spatial, and bodily-kinesthetic (Lane 1998; Wiseman et al. 2005).

Indigenous land-based pedagogy of language and stories is where teaching culturally is experienced most profoundly. The unnatural settings of learning the language through the stories while within the confines of a colonized institution are problematic because they fail to offer experiential learning in the natural setting, developing a relationship with the stories from the land, which is a living being, a teacher, and an interlocutor (Engman and Hermes 2019).

Teaching the language and stories in natural settings reconnects the Niimíipuu to the land, and learning becomes more powerful. Indigenous scholar Vine Deloria Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux) teaches that there is power in place when we Indigenize our teaching philosophy. Therefore, when we reclaim teaching the language and stories in their natural, usual, and accustomed place on the land, we Indigenize our Play and Sport pedagogy with our philosophy of land-based learning. Furthermore, "Indigenous societies have long practiced forms of education in which land-based, play-based, intergenerational, and applied learning strategies have helped the next generation learn what it means to live in ethical and sustainable relationship with all living beings" (McCoy et al. 2020, 3).

Describing Playful Pedagogy:

As language teachers, we are always looking for innovative language teaching methods, such as teaching the language through stories in which "learning Indigenous law can heighten the ability and the motivation to learn the Indigenous language of which the law is a part" (Borrows 2016, 810). The Niimíipuu have rich resources, including a plethora of Niimíipuu oral narratives (primarily 'iceyéeye stories) written in Nimipuutímt and English. Teaching the language through the stories grabs students' attention, and they become active participants in the retelling. For example, I become very animated when telling a story, making the students laugh. I have the students retell the story, and they take on different characters when re-enacting it. The students often use some of the same inflections and expressions I used during the initial storytelling.

Imagination as Play and Sport

Wáaqo' kex weye peẋeeléewis! [Now let's play!] Imagine the nimipuutímt word, hiweyéhnece [snow is coming down]. Standing in front of the class, I demonstrate to the young Coyotes, raising my "paws" into the air and starting to the right, then zig-zagging to the left, back and forth with my hands while saying the word hi-we-yéh-ne-ce with each syllable of the word represented by movement with my "paws." We repeat this word and use bodily kinesthetics with Total Physical Response (TPR), which uses physical movement to teach verbs (Total Physical Response (TPR) http://www.theteachertoolkit.com/index.php/tool/total-physical-response-tpr). The students, the young 'iceyéeye, use their imaginations to apply the Play pedagogy, embodying the movement of snow falling to the ground. The kids-in-play repeat with me the word hiweyéhnece until our bodies are crouched all the way down to the ground.

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Then I teach them that once the falling snow touches the ground, we call it by the noun or name meeqe' [snow]. Now the game of imagination, Play and Sport, builds in excitement when I instruct the students to place their 'ípsus [hands] into the meeqe' and make a méeqe'nim poxpok'ála [snowball]. I then command them, 'etuleyléekitx méeqe'nim poxpok'ála! [Throw the snowballs]! We repeat the words méeqe'nim poxpok'ála as we throw our imaginary snowballs at each other. With the continuous repetition of the word and making imaginary méeqe'nim poxpok'ála, we duck and hide our faces to prevent us from being hit by the imaginary méeqe'nim poxpok'ála. Some pretend that they got blasted in the face with the méeqe'nim poxpok'ála. The students with glistening eyes, smiles, laughter, and rosy cheeks, having fun, experiencing Play and Sport, get worked up in this workout. They then yell, "Let's do it again!" It never fails, year after year; the young 'iceyéeye love this.

Indigenous Land-Based Pedagogies and Decolonizing in Play and Sport:

The decolonizing practices include restoring relationships to the language, land, and stories through Indigenous land-based pedagogies and reclamation of cultural knowledge and ways of knowing. The Nez Perce Cultural Standards (NPCS) are also addressed here as they demonstrate cultural ways of knowing and doing.

Playful Pedagogy for Teaching and Learning Niimíipuu Language and Stories was an embodied educational experience by the students in play and sport during field trips to these story sites.

In the classroom, I told the students the story of *Hay'óoxchacwal kaa Hinméet* [Cottontail Boy and Thunder] (Watters and Walker, 1967). This was done in preparation for the Play and Sport field trip in the outdoor classroom. During the storytelling, I take on the roles of each character. This is Play and Sport because a lot of energy and movement—bodily kinesthetics—is put into

telling the stories. Play in teaching comes alive when I add sound effects in the storytelling. I have fun telling the stories that create a playful learning environment. Sometimes I put on my ’iceyéeye mask and use props. I use key Nimipuutímt words during the storytelling combined with TPR.

Key Nimipuutímt words are written on the whiteboard. I add some quickly drawn illustrations for the students to connect meaning with TPR, spatial intelligence, and Active Visualization during the storytelling. After the storytelling, the students join their peer story groups (Community Orientation). Collectively, the students exercise agency as they embody ’iceyéeye searching for knowledge on retelling the story.

In each story group, the students draw what they remember and write key nimipuutímt words (linguistic/verbal) from the story. The students connect the pictures to the stories (TPR), and some students show great abilities in their spatial intelligence as artists.

Each story group discusses what they feel the lessons are from the story. The students are empowered by experiencing their sovereignty and self-determination of what the story means to them. Then I share my thoughts on what I have learned from the story. It is important to have the students discuss the story's meanings with each other first, to avoid giving them a prescribed lesson about the story. Each story group presents their story work to the whole class, demonstrating Storytelling and Evaluating Mastery.

In class the next day, I did a quick one-minute tell-all of the story, sounding like an auctioneer or those medical prescription commercials that provide the warnings in a fast-forward pace. It was entertaining and fun. If it wasn’t fun, then what’s the point, right?

We then practice some key nimipuutímt words and songs or chants (musical). Then each story group experiences a ‘play day’ with teamwork in retelling and acting out the story (Community Orientation, Bodily Kinesthetics, and Spatial).

All these Play and Sport strategies take place in the classroom in preparation for the exciting day of Play and Sport pedagogy in the outdoor classroom.

On November 1, 2022, the Lapwai Middle School eighth-grade students and I went on a field trip to tip’aẋlíwam [Split Crevice Head of Canyon] near Tolo Lake west of Grangeville, Idaho. This is the story site of *Hay’óoxchacwal kaa Hinméet* [Cottontail Boy and Thunder] (Watters and Walker 1967), where Cottontail Boy and Thunder fought because Cottontail Boy stole Thunder’s wife. During the figh,t Thunder strikes lightning at Cottontail Boy, which creates a big crevice of split rocks in a deep gorge there.

While at tip’aẋlíwam and the Tolo Lake area for Play and Sport, like ’iceyéeye, we wandered and searched around the 36 acres. We saw a táamsas [wild rose] bush, from which the students learned rosehips (rose berries) contain a lot of vitamin C, and some students and I tasted it (Experiential Learning).

They also learned about the mammoth bones found in Tolo Lake in 1994, and that the lake's original name was named after a Niimíipuu woman, Tulikéec Cexcéemit [placing (bets) on

cards]. Later, the name was shortened to Tule and corrupted to Tolo by the White settlers. Lastly, the students learned that their Niimíipuu ancestors camped, gambled, raced horses, and dug qém'es [camas] there, and that this site is also the place where the Niimíipuu camped when the U.S. government declared war on the Niimíipuu in 1877.

In search of knowledge and wandering in this Play and Sport outdoor classroom environment, we learned from the land and burned some calories, too. It was a great day at school!

A playful pedagogy creates an environment where students embody the lessons, and teachings become more effective. Children are inspired to learn and share, and they teach their families at home.

Play and Sport with Language

It is only natural to show movement, as our nimipuutímt is verb-based. Therefore, our words are playful! Some nouns and onomatopoeia, or vocal imitation and sound-effect words, show movement. For example: 1.) many Niimíipuu stories start with saying, 'iceyéeye hitoláyca [Coyote is going upriver], 2.) the noun łéepłep [butterfly], where łéep represents the onomatopoeia, and 3.) the sound-effect for a bird flying up to a branch, kwalalalala; I demonstrate this with my hand fluttering upward.

la

la

la

la

kwa

The sound effect, coupled with the bird's movement and the use of imagination, adds a magical touch to storytelling with TPR and sound effects of the nimipuutímt onomatopoeia word.

Conclusion:

I can name many examples of Play and Sport in language and story teaching, but the main point in teaching is to be creative. When your students are engaged, excited, and laughing, this affirms that they are enjoying the Play and Sports pedagogy.

'iceyéeye [Coyote] in Play and Sport has much to show us.'iceyéeye in his adventurous journeys takes us along to discover reimagined ways of learning and teaching that can be fun and include equitable ways of knowing, such as Indigenous land-based pedagogies and Methodologies of Playful Pedagogy for Teaching and Learning Niimíipuu Language and Stories. Through this way

of knowing, the boundaries of defining Play and Sport are reimagined through the lens of ’iceyéeye [Coyote’s] worldview.

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I am from the Niimiipuu Nation, an enrolled Nez Perce Tribal member, and live in Lapwai, Idaho. I teach Niimiipuu Language and Stories and Indigenous Research Methodologies/Methods at Washington State University and at Lapwai Elementary and Middle School.

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LEARNING THROUGH STORYTELLING: AN INTERVIEW WITH ANGEL SOBOTTA, AS TOLD BY ’ICEYÉEYE [COYOTE]

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Coyote and Fox

Once, a very long time ago, I had a son who was born from my elbow. I was very proud of my son, who was to be rich and a chief. Soon, I had to go hunting, and my daughters, as well as the daughters of my best friend Fox, came to take care of my son. My son was very cute, and the daughters fawned over him and tickled him, and my son laughed and laughed, until he laughed too much and died. I mourned and cried until I was exhausted. I put my son on top of the mountain so everyone could see him in his resting place.

I was furious that my son died, and in revenge I killed mine and Fox’s daughters, except for the youngest, who escaped. My youngest daughter said that she would come back in a storm and scoop up the hateful old man and jump over the cute one. I was arrogant and said to Fox, “Hear what she says—she will come back to scoop you up and jump over me.” But I was wrong; I had become hateful from my vengeance, and when my daughter returned, she scooped me up and jumped over Fox, and I died.

After some time had passed, Fox grew lonely, and he performed a ritual to bring me back to life. Fox cared for me, and eventually we were able to roam the land together as we had before. Fox had forgiven me. This story teaches us something very important: vengeance can often be a double-edged sword and harm the vengeful as much, if not more, than the one seeking revenge. Instead of seeking vengeance, we should be like Fox: forgive, forgive, forgive.

This story, and many like it, form the basis for my people, the Niimíipuu’s history, laws, and guiding principles. Through niimíipuum titwáatit [the people’s stories], Niimíipuu children—my children—learn both about their culture and their language.

Niimíipuu: Learning Through Storytelling

If you have not heard of the Niimíipuu before, it is likely because you have only heard the name given to us by early settlers and French fur trappers: Nez Perce [pierced nose]. This name is a misnomer for a few reasons. Firstly, it is a misinterpretation of our Niimíipuu sign language for our people, which means “people emerging from the mountains in single file.” Secondly, the name Nez Perce conflates the Niimíipuu with other Native American tribes that lived nearby and would mingle with the Niimíipuu; those tribes did have pierced noses, and early colonizers didn’t bother to distinguish between the tribes and simply called them Nez Perce. Niimíipuu is a reclamation: it means “the people” and is our name for ourselves in nimipuutímt [the people’s language].

Unfortunately, an incorrect name is not the only mark left on the Niimíipuu from colonization. Like many other Native American tribes, colonization divorced the Niimíipuu from our language and culture. Niimíipuu culture relied heavily on oral storytelling, which would be done in communal spaces like the longhouse while in the presence of kinfolk. Gifted storytellers could command attention effortlessly as they shared tales of the ancestors, the animal people, and the lessons our stories pass on. Colonization shattered this lifestyle and things are very different now. Though some Niimíipuu are becoming teachers and making strides in reclaiming the language and stories that are integral to the Niimíipuu way of life, it is an ongoing struggle to capture the true spirit of these stories in the colonized institution of Western schooling.

Angel Sobotta is one of these teachers striving to revive the Niimíipuu language and the vibrant tradition of storytelling. Twenty-eight years ago, Angel joined to reclaim the Niimíipuu language with the Nez Perce Tribe's Nez Perce Language Program and last year she began teaching Niimíipuu language and stories at Washington State University, which resides on Niimíipuu ancestral lands. Angel wears many hats: not only does she write grants with WSU to help assist the community, but for the Nez Perce Language Program she also teaches elementary and middle school students the Niimíipuu language and stories through playful storytelling, studies the stories herself, and works with other members of the tribe to bring the language back to life, including such work as a play production of the Niimíipuu creation story, Tim'néepe [Heartplace, or Heart of the Monster].

Just as she now teaches the children, Angel herself had to learn the stories of the Niimíipuu, and that learning was an ongoing process. "I only knew pieces of the stories, not the depth of them," she shared with an interviewer, discussing how the distance colonization created between the Niimíipuu and Niimíipuu ancestral stories has made it difficult to form a full understanding of Niimíipuu history. "It's estimated we have about three hundred stories, but many were lost due to colonization. We also only have one or two elders left who speak the language, down from the six or seven we had when I started."

For the Niimíipuu, the land itself is the center of much of their history. Angel's dissertation focused on Storytelling and Land, and she shared that she recites story names and their teachings to herself as she travels around her tribe's ancestral lands: "The stories are like relatives. You have to visit them, and they wake up when you think about them. Saying their names keeps them alive, it reminds me who and what they are and honors them."

Because of this critical link between the land and the stories, Angel found it difficult to communicate the spirit of Niimiipuu stories to her students in Western-style schooling. The stories simply don't come across as well in the written word, according to Angel, and students' attention spans are shorter these days, but even more problematic is how stifled the stories become while in an environment established by and for colonizers.

Angel's method of teaching is more than just telling our stories to Niimíipuu children. In order to engage the students, Angel embodies Coyote in her teaching, leading the students to explore nimipuutímt through play; in her own words, she is "playing the game of teaching and learning," treating storytelling as a form of play. The students play games to help them learn our nimipuutímt,

acting out the stories and doing play exercises to help solidify their understanding of the vocabulary. However, to tell the stories of the Niimíipuu in Western-style schooling demands intense energy and dedication from the teacher, and denies students the ability to truly connect with the stories.

Angel's solution to this problem was simple and highly effective: she took the students on field trips out to the land. While there, students engaged with the places the stories took place through play, as did Angel herself, once more "playing the game of teaching and learning." Angel shared that this style of teaching was very well received by students, saying that the students "are different people when they get to have a classroom outside," that the students would have fun playing in the places the stories came from and getting to learn where those places were, instead of just reading or hearing about them.

Despite the success she's found, Angel did note some struggles with this setup. First, funding is limited for field trips, as the language program is considered part of the humanities, an often-underfunded subsect of education. Secondly, and more critically, even when these field trips do have funding, only a small percentage of Niimíipuu children are receiving the education and culture that can only be gleaned from visiting the land and hearing its stories firsthand. Niimíipuu are scattered all across the country and across the world, and it would be extremely difficult to bring everyone together to the Niimíipuu's ancestral lands. Angel quoted Vine Deloria Jr. saying that "education is not Indian education if it's not based on the land"—while modern technology can help fill some of the gaps for Niimíipuu located around the world, granting them access to videos and other digital archives of nimipuutímt, it is a poor substitute for being there in person. However, despite these struggles, Angel is hopeful for the program's future and determined to keep the nimipuutímt alive.

Now that you've heard mine and Angel's stories, it's your turn. How can you be like Coyote and discover new ways of learning through play? What stories can you tell?

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Angel Sobotta in discussion with the author, April 2025.

Author Biography

Jessica Chapman holds a BA in English from Meredith College. Aside from her interest in copyediting, Jessica is also pursuing creative writing, largely exploring themes of identity and self through the lenses of fantasy and horror.

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About NEOS

NEOS is the flagship publication of the Anthropology of Children and Youth Interest Group (ACYIG), American Anthropological Association. The annual publication consists of peer-reviewed original short-form research articles as well as editor-reviewed commentaries and feature pieces. NEOS relies on the work of many volunteers, including the full editorial board, peer reviewers, the ACYIG communications team, and a multitude of advisory board members for both NEOS and ACYIG. If you are interested in getting involved, please contact acyig.editor@gmail.com.

About Anthropology of Children and Youth Interest Group (ACYIG)

Launched in 2007 as an Interest Group within the American Anthropological Association, the Anthropology of Children and Youth Interest Group (ACYIG) now boasts more than 1200 members in over ten countries. Members include academics and practitioners who publish on and work with, children all over the world. The need for an anthropological interest groupconcerned with children and childhood continues to center on the fact that, despite growing interest in the area of cross-cultural research on childhood, children's experiences, and children's rights, there are very few established places to discuss and publicize such work, especially outside the realm of education and health disciplines.

NEOS Editorial Board

NEOS team. I recently graduated with a Master of Arts in Psychology from Pepperdine University. I'm currently completing an internship in clinical therapy, with the goal of obtaining my license to practice as a professional clinician. I'm also working as an adjunct instructor of Psychology at the community college level. I am a lifelong resident of the state of Michigan, where I'm a very active member of my church's music program, singing and playing the piano. I can also be found interacting with several wonderful cats when it pleases them to allow me to do so.

Sean Heath, PhD, *Assistant Editor*
Sean is a Social Anthropologist specializing in water, the senses, wellbeing, and the politics of bodily movement. He received his PhD in 2022 from the University of Brighton where he conducted research with age-group competitive swimmers in the UK, which examined the sensory aspects of immersion in water and the sociality of club swimming and how these affect youths' wellbeing. Currently, he holds a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Postdoctoral Fellowship at KU Leuven studying water stewardship and the environmental politics of wellbeing in the entangled relationships between arctic waters, the senses, and place. Between cold-water dips and outdoor swims, he has also examined the emplaced entanglements between the material, social, and emotional experiences of outdoor swimming in "natural" environments in Canada, the UK, and Norway. His work has been published in the leading journals *The Senses and Society*, *Body and Society, HUMOR,* and the edited volume *High Performance Youth Swimming*."

Alexea Howard, M.A., *Assistant Editor*
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