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

Nicole Sanches (Utrecht University)
n.sanches@uu.nl

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[1], 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.[2]

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*[3] 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.

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.

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[1] All names of persons and organizations are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of interlocutors.

[2] Fieldnotes, December 5th, 2015

[3] 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.

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).[4]

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 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.

[4] 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.

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."[5]

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 to engage in the ritual once more. On the back deck were Mickey Mouse, Mrs. Claus, and Sinterklaas.[6]

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

[5] Fieldnotes, December 4th, 2015
[6] Fieldnotes, December 5th, 2015

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?"[7]

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.

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

[7] Fieldnotes, December 5th, 2015

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[8]; 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 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

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

> really good that they involve the youth, that the teens help do things for the young generation.[9]

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

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

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

"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.[10]

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Author Biography

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 social work. Her doctoral research focuses on the ways in which education informs notions of belonging and nationness on Sint Eustatius, Dutch Caribbean. By working together with youth and playing with video, photography, and arts as a means to think critically, she particularly seeks to learn about approaches on togetherness and inclusiveness.

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