Under Pressure Yet Vividly Alive: Papiamento Cultures And Histories In The Digital Realm?

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Creole languages and Caribbean culture have been recognized for some time now as intrinsically plural. Papiamentu/o—the primary language of Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao—is an excellent example of this Creole plurality. The language developed to be understood by all Creole speakers living on the islands, whether of African, Sephardic-Jewish, or European descent. It is a central and thriving element of cultural expressions of the island populations and of their extensive diasporic communities, and crucial to identity formation and belonging.

Today, Papiamentu/o is of increasing significance in the cultural field, in community work, and in the arts and education of the Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao (the ABC islands) and their diasporas. Yet at the same time, the language is under pressure. On the islands, knowledge produced in Papiamentu/o is not valued or incorporated on equal terms with knowledge produced in Dutch, English, or Spanish. And in the broader context of Caribbean studies, even today, Papiamentu/o and its cultural context remain relatively underrepresented. For this edition of *archipelagos*, we invited scholars, heritage workers, and arts and education professionals to reflect on Papiamentu/o cultures and histories in the digital realm. Their contributions explore the implications of these dynamics for digital praxis in this relatively unknown part of the Americas.

The apparent disconnect or neglect of this area in Caribbean studies is often attributed to the wrongly presumed dominance of Dutch cultural ties and the Dutch language on the six "Dutch" Caribbean islands. On all islands, Dutch is—and always has been—a minority vernacular. The Windward islands Saba, St. Eustatius, and the Dutch part of St. Maarten are primarily Anglophone, whereas in the Leeward islands of the ABC islands, the dominant vernacular is the language known in English as 'Papiamento.' With two variations—Papiamentu of Bonaire and Curaçao and Papiamento of Aruba—its origins are still disputed, though it is clear that the parent language of this Creole is West Iberian

archipelagos • 2025-04-01 • 10.7916/ARCHIPELAGOS-Q4XH-SG20 • CC-BY 4.0 archipelagos journal • ISSN: 2473-2206

Romance. Today Papiamentu/o is a rich mixture of Portuguese, Spanish, Upper Guinee Creoles, Native American languages, Dutch, French, and English.

As the primary element of identification and belonging on the islands, Papiamentu/o is crucial to education, community work, and the arts, implicated in a constant process of discovery and renewal. Papiamentu/o often takes center stage in the cultural praxis of the ABC islands and their diaspora. In theatre or music performances, the language is not simply being used, but also experimented with, enriched, and celebrated. As elsewhere in the Caribbean region, Papiamentu/o radio stations and radio programs have been a crucial outlet and platform for cultural and political information, interaction and expression since the late 1940s, producing a rich orality and shaping oral traditions.

With its reach and use pervading all social and economic categories, Papiamentu/o is a language of resistance, but not exclusively the language of the oppressed.[1] It is broadly appreciated in all parts of society, but contested and used politically by the elites in a way similar to other Creoles.[2] Whereas in Haiti, Creole was officialized in the constitution of 1987, it took the ABC islands until the 1990s to begin the process of establishing Papiamentu/o in policies and education, and even longer to achieve officialization. In the meantime, impactful political changes occurred during these decades. Today, the islands are all non-sovereign territories within the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The three smaller islands—Bonaire, Saba, and St. Eustatius—have been governed as special municipalities of the Netherlands since 2010, and the three larger ones are autonomous countries within the Kingdom: Aruba since 1985, Curaçao and St. Maarten since 2010. Officialization of Papiamento in Aruba took place in 2003, followed by Papiamentu in Curaçao and Bonaire in 2007. After 2010, with the change in governmental structure, the official status of the Papiamentu language in Bonaire ended, and it took years for the language to be recognized here under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (2024).

On the relatively small ABC islands, many challenges surround developments in the area of culture, education, and science. The organization of language planning by the Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao governments has suffered both from changes in political structures and agendas and from a persistent lack of funding. To this day, no effective inter-island cooperation is in place. Structural investments are also undermined by local educators, parents, and students prioritizing education perceived as global, relegating the local language to the periphery of private conversations and stagnating the development of local educational material.

Looking beyond these grim observations, we also see that cultural peripheries are creative and resilient spaces. As a vernacular and as a published language Papiamentu/o has been increasingly productive, especially since the 1930s. Cultural emancipation and educational developments of the 1970s and onward substantially stimulated the formal and creative use of the language, resulting in a wealth of published and recorded sources that could enrich cultural development, education, and research.

In the past years, all islands made progress in digitizing access to knowledge and materials, some by building repositories, others by creating tools, adapting pedagogy,

[1] Joyce Pereira and Luc Alofs, "Papiamento: An Official Caribbean Creole Language from Legal Repression to Full Recognition," *Caribbean Cultural Heritage and the Nation: Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao in a Regional Context* 4 (2023): 137, https://scholarlypublications.universiteitleiden.nl/handle/1887/3629949.

[2] Philipp Krämer, Eric Mijts, and Angela Bartens, "Language Making of Creoles in Multilingual Postcolonial Societies," *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 2022, no. 274 (1 March 2022): 51–82, https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl-2021-0018.

and applying for funding, with hard work particularly being done by those preparing the soil for future scholars, teachers and cultural workers. Through the efforts of dedicated *aficionados*, major progress has been made to develop tools for Papiamentu/o in the digital realm. Among these on Curaçao is the *Banko di Palabra*, a unique digital repository for all words in Papiamentu, and an official Papiamentu word list (*Buki di Oro*) released in 2011 under a CC-BY-NC license.[3]

The perspective for obtaining support for digitization has substantially improved in the past few years. Dutch governmental funding organizations launched new programs in the context of the formal apologies for slavery offered by the Dutch government in 2022 and the Dutch King in 2023 to the ancestors of all enslaved persons under Dutch rule. An intensified focus on colonial heritage and transnational cultural activities with former Dutch colonial territories followed. Within The Netherlands, key heritage partners gradually came to acknowledge, understand, and embrace the importance of the intricate cultural connections within all territories of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, including the six islands in the Caribbean.[4] From a small Caribbean island perspective, this outreach—as welcome as it is—also proves challenging. For all parties involved it requires a fundamental change of perspective and triggers uncomfortable but necessary conversations about patterns and implications of inequality, and about ground rules for ethical forms of cooperation.

Within the Caribbean, interestingly, the Dutch islands have often been understood as an anomaly, with their apparent close ties to the Kingdom and focus on Europe.[5] Though this perception contains elements of truth, it is far from the whole story. Long before the recent turning of tides in The Netherlands, librarians, heritage professionals, and archivists from the Dutch Caribbean built relations in the region through organizations such as the ACURIL library association, and the CARBICA archives association, and started cooperating with platforms such as the Digital Library of the Caribbean (dLOC) and the Internet Archive.[6] These Caribbean networks all share a commitment to employ digital humanities as a tool to promote inclusivity, cultural democracy, and human rights. Furthermore, on all ABC islands in the last decades, collections have been developed with a distinct postcolonial focus and ambition to empower. Through community projects, for instance, voices of the marginalized have been recorded on all islands since the 1950s.[7] From this tradition, the islands have a solid starting point to use digital humanities—in the words of Roopika Risam—to "reshape the dynamics of cultural power and to reclaim for individuals and communities the humanity that is routinely denied."[8]

That there is much to be said about Papiamento/u culture and history in a digital realm—from digitization to critical reflection and innovation—became clear as abstracts

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[3] Ronald Severing et al., "Towards a Language Database of Papiamentu," 2014, 97–104.

[4] About the historical background [in Dutch]: Margo Groenewoud, "De Digitale Toekomst van Caribisch Erfgoed in Het Koninkrijk," in *Antilliaans Erfgoed.*, ed. Gert Oostindie and Alex Stipriaan van, vol. II. Nu en verder (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2021), 233–52.

[5] Margo Groenewoud, "Decolonization, Otherness, and the Neglect of the Dutch Caribbean in Caribbean Studies," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 64 (2021): 102–15.

[6] Margo Groenewoud, "Epiloog: de som van de delen.," in *Cultuur Digitaal: een eerste verkenning in de Cariben*, by Shahaila Winklaar (DEN kennisinstituut cultuur & digitale transformatie, 2024).

[7] Margo Groenewoud, "Digital Humanities, Social Justice and the Pluricultural Realities of Dutch Caribbean Heritage Archives," in *Caribbean Cultural Heritage and the Nation. Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao in a Regional Context*, 2023. https://scholarlypublications.universiteitleiden.nl/handle/1887/3629949

[8] Roopika Risam, *New Digital Worlds: Postcolonial Digital Humanities in Theory, Praxis, and Pedagogy* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2019), 143.

and ideas poured into our inboxes. Of all these works, four are included in this issue of *archipelagos*, and other work is still in process. So yes: there is much more to come on the Dutch Caribbean digital and the Papiamentu/o language.

In this special issue, Curaçaoan scholar, librarian and educator **Mikayla Vieira Ribeiro** introduces us to the legacy of Curaçaoan multi-talent Elis Juliana. Known for relentlessly bringing a wealth of stories and insights to the community, Juliana foregrounded the importance of Glissant's right to opacity: the fact of knowledge that not everyone is entitled to know. Looking at his legacy in a digital realm, Ribeiro analyzes Juliana's multimodal approach to archiving and explores the background and relevance of his archival principles, centering "trusting relationships, respect for modalities of knowledge, and reciprocal knowledge sharing."

Three essays in this issue elaborate on how colonial power structures have influenced the (digital) archive and reflect on the consequential ethical considerations and responsibilities. Trinidadian historian and digital educator **Debbie McCollins** reviews The Colonial Collections Consortium, an extensive digital archive of objects produced by or acquired in the Dutch colonial world. Her assessment engages with the core dilemma of this transnational hub, as partner institutes work with colonial historical material "controlled ultimately by imperial hands" while trying to correct colonial injustices. Also presented in this issue is the Historical Database of Suriname and the Caribbean, an international project involving archives, data scholars, historians, students, and citizen scientists. As **Björn Quanjer et al**. lay out, this project was initiated to collectively make slave registries accessible for ancestors and historians. The team describes how the project enables Caribbean communities to participate in data creation that will eventually facilitate the recreation of their ancestry and their transnational histories. Under public peer review in this special issue is The Criadas Project, presented by its initiator **Sarah Bruno**. The Criadas Project provides a database of women and girls who worked for low wages in Puerto Rican households in the first half of twentieth century. The individual data is enriched by a narrative and an artistic graphic, adding an imaginative and emphatic layer to the core details. Driven by a focus on historical representation, the collective attempts to "re-configure an alternative archive," and to initiate new conversations through additional pedagogical material. In these respects it is very much in conversation with the kinds of politically and ethically engaged digital humanist initiatives increasingly prevalent in the Dutch Caribbean.

Overcoming archival silences and supporting postcolonial studies is at the core of two essays on new digital collections. Aruban scholar **Jan Bant et al.** record work done with the Internet Archive for a collective of Aruban heritage institutes that has worked toward facilitating the availability of digital sources, including a rich corpus in Papiamentu/o. The consortium behind this Colleccion Aruba made an effort to present material in ways that speak to the communities being served by providing a Papiamento interface and Papiamento search tools and finding aids. Librarian **Jeanmary Lugo González** presents the Juan Mari Brás Collection, a digital archive curated by the Juan Mari Brás Foundation with support from the University of Puerto Rico (UPR). It mobilizes a hidden collections framework to give lesser-known collection items visibility, thereby furthering their use.

I am deeply grateful and indebted to the authors, the reviewers, and the brilliant editorial team at *archipelagos* for their contributions to this issue. I can only hope this will mark the beginning of a robust and sustained integration of the ABC into the realm of the

Caribbean digital. We have delved into uncharted yet familiar territories, and we promise the readers of this issue an illuminating journey.

Margo Groenewoud

Located in Curaçao, Dr. Margo Groenewoud is an independent scholar working with partners in the Caribbean, the United States, and the Netherlands. She is a cultural and social historian interested in new narratives about Caribbean transnationality, modernity and radicalism. Dr. Groenewoud wrote a dissertation on the entanglement of state, industry, religion and civil society in mid-twentieth century Curaçao. She published articles in international journals such as Small Axe, the Journal of Caribbean History, and the New West Indian Guide and is editor for Caribbean Conjunctures: The Caribbean Studies Association (CSA) Journal. Her historical research has been supported by the Fulbright Program, CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, the Dutch Research Council (NWO), the University of Curaçao (UoC), and the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV). Dr. Groenewoud has been a (guest) lecturer at the UoC and a range of international universities. In 2024, she had the honor of giving the yearly Tula Lecture for the National Institute for the Study of Dutch Slavery and its Legacy, Ninsee. Dr. Groenewoud is currently DH consultant for the Re/presenting Europe consortium in The Netherlands, and for the Digital Library of the Caribbean (dLOC) revitalization program supported by the Mellon Foundation.