

# Introduction

*All day long they work so hard till the sun is goin' down  
Working on the highways and byways and wearin' a  
frown  
Hear them moanin' their lives away  
Then you hear somebody say  
That's the sound of the men working on the chain gang.  
—"Chain Gang," written by Sam Cooke\**

Let's start with the problem: our definition of play is broken. We game scholars know this intimately because we have watched as the term's emancipatory potentials were appropriated and co-opted by hatred, far-right rhetoric, and bigotry over the last decade. One need go no further than a game's voice chat, Twitch stream, or Reddit forum to observe how neatly adolescent hate speech sits alongside gameplay. Was Gamergate the

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## 2 Introduction

moment when play was appropriated by hate? Or was it instead the moment when a century of rot eating away at the concept finally broke through? Folks, our ship is sinking, and we're about to be washed out to sea. Maybe we've been on this ship so long that we've forgotten what freedom is. Is play our savior or our oppressor?

Pause. Let me take a beat to define play. Most people picking up this book already have some mental model of the term. There are a few typical characteristics that are common to most definitions of play. Here are the basics: play is fun, and it's often pleasurable; play is universal, interspecies even; it is consensual or voluntary; and, finally, play is a behavior; it's something you *do*. There is more to it, of course, but for most folks the previous definition will suffice. In this book, I argue that this definition of play is only half-baked. I share how this definition might alienate Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) from spaces of play that were previously viewed as inclusive. Moreover, I want to convince you that an inclusive, and thus reparative, definition of play is as painful as it is pleasurable, as individual as it is universal, and as mandatory as it is voluntary. If this interests you, by all means, read on.

The Black radical tradition is filled with stories of slave ships. It's also replete with tales of art, music, and other forms of play that have little to do with games. "That's the sound of the men working on the chain gang," goes the refrain of an old Sam Cooke song. The men in the song are singing, but they're also in pain.

They're singing about how agonizing their work is and how miserable they are. The singing itself gives them hope. *They're playing*. Play as read through the lens of the Black radical tradition is about diving into the messiness of life, seeking a philosophical praxis that is down, around, outside, and always just out of reach. The slave ship defines the Black radical tradition, just as its specter haunts all of us who think within it. It's a history of dislocation, relocation, trauma, pain, and suffering. It's a hideous legacy, for sure. But it inadvertently produced kinship between centuries of Black folk slowly piecing back together what centuries of colonialism broke.

Fred Moten and Stefano Harney unflinchingly define Blackness as, "the site where absolute nothingness and the world of things converge. Blackness is fantasy in the hold. . . . We are the shipped, if we choose to be, if we elect to pay an unbearable cost that is inseparable from an incalculable benefit" (Harney and Moten 2013, 95). Black folk share a traumatic history that has its roots in the slave trade. We are "the shipped" because we have been imprisoned in the cargo holds of slave ships and treated as objects. Black subjectivity in this tradition thus inhabits objectification while contending with a colonized past and the possibility of a shackled future. In other words, being Black is just as much about skin tone as it is about history. As a people, we now will forever contend with a history of murder, rape, abuse, appropriation, and enslavement. We have been treated like objects, bought and sold in markets,

stuffed alongside inanimate goods on slave ships. Yet we embrace this history; it is through resilience that we are united. Despite the pain, we memorialize and share the traumas of the slave trade—and therefore the horrors of colonialism—with one another. The discomfort of living in this place and embodying this history is itself the potential of the Black radical tradition. Embracing and understanding this dissonant place is reparative. I locate within it a common ethic of resistance, struggle, and even survival.

I invoke the history of Black folk abducted on slave ships because this book specifically argues that torture—as a trauma passed down from one generation to the next—is an important part of the Black experience in North America. An experience that unfortunately resonates with countless other BIPOC globally who themselves have been abused, tortured, and worse by slavers, merchants, and governments. From these shared legacies of abuse, we find solidarity. I want to be explicit that I do not feel that being descended from slaves is either an essential part of the BIPOC experience in North America or globally.<sup>1</sup> Yet this tradition is the one I was raised within, and so I feel driven to speak to it as a way to reconsider a definition of play.<sup>2</sup>

But what do slave ships have to do with play? In short, this book is an attempt to repair a definition of play that has been largely informed by scholars and philosophers working within a White, European tradition. This tradition of play, theorized most famously

by Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, French sociologist Roger Caillois, and Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, reads play in a mostly positive sense. They assert that certain practices—namely, torture—are taboo and thus cannot be play. I argue that this approach to play is shortsighted and linked to a troubling global discourse that renders the experiences of BIPOC invisible. In other words, by defining play only through its pleasurable connotations, the term holds a bias toward people with access to the conditions of leisure. Indeed, torture helps paint a more complete picture of play, in which its most heinous potentials are addressed alongside the most pleasant. In so doing, the trauma of slavery is remembered and re-embedded in the very concept of play. In rethinking the phenomenology of play, I will detail the more insidious ways that play has functioned as a tool of subjugation. A tool that hurts as much as it heals and has been complicit in the systemic erasure of BIPOC people from the domain of leisure.

There is an urgent social imperative for this work. The Black Lives Matter protests that unfolded globally in the summer of 2020 spoke explicitly about how the erasure of BIPOC people from White social spaces in North America through the threat of torture and violence continues to subjugate entire communities. Practices that divide and exclude only exacerbate the problem of racist exclusion. For this reason, I argue that it is crucial to rethink the politics of play in our present moment. Approaches that misconstrue play as an innately good

or positive activity run afoul of this problematic. They ultimately intone that those with access to leisure time engage in activities that are generally positive, constructive, and wholesome. We must urgently rethink the very definition of play to make space for those it has oppressed, as well as those it has elevated. By rethinking play, we might recognize how the alibi it provides has enabled toxic communities to thrive. After all, Gamer-gate, the “alt-right,” steroid use in sports, and hazing rituals all owe something to play as well. The tradition of Black people descended from slaves specifically shows how we might use these tragic moments of play to create a more inclusive and reparative definition of the term.

The road toward a more inclusive study of play has been a bumpy one. Toward this end, I find it useful to disambiguate studies of games from the study of play. Game studies considers games as objects and play studies theorizes play as an embodied practice. Game studies is a younger area of scholarship that draws on many canonical theories of play. It places an emphasis on both the narrative and mechanical structures that constitute games. Thus, game studies is interested in what games are, who plays games, and the social impacts of games. Although game studies scholarship often draws upon studies of play, it is generally more engaged with theorizing games themselves. In comparison to work in game studies, work in what I call play theory has a relatively longer arc. Play theory generally considers play

as an activity. Game studies scholars might consider a game that is never played, and likewise, play theorists might consider forms of play that exist outside of games.

Unlike play theory, game studies has been wrestling with questions of inclusivity for at least two decades. I concur with Kishonna Gray's assessment that "a focus should be placed on how technology is mobilized to fulfill the project of White masculine supremacy" (Gray 2020, 4). Like many other game studies scholars, Gray implicitly theorizes technology through the medium of computer games. Computer games show how people navigate technology (both computers and software) in everyday life. And because people talk about their experiences playing games, they offer researchers insight into the subjective experience of technology. As such, games allow players to flirt with the pleasurable aspects of White supremacy by granting them the agency to engage in what Lisa Nakamura terms "identity tourism" (Nakamura 2005, para. 8) and what David Leonard considers "digital minstrelsy" (Leonard 2006, 87). For these scholars—and others like Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea M. Russworm (2017, 3) who see an immediate and direct correlation between the textual content of games and the everyday politics of gamers—representation matters. But what if these theorizations that address inclusivity as a problem of gamers, games, and gaming are too specific? This book considers how these insights from an intersectional analysis of

games and gamers might be applied to the very practice of play.

The problem of inclusivity in games that the aforementioned scholarship engages with is symptomatic of a larger problem in play studies. In order to address the problem of inclusivity in play studies, this book will confront yet another taboo—it will attempt to challenge and decolonize White European thought through the theory and language used in White European critical theory. I admire how the work of theorists like Samantha Blackmon and TreaAndrea M. Russworm uses the language of the “mix tape” to recenter Black women in a narrative around games that seeks to decenter their importance (Russworm and Blackmon 2020, 99). They organize their writing musically, splicing in lyrics by Black women to help tell the same story a different way. The idea is to show how the knowledge produced by folk in the community is a form of scholarship that is at least the equivalent of the traditional academic essay.

I dig this approach. It has been highly influential to my own thinking on the topic. In this book, I talk about music and weave song lyrics performed by Black artists into the text to drive home the point that a good deal of this material has been discussed by Black folk already—even if it’s formalization as an academic argument is itself novel. I admire the way Blackmon and Russworm make space for Black scholars to talk about play in their



own voice. It's essential to have spaces where we don't have to code switch—a point I will return to in chapter 1 when I discuss the jargon of crows. Some readers will doubtlessly find some passages in this book curious, cryptic, and wildering. This is deliberate. I mean to challenge the norms of White European scholarship with my writing. Accordingly, I vary my approach in this book by toggling between the language and methods of critical race studies and theoretical conjectures more common in the canon of White European play studies. Throughout, I focus specifically on amending the work taken up by a lineage of White European theory that has historically excluded BIPOC folk. In this sense, *Repairing Play* gives life to a form of play that attends to the traumatic aspects of play and serves as a form of reparations. After almost a century of colonizing play that centers a White European perspective, we must totally rethink the premises upon which this theory is predicated.

At the heart of my argument lies the premise that theories of play see it as a constructive and positive form of leisure. Accordingly, we must work to reconcile these theorizations with the fact that play is often hurtful, toxic, and haphazard. Historically, this theorizing has taken place in several domains. Johan Huizinga (1980) neglects gambling in the entirety of 1938's *Homo Ludens* because of its associations with the amoral connotations that were associated with the activity at the time.<sup>3</sup> Roger Caillois (2001), writing in 1961, uses

the term “corruption” to discuss forms of play that he finds troubling or unpalatable.<sup>4</sup> Jean Piaget (1962) and Lev Vygotsky’s ([1966] 2015) respective theories of play—and the educational theory of constructivism that follows<sup>5</sup>—are predicated on the idea that play is the mechanism that structures learning. These ideas have been tremendously important in game studies as well. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman’s influential reading of Huizinga’s magic circle (2003) has been so often uncritically cited as a way to explain games as a positive activity that it prompted Zimmerman to clarify his position in an op-ed for *Gamasutra* entitled, “Jerked Around by the Magic Circle” (Zimmerman 2012). Scholarship on games and learning; serious games; and games and literacy builds on Piaget and Vygotsky’s theory of play and cognition. But play is not always constructive; it can also be oppressive and traumatic.

Theorists have attempted to reconcile the creative and destructive aspects of play. Brian Sutton-Smith argues (1997) that “play” holds a variety of valences and can thus be used to achieve a variety of rhetorical ends. He argues that play is often used to advance a perspective that assumes playfulness relates to progress (learning through play), fate (play of chance), power (the play of sport and contest), identity (rituals of group identity), the imaginary (play and creativity), the self (playful hobbies that result in individuation), or frivolousness (play as an idle, leisurely activity; Sutton-Smith 1997, 8–11). In approaching play through a rhetorical lens,

however, Smith treats all of these rhetorics as equal in impact. I deviate from Smith in this book, as I feel that the basic phenomenology of play is a power relationship. The moment people engage in what Judith Butler (1990, xxxiii) terms an “activity play,” they are conjuring this relationship. As this book will detail in chapter 3, this performative act has an uneasy and violent grammar that casts the player as a subject, and the game and its other players as objects. A radical phenomenology of play centers on the moments when play is painful (as opposed to pleasurable) to recenter the BIPOC narratives that focus on the traumatic and violent aspects of games and play.

The trauma of slavery in North America is not only remembered through storytelling; it is also memorialized in forms of play. Among the most mythic and controversial games that young Black children played in the postbellum (post-Civil War) United States was “Hide the Switch.” In this game, players would root around for a hidden switch, and once found, the finder was granted free rein to flog the other players, who attempted to parry the attack. Historians considering the game’s persistence within slave culture have been challenged by it because the game reinforces the martial conditions of bondage. Many explanations have been offered to explain its endurance, often as a form of “coping.” Some historians suggest that the game allowed children to practice avoiding punishment. Others believe that the game allowed enslaved Black children

a brief moment of liberation by allowing them to role-play being the “master” (King 2011, 117–8). Both explanations are ultimately uncomfortable, as they attempt to reconcile the violence of the experience of Black folk descended from slaves by drawing on the inevitable lighthearted connotations of play. Historians thus perpetuate a trend in which torture is either reduced to a carnivalesque inversion of power dynamics—where the victim becomes the oppressor—or violence is reduced to discipline—a tactic for living within its inevitability.

A good deal of my writing in this book deals with what I and several other scholars working in a wide array of fields term “affect.” Affect is a tricky word to define because its definition varies greatly between fields. Where a cognitive psychologist might measure affect with sensors that track the beads of sweat secreted by a television viewer, a literary theorist might consider the emotions and moods experienced in the shadow of monuments. Simply defined, affect can be read as stimulus and response. But, in practice, the terms are used in a way that hints at far more—in sum, affect is a way of signaling the investigation of the minute and difficult to perceive connections that exist between all things.

I should also take a moment to discuss what I mean by torture. I situate my understanding of torture within the tradition established by the philosopher Michel Foucault. As a practice, torture is a long-term form of discipline that uses coercive techniques to subjugate people. Torture runs the gamut from its most brutal

forms—waterboarding, for example—to playground bullying, to its most pleasurable extreme—BDSM. I argue in this book that it is a mistake to view “tickle torture” and BDSM as merely “innocent” forms of torture. For even in the most innocent and pleasurable acts of play, we subtly discipline those around us to engage in unspoken rules. Relatedly, I define pleasure in an affective sense; pleasure drives desire and is often juxtaposed against pain, another affect. Torture and play are both practices that produce affects of pleasure or pain.

In this book, I am concerned with brutal, disciplinary, and militaristic torture because I feel they are undertheorized and seen as taboo in the study of games and play. The relationship between torture and pleasure, on the other hand, has been better theorized in work that analyzes social practices within BDSM communities worldwide. J. Tuomas Harviainen’s (2011) work shows how BDSM might be considered play. Yet it and other similar analyses stop short of including military and disciplinary torture (Weiss 2011, 211). This is because they theorize BDSM mainly as a form of consensual play. Instead, this book argues that we must understand military and disciplinary torture—with its connotations of pain and not pleasure (and not pleasurable pain)—as play. What’s more, I advocate for a definition of play that overcomes what I see as a fundamental taboo: play is allowed to be pleasurable but not torturous. Yet so much of play *is* torturous: BDSM, memorizing long lists of rules, exhausting one’s physical limits, and the tedium of simply

playing Monopoly. This seeming paradox—that torture both is and is not play—can be resolved. Torture *is* play, and approaching it as such reveals a good deal about how play subjugates and disciplines people.

Although this book looks at torture as a specific form of play, I implore my readers to consider a wide gamut of ways that they may have encountered painful moments of play in their own lives. This occurs all the time in the schoolyard. Children hound, chase, and tease one another mercilessly. What is often common sense for a six-year-old—that the playground can be a scary and unruly place—is seen by the aforementioned canon of play theorists through the overtly racist lens of “savage” play. I argue that bullying, too, is a form of play. We all have experienced play’s dark and troubling proclivities. Definitions of play that ignore these aspects of play exclude through omission anesthetize the concept, thus offering what I feel is an incomplete theory of play.

Recognizing how play is often experienced as torture might also help us better understand how the application of the term has been historically used to exclude BIPOC, women, trans people, and nonbinary folk from historically White and masculine spaces of play.<sup>6</sup> When play is only theorized as pleasure, minoritized<sup>7</sup> people are made to act as “killjoys” when they describe their play experiences as torturous.<sup>8</sup> The concept this book puts forth—*repairing play*—is meant to open the concept of play up in a way that is more inclusive. It means contending both with how play includes (through pleasure)

and how play excludes (through torture). Repairing play is simultaneously a form of intellectual reparations that amends the commonsense notion that play is pleasurable and a form of play that focuses on exploring the deep, painful, and sometimes traumatic depths of life.

The discomfort I noted previously when describing “Hide the Switch” relates to the relationship between play and cultural identity. This game predominantly existed within an oral history of slavery passed down through generations of Black folk. It is best pondered as an artifact of a bygone era that is better left in the past. Still, we can recognize the social repression of “Hide the Switch” as a process through which the dynamics of play were culturally controlled and regulated. Similar to the hypervigilant policing of Black people in early twenty-first-century America, Black children’s games have also been repressed and policed. Small and invisible, the historical policing of play has contributed to the cultural erasure of BIPOC today. Thus in play, because the brutality of slavery cannot be shared, we are left with a concept that relates to torture only in so far as it is pleasurable. In other words, a Black phenomenology of play begins with the notion that torture is a form of play.

To explore this argument, this book is divided into five chapters and a conclusion. It begins by revealing how the definitions of play popularized by White European philosophers are predicated on a racist binary. I look at the work of Johan Huizinga, Roger Caillois, Jean

Piaget, and other canonical theorists of play theory to demonstrate how many canonical definitions of play presume that play is productive of “civilization.” This conceit—however useful it may be for those who might advocate for play’s virtues as a tool of education and training—is fundamentally White supremacist. In the first chapter, “Decolonizing Play,” I work through the reasons that early play theory argues that play is productive and explain how the presumed opposite of “civilization,” barbarism, is often invoked to dehumanize and disparage BIPOC people. I argue that this distinction produces a double standard between the painful and pleasurable potentials of play. The painful potentials of play are quarantined, set apart from the pleasurable play that “civilized” people enjoy.

If play is not productive of “civilization,” what does it produce? The second chapter of this book, “Play as Affect,” argues that play is productive of affect. The affects of civility that the theorists in the first chapter lauded so keenly are most closely affiliated with the pleasurable. The affects most verboten in these texts are associated most with the traumatic and painful. By focusing on the pleasurable as opposed to the painful, theories of play exclude BIPOC people through erasure. Games like “Hide the Switch” noted earlier become arcane riddles of play that are only accessible through history books—“barbaric” stereotypes of how wild children play when raised outside of White European culture. *Repairing Play* is a phenomenology of play



that begins with the painful and traumatic affects that are produced by play to develop a definition that better speaks to the lived experiences of BIPOC people. But if play is productive of painful affects, we must also contend with the question of how central consent is to repairing play.

The third chapter of this book, “Play as Capture,” imagines the White European grammar of play through the language of law enforcement. It asks readers to wrestle with whether their captivation with play is actually a form of capture or arrest. Here I reject readings of play that treat it as morally ambiguous. A reparative definition of play must contend with the term’s ultimate ambivalence by returning to how play’s vertiginous potentials, madness, violence, disorder, and dissonance help close the phenomenological loop. Indeed, play will remain complicit in the erasure of BIPOC people until we contend with the disturbing and grotesque ways that people have been toyed with, tortured, and made to endure horrors in the name of play.

“Torture and the Black American Experience” is the fourth chapter of this book. It explores the historical relationship between torture and the experience of Black people descended from slavery. I draw on the history of Black people in North America specifically because it is one of many BIPOC histories that centralizes torture in its narrative and can thus speak to both the pleasurable and painful dynamics of play. Additionally, it is the story I know best because I have grown up

within this tradition. The chapter uses slave songs as an example of how play communicates the pain of abuse and serves as a way to cope with and produce a spirituality around the collective suffering endured by Black Americans. These perspectives on torture help us better comprehend play's fuller dimensions and how it might resuscitate a phenomenology of play today.

The arc of this book ends with the fifth chapter, "Recentering Blackness in Games and Play." The goal of this final chapter is to draw on examples of Black play from a variety of media to show the stories that a repaired play might allow to be told. From theater, to video games, to marbles, I endeavor to offer examples of Black art that challenge the European definition of play that has haunted the entirety of this book. Through these examples, I hope to show the reader how this project of repairing play has long been the lifework of Black artists. Play has been complicit in the erasure of BIPOC people insofar as our work, energy, and creativity have been belittled and read as tangential to the main creative products that are marketed through play. We cannot believe in the dream of a repaired play until we see that BIPOC people have been dreaming it all along.

Finally, the book ends where it began, concluding with "Repairing Play." *Repairing Play* is both a play on reparations—the financial compensation sought by Black people from the state for centuries of bondage—and the idea that a new form of play that is inclusive of BIPOC people may be reparative. By insisting on a

radical new practice of play that memorializes its most harmful abuses, we can envision a more thoughtful kind of playing where players are aware of the potential violence that lurks in an unlikely roll of dice.

To repair play, we must strip away the racist dichotomies of civilization and barbarism that were used to justify the slave trade. We must abandon the conceit that some forms of play are more intellectual or noble than others. For until we do, we are all in the hold together on a sinking ship in dire need of repair. Here in the hold, there is an ember of hope. As critical race theorist Frank Wilderson has written, “I would make my home in the hold of the ship and burn it from the inside out” (Wilderson 2020, 323). Indeed, let the blaze of the slave ship cast our shadows over the inferno of play that colonizes everything it touches. This play that is rooted in a fundamental and toxic lie of equity, morality, education, and leisure has long excluded BIPOC people—but we know how to repair it. And we shall dance, sing, chant, and celebrate as we do.

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# Repairing Play

## A Black Phenomenology

By: Aaron Trammell

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