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Decolonizing Play

*Southern trees bear a strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swingin' in the Southern breeze
Strange fruit hangin' from the poplar trees
Pastoral scene of the gallant South
The bulgin' eyes and the twisted mouth
Scent of magnolias sweet and fresh
Then the sudden smell of burnin' flesh
Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather
For the wind to suck
For the sun to rot
For the tree to drop
Here is a strange and bitter crop*

—Billie Holiday, “Strange Fruit,” 1939*

*First published as the poem “Bitter Fruit” by Abel Meeropol in 1937.

Crows play. Researchers who observe their behavior have found seven main practices that resemble what philosophers call “play.” Crows manipulate objects for no apparent reason, hide things, and perform tricks while flying. They mess around with water while bathing, slide down slopes, vocalize aimlessly, and hang on branches upside down (Heinrich and Smolker 1998). But the crows in the epigraph ain’t playing—they’re surviving. Billy Holiday’s *Strange Fruit* is a protest song. It’s a graphic description of the lynchings Black folk suffered in America throughout its history. And while the tune may have changed—the hangman’s noose today is less popular than the pistol and the police no longer wear hoods—the song remains the same. Black people in the United States and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) people across the world are more likely to be killed by the authorities, their neighbors, or complete strangers than their White counterparts. This is the rationale for the Black Lives Matter movement, and an upsetting reminder of how unjust and inequitable society remains. To repair play, we must first recognize how deeply indebted the concept of play is to White European thought and consider how this lineage has created significant blind spots in our discourse of play. Most notably, play theory insists on elevating play to a virtue—an art of modern progress—and characterizes the forms of play that compete with this narrative as corrupt. They are not “true” play.

Before digging into the canon of play theory, let's return to crows for a second. These scavengers might be more helpful in addressing the problem of play than one might initially think. Although animals play, their play is unproductive. The canon of play theory derived from the work of Johan Huizinga (1980) makes a crucial, influential argument that left an indelible mark on a good deal of research that has followed: play itself is productive of civilization. He writes, "Now in myth and ritual the great instinctive forces of civilized life have their origin: law and order, commerce and profit, craft and art, poetry, wisdom and science. All are rooted in the primaevial soil of play" (Huizinga 1980, 5). He implies that "civilized" is all that is legible to Western European "civilization." The opposite, as I will catalogue here, is barbarism. Likewise, he implies that the civilized is that which is human, while the barbaric is that which is not. Thus, he assumes that people whose customs are not legible to Western Civilization act much like animals. They are like the crows, trifling with baubles with no particular goal or end in mind. For the presumably "civilized," play is always constructive of something.

Billie Holiday once sang of crows. "Strange Fruit" was a song about how the presumably "civilized" White folk in America, were themselves barbaric. The crows in the song bore witness to the murder. They know that from the perspective of countless BIPOC folk globally, the arbiters of "civilization" themselves, the police, are

barbaric. To underscore the point, police *do* play. They play with guns, they play in uniforms, and they perform authority as they toy with the folks they encounter on the beat. Contemporary social movements like All Cops Are Bastards spell this out by showing how the police are, in so many instances, guilty of transgressing the very laws that they are sworn to uphold. Recognizing the barbarism at the core of “civilization” is core to the Black experience in North America. We have all had “the talk” about how to behave when pulled over. We know, just as the crows do, that the project of “civilization” is itself the project of White supremacy.

The problem with “civilized” play, as I describe it in this chapter, is that it pits BIPOC people against each other. The Disney film *Dumbo* speaks volumes. In *Dumbo*, the eponymous protagonist elephant is antagonized and later befriended by a murder of crows. The crows are illustrated as “hep-cats” speaking in jive and singing scat—and of course, they’re Black. In the original release of *Dumbo*, the main crow was named Jim Crow—an allusion to the offensive minstrel performer who used that moniker in the nineteenth century. The racism in the movie is so blatant that Disney later changed the character’s name to Dandy Crow in an effort to make the movie less obviously offensive. The crows in the film are playful—they sing, cackle, and strut around. This scene shows how the play of Black people was appropriated, twisted, and commodified by a White film studio. Yet this inclusion was defended by

Floyd Norman, the first Black man hired as an animator by Disney.

In defense of the crows, Norman invokes the naive gaiety of “fun” as a rationale. He wrote an article for his blog entitled “Black Crows and Other PC Nonsense,” in which he explains, “If you remember the story, a group of cool crows nesting in a field decide to have some fun at the elephant’s expense. After Timothy Mouse scolds the feathered group, they soon have a change of heart and decide to encourage the little elephant. The song they sing is pure fun and entertainment and the animation is inspired.”¹ Norman’s opinion is clearly colored by the unique pressures he faced as the first Black animator hired by Disney. Many “model minorities”—particularly the first BIPOC people in their industry—feel a pressure to perform not just competency at their craft but also cultural competency with the social norms of the community that they enter. Norman defends the inclusion of Black characters in *Dumbo*, despite the stereotypes they embody, at the expense of critiquing the White supremacist culture from which they had been created. If Norman were to call the crows out as racist, he would be seen as critiquing the company (and thus his peers) as racists. He would violate a social norm and risk being seen as uncivilized. In other words, he would be playing the spoilsport.

Leisure, fun, and games are all pathologies of an understanding of play that ignores the traumatic and painful aspects of play, instead making it—by definition

—something positive. But experiencing play and civilization as pleasures is a privilege that is at odds with the lived experiences of BIPOC people. “Civilization” has disciplined BIPOC people for centuries, it is the colonial force that put a boot to our necks, stole our land, and enslaved us. If play is productive of civilization, then by extension play must have had a hand in the evils of colonization. To read play as mere leisure is a privilege, a privilege afforded to White people. This is why stereotypes of Black people goofing off, having fun, and hanging out are read so negatively—leisure is part of White privilege. A Black man at a country club? He’s going to be watched closely by security. I’ve had to turn over my bags at game shops and comic book stores as dubious clerks cased and profiled me.

When they aren’t depicted as animals, the Black men in *Dumbo* are hard at work. The “jive crows” are contrasted with a Black chain gang (called the Roustabouts) elsewhere in the movie. The Roustabouts are depicted as lazy and drink, smoke, and play instead of work. Particularly offensive are the ways that the Roustabouts sing that their work is “happy,” while swinging heavy hammers. On all levels, the message is clear: If you’re Black you better wear a smile and be “happy” no matter how painful or traumatic your work is. You’re going to be seen as lazy no matter what, and you sure don’t get to say what counts as fun.

So how did we come to agree upon a canon of play theory that colludes so readily with the ideology of

White supremacy? This question, in my opinion, is philosophical in nature. It asks us to review theories about what play is—in other words, research that has been done on the phenomenology of play. Phenomenology is a domain of study that offers a scientific and cultural account of how practices, play for instance, are structured. It asks questions about why several experiences of the same thing, or “phenomenon,” differ from one another? Because I argue that repairing play means understanding how play is experienced differently by BIPOC people, the argument is phenomenological in scope. So is the canonical argument made by Johan Huizinga. Huizinga argues that by playing, we make society, or more specifically, “civilization.” His theory suggests that there is a structure to both “civilization” and play and that these two structures are linked. As I discuss later in this chapter, the problem with Huizinga’s argument is that his definition of “civilization” is almost exclusively a White European one. It is less an argument about what happens when people play and instead a phenomenological argument about what happens when White people play.

Because Huizinga only accounts for European “civilization” in his writing, his account of play is naive. It renders both play and “civilization” in mostly positive terms, and thus sidesteps the abuses, traumas, and pain that play connotes for BIPOC people. Margaret Carlisle Duncan, in her close reading of *Homo Ludens*, notes this exactly. She explains the contradictions of Huizinga

and argues, “Play scholars have failed in their attempts to conceptualize play *precisely because they have ignored the ideological dimensions of their subject* which lie not in play but in discourse (i.e., reflection and talk) about play” (Duncan 1988, 29). Otherwise stated, play theorists have a tendency to read play as phenomenology, not ideology. I concur with Duncan’s larger point, to assume that play exists outside of discourse, and thus ideology, is a romantic and dangerous notion. As we know well today, play is political, and approaches to the topic further the dynamics of White supremacy when they are naive to the implications that play is a form of power. Repairing play deliberately centers BIPOC people for this reason. Challenging ideology means offering alternatives to it and drawing on histories and experiences of the invisible, exploited, and otherwise abused.

Duncan advocates that we understand the rhetoric of play precisely so that we can critique its ideological character. Yet this solution sits uncomfortably with me as I read it in the aftermath of the radicalization of far-right politics in 2021. Gamergate, QAnon, and other avenues of radicalization today often use play as an alibi for aggressive, violent, and discriminatory behavior. Doing it “for the lulz” has become a callous expression of how the rhetoric of play as “free” is often used to defend the most egregious instances of play as violence. Thus, although I concur with Duncan that play is ideological, I find myself drawn to Huizinga’s interest in the

terms *phenomenological dimensions*. Because phenomenology considers the experience of inhabiting a body (Ahmed 2006, 544), I argue that Huizinga's mistake was simple: he didn't consult any BIPOC people about their experiences of play.

Thus, throughout this book, I argue that to repair play, we must center BIPOC people in the conversation. A Black phenomenology of play is both one of pain and pleasure. A recognition of how play can be painful would have resolved the contradictions that Huizinga himself fretted about while writing. Mathias Fuchs's historical work suggests that Huizinga's unpublished forward for *Homo Ludens* reveals a critical Huizinga concerned with how his theory of play may have appealed to the ideology of Nazi Germany as it "is often read in defense of 'free activity,' 'fixed rules,' and 'orderly manner'" (Fuchs 2014, 535). Even Huizinga, in reconsidering his own work after World War II, was aware of how the violent tendencies of play might complicate the potentials he would, unfortunately, term "civilized." Huizinga was watching the cops in Germany commit genocide. In returning to his own theories, he became troubled by their contradictions. If only he knew a few more Black folk, they would have told him that "civilization" ain't all it's cracked up to be.

It is pertinent then to reconsider play through a comparative approach that is critical of dominant theories. In 1938, Huizinga (1980), whose widely cited *Homo Ludens* has become a master text in the field of

game studies, first approached play as a cultural phenomenon. The anthropological scholarship in his day approached rationality as an innate biological characteristic of “man.” Huizinga hoped to disrupt this approach to what he termed the “human” by juxtaposing the “rational” society against the “playful” society.²

In Huizinga’s definition, play is the preconscious act that is often labeled “ritual,” “sacred,” “natural.” When unspoken (and therefore unlabeled) play manifests as a series of behavioral patterns common to both man and animal, listed as “order, tension, movement, change, solemnity, rhythm, rapture” (Huizinga 1980, 17). For Huizinga, there is a fundamental organizing function to play behavior. While efforts to explain it are often cast as ritual or myth, these labels are ultimately secondary. Because in Huizinga’s work, play is the preconscious driver of ritual activity. Moments of play are fleeting and temporary, but there is a finite trace of play’s significance in organizing the whole of Huizinga’s imagined lifeworld.

Huizinga describes play as fundamental to a “later phase of society.” This is a clear dog whistle for situating White European society as superior to BIPOC cultures that era anthropologists read as primitive. Although Huizinga takes steps to clarify that he feels cultures who primarily engage in ritual play might still be considered “man,” it is worth noting that language that stratifies society into stages of development has been historically used as a way for White supremacist groups to argue

for the virtues of “civilized” Western European culture. Although it is not clear how Huizinga disambiguated the crowing of colonized and indigenous people from the jargon of birds, he felt strongly that some social structures were more advanced than others. While Huizinga’s approach is broad in its scope, at least one element of his argument still drives the dominant discourse: that play is a cultural (not biological) phenomenon. This differentiation is best seen in the work of Jean Piaget, a psychologist who argued the opposite.

Taking a psychological standpoint, Piaget (1962) considers play an intimate part of our physiological makeup.³ While Piaget concurs with Huizinga’s opinion that play is a preconscious act, he argues that it is biological in nature—a step in the development of our mental sensemaking organs.⁴ The standpoint of cognitive psychology through which Piaget approaches his work is relevant insofar as it considers play a foundational psychological driver of rationality.⁵ Piaget’s theory of play presumes a type of rationality informed by the Western European enlightenment. This kind of rationality has historically excluded the cultures and practices of BIPOC people from the discourse of philosophical thought.

Where Huizinga took a broad approach to play and Piaget adopted a biologically essentialist perspective, Caillois analyzed play sociologically. Caillois (2001), who focuses specifically on the play of games, is somewhat critical of Huizinga and Piaget’s work. He finds it

curious that both omitted games of chance in their writings, and argues that this exclusion may relate to the audiences for which these scholars wrote. For Piaget, the moralistic connotations of gambling may have made its inclusion unpalatable to the educators interested in understanding play as a process of learning. As for Huizinga's omission, the inclusion of games of chance would threaten to undo his argument regarding the primacy of play as a civilizing cultural form. This would call into question those instances in which play is arguably at its most vertiginous. These are the moments in which gambling allows for individual transcendence of the economic order, like buying lotto tickets. These moments are also the most difficult to regulate and have found their strongest opponents in legal, and religious codes.

For Caillois (2001), White European society is explicitly the focus of play. He categorized Australian, American, and African aborigines "primitive societies" and referred to them as "Dionysian" contrasting them with the "rational" cultures of the Incas, Assyrians, Chinese, and Romans (87). Mimicry and vertigo, which he associates with "primitive" cultures and rituals, are said to corrupt competition and chance, which are associated with what Caillois (2001) saw as more sophisticated cultures. Competition and chance, of course, yield the meritocratic structures that underlie much of White European society. Importantly, it is vertigo that corrupts competition and mimicry which corrupts chance, not

the other way around.⁶ An anti-colonial approach to this problem might ask why it is that competition and chance are lauded in this instance, while mimicry and vertigo are decried? Caillois classifies these combinations as “forbidden play” and even maps them to cultures accordingly. His work speaks to the prejudice he brought to it, as he was concerned with miscegenation between different aspects of play.

Mihai Spariousu (1989) shows how deeply indebted thinking about play—as typified by Huizinga, Piaget, and Caillois—is to the canon of Western thought. In his book *Dionysus Reborn*, Spariousu compares approaches to play in the social sciences, philosophy, and literary theory. He locates a split in the Western consciousness along rational and prerational axes dating back to ancient Greece. Spariousu suggests that theory on the play concept has reflected this split.⁷

Games, for the most part, are theorized in all these contexts as rational, creative, ordered, and progressive extensions of play. Although games are often said to reflect the social order (Bowman 2010; Caillois 2001; Fine 2002; Hofer 2003), such a sentiment fails to question the racial politics of this social order. Indeed, any social order that reads the emotional against the rational has justified slavery and encouraged violence against women, nonbinary folks, and people of color in the name of “rationality.” Spariousu’s analysis, though uncritical of the cultural dynamics that take place within the social order produced by play, is spot on. We

live in a society that denigrates the lived experiences of minoritized people in favor of a presumably “rational” set of living conditions in which the police are used to control a presumably emotional and violent BIPOC population. As I will describe in more detail in the next chapter, repairing play makes space for understanding the often violent and “emotional” affects produced by play.

The “rational” telos of the play I’ve described in this chapter is productive in a material and economic sense. For evidence of this, one need look no further than the burgeoning “serious games” movement. According to a survey by Sawyer and Smith (2008, 23–27), serious games have applications as diverse as health, advertisement, training, education, science, research, production, and labor. You might now find serious games in government, nongovernmental organizations, defense, health care, marketing, communication, education, business, and industry. Serious games are an extension of the proratational aspects of play and are explicitly designed to strengthen their respective fields. In other words, they are designed to reinforce the order of existing institutional frameworks.

Serious games have been particularly influential on today’s game studies. This application of play is often well-meaning and altruistically minded insofar as it situates play as a potential driver for collective action. It tries to imagine a path for gaming that betters education, social justice, and even media literacy. Although

serious game designers and theorists often see themselves as being allied with the struggles BIPOC people face globally, they further a vision of play that neglects the many ways that play can be traumatic. In this sense, serious play continues Huizinga's mission to compel readers to understand how play "civilizes." Civility, in his definition, aligns the interests of a mostly White, upper-class elite against the interests of BIPOC people who globally are just "making do."

Tara Fickle is wise to the ways that this cannon of play theory has neglected BIPOC interests. Huizinga, Caillois, and so many others, she argues, were Orientalists. By this, she means that they were Western scholars who, through their work, exoticized and fetishized eastern play practices. Fickle (2019) concurs with much of the aforementioned, writing that play theory defaults to a "Eurocentric viewpoint, in which 'culture' implicitly means Western European culture" (115). Thus, the work of Huizinga and Caillois ultimately aims to further the White European norms, which have been seeded globally through colonial initiatives for centuries. Recognizing that play as we know it is aligned with the interests of a White bourgeois few is key to moving forward and developing a new theory of play that explores the experiences of BIPOC people.

The beginnings of such a theory are discussed today in game studies. There has been significant discourse on the topic in game studies, as there remain many game designers who continue to embrace colonialist tropes

in their design practice. Critical game studies scholar Soraya Murray (2018) even suggests that there is significant interest in the field to constitute the start of a postcolonial game studies that is specifically engaged in the “lived space” of play (6). In her important work pulling together and unifying a coalition of postcolonial scholarship, Murray also identifies the gap, which this chapter hopes to have filled. Namely, postcolonial game studies scholarship is fundamentally interested in games, not play. Play considers the practices that take place in and around games, but it also includes practices that are not related to games at all. As I will describe in more detail in chapter 4, play includes things like slave songs, which were a key part of survival, hope, and tradition for Black folks on plantations. Even games like the aforementioned “Hide the Switch,” which is often considered children’s play, pull the brutal and visceral violence of the colonial experience out of focus. As chapter 3 will describe in detail, play that repairs aims to include painful experiences such as torture specifically because these are the experiences of play that have been imposed on colonized people for centuries. Torture was a fundamental method of coercion in the colonies, and it is through play, *not games*, that we see its lasting impact on BIPOC communities.

Souvik Mukherjee (2018), also a critical game studies scholar, hints at the radical potential of play to subvert colonialist tropes in his essay “Playing Subaltern: Video Games and Postcolonialism.” He concludes his piece by

explaining, “The player, whether from the erstwhile colonized countries or elsewhere, nevertheless, both writes and writes back in games that engage with the questions relating to colonialism whether he or she chooses to or not. The video game medium offers the simultaneous possibilities of subalternity, protest, elitism, and hegemony; it is the actualization by the player that results in a deeper understanding and experience of the postcolonial” (518). Here, the player’s ability to occupy two critical positions, where they both “write” and “write back” in games can go by another name, play. Indeed, the logic of colonialism is determining, not determinist. I agree with Mukherjee’s assessment that agency is fundamental in resisting the logic of colonialism and aspiring toward a postcolonial discourse. For me, repairing play is this aspirational approach to the postcolonial.

To repair play, or to “write back” through the ways we play, we must first endeavor to produce a space where ludic narratives can aspire to tell painful stories alongside the pleasurable. It was the pleasures of trade—exotic spices, resources, free labor—that led to colonialism as an economic paradigm. Likewise, European merchants and slavers alike were captivated by the promise of wealth through trade. In this sense, it was the affect of pleasure, its cruel promise, that led them to exploit populations and people as if they were resources in the global trade “game.” Repairing play means tending to the painful aspects of this discussion. Returning to the trauma of colonialism to explode the paradigm of

play from within. Yes, it is important that players enjoy agency as they engage in postcolonial play. It is imperative, though, that they use this agency to remember the abuse and trauma of colonialism. For without it, the play they engage in will haplessly collude with the colonialist impulse that reads play through the racist dynamic of “civilization” and the barbaric. Despite this, I remain optimistic that we can repair play and that doing so is key to decolonizing a space that has long exploited the labor, feelings, and experiences of BIPOC people globally.

This chapter has focused on how the White European tradition of play theory, by arguing that play is responsible for “civilization,” has focused on the ways that play is pleasurable as opposed to the ways that play is painful. The painful nuance of play, in other words, threatens to undermine the argument upon which these theories are built. Play is fundamental to the social structures in whatever cultures these theorists deemed “civilized.” Of course, this argument is not only fundamentally a colonialist narrative, but it’s tautological as well. These two problems work together to produce a basis for play theory that is clearly White supremacist. Canonical play theory, in other words, positions play only as a positive force that plays a presumably large role in separating (presumably White European) men from animals. We the readers are supposed to fill in the appallingly White supremacist overtones. We know when play does not “civilize” by observing how cultures

that are not “civilized” play. Those examples of play are then scrutinized, said to be either “not play” or, in the case of Caillois, “corrupted” play.

Thus play has been positioned as a tool of colonization, and the practices of play that are the most compatible with a colonial worldview have been lauded. These practices are the most pleasurable aspects of play: virtuous play, play that educates, and play that offers relief from work. Even the play of situationism, with its emphasis on how play can reveal the truth rather than occlude it, might be seen in this tradition. We must look to examples of play from BIPOC creators in order to repair it. As it stands, theorizing on play risks embracing colonialism by uncritically celebrating all play that is pleasurable and excluding experiences of play that are hurtful, painful, and even traumatic.

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A Black Phenomenology

By: Aaron Trammell

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