

Conclusion: Repairing Play

*I came to know with now dismay
That in this world we all must pay
Pay to write, pay to play
Pay to cum, pay to fight*

—Bad Brains, “Pay to Cum,” 1982

Throughout this book, I have alluded to the erasure of Black play. This is the crisis we must address if we are to repair play. The quote above is by the Black DC hardcore band Bad Brains. The excerpt, taken from a short track on their whirlwind eponymous album, laments the cost of creativity, reproduction, and even play for BIPOC people, and in this case, the presumed listeners as well: punks. All the costs that we must pay for—the cost of creativity, the cost of reproduction, the cost of play—are what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten feel render us a fugitive public. They argue that we must find a common cause between the oppressed, BIPOC people, and other fugitive groups on the run from creditors.

For them, the forgiveness of debt is the rehabilitation of capital since it furthers the same destructive logics that have colonized BIPOC people for centuries (Harney and Moten 2013, 64). The problem is that forgiveness maintains the same power relationship that allows the systems of today's bondage, best embodied by debt, to continue.

The question of whether debt must be forgiven is an open one and often takes another name: reparations. In that context, reparations refer to a global coalition of BIPOC people who have had their histories, land, families, and dignity stolen from them by White colonizers. Harney and Moten's case for solidarity in the underground (what they term the *undercommons*), must be contrasted against Ta-Nahesi Coates essay, "The Case for Reparations." Here Coates also writes about debt, and Black farmers in Mississippi who were murdered, harassed, and chased out of the state in antebellum America. Coates explains, "Many of Mississippi's black farmers lived in debt peonage, under the sway of cotton kings who were at once their landlords, their employers, and their primary merchants" (Coates 2014, para. 3). Connecting the dots between this debt and the debt of Black homeowners during the 2009 financial crisis, Coates uses the term "plunder" to describe how the state and other White institutions leveraged debt to exploit Black publics in the United States. In other words, the debt continues to grow. You've got to pay to play.

Repairing play is play that remembers, play that speaks truth to power, and play that is conscientious of its own debts. I started this chapter with some notes on debt and reparations because I am certain that the debts owed by Black people as well as the debts owed to Black people by the appropriative White state are fundamental to understanding a Black phenomenology of play. Remember, Black play is about pain as much as it is about pleasure. The pain that haunts Black communities in the United States, as well as many BIPOC communities globally, is the pain of debt. As long as play is policed by designers and publishers who prefer to publish the pleasurable to the painful, we continue to live in bondage. We remain subordinated by a system of values that continues to neglect, criticize, and deliberately misunderstand Black aesthetics.

The goals of this book are ambitious. It aims to center the experiences of BIPOC people in a theory of play. By writing it, I hope to make scholarship about race more legible to a community that has long focused on a canon of play scholarship invented by a handful of White European men. Even after reading this book, if you continue to find this scholarship illegible, that's okay. Crows speak in jargon because they don't need to be understood. When crows play, are they speaking or are they singing? Beautiful and cacophonous, we reach toward an ideal of play that is only inches away outside of the hold. We lament in sonorous tones how this ideal is somehow always just out of reach.

I began this book by rehearsing some major problems in the canon of play theory. I moved deliberately from Huizinga to Caillois to Piaget to Sutton-Smith because this canon has been built upon a problematic assumption. Most canonical game theory presumes that play is productive of civilization or even consciousness itself. As a game studies scholar, I admire the potency of this argument. However, as a Black man, I remain concerned that this approach to play continues to reify an ideal of civilization that is inherently White supremacist; it defines White European culture as “civilized” and juxtaposes all other cultures against this tautological¹ standard. I maintain that play can still be productive—just as a dream can be productive of ideas—but I argue specifically that play is productive of affect.

Play’s connection to affect is intimately linked to the aforementioned discourse of civilization and play. White European definitions of civilization demand that “citizens” act within a particular set of moral standards. Those who don’t are exiled, jailed, or shunned for their vulgarity. Huizinga chooses not to write about gambling, while Caillois describes certain forms of vulgar, vertiginous, and unsettling play as “corrupt.” Corrupt play is often productive of affects that aren’t pleasurable and instead are unsettling and painful. I’ve argued throughout this book that these affects are key to Black radical aesthetics, and we do ourselves a disservice when they are neglected and isolated from play. To repair play,

we must come to understand the painful, the torturous, and challenging aspects of how we play.

Repairing play means rethinking how we understand questions of consent in the games that we play. Canonical approaches to play presume that play is voluntary, specifically because they aim to recover “civilization” from its phenomenology. Repairing play responds by beginning with the assumption that play is not necessarily voluntary and is a potentially hurtful and traumatic activity. But just because play can be hurtful and potentially traumatic, it doesn’t follow that the concept itself is problematic. We must tend to play in order to repair it. We must build consent into the games we play and recognize how one person’s play is another’s prison. Black radical aesthetics don’t hit pause before describing the traumatic; instead, they introduce the painful with the thoughtful care it deserves.

If we consider how tending to play and opening up a space for playing with the traumatic might repair it, we must also acknowledge how horrific behaviors like torture are also play. I look to W.E.B. Du Bois to recall the centrality of torture to the Black American experience. Torture evokes a dark fantasy about life in the hold. It reminds us of the objectification that occurs when we are played with. A Black phenomenology of play grounds itself in the affects of torment that play produces, as opposed to the affects of pleasure that the White European canon read as particularly “civilized.”

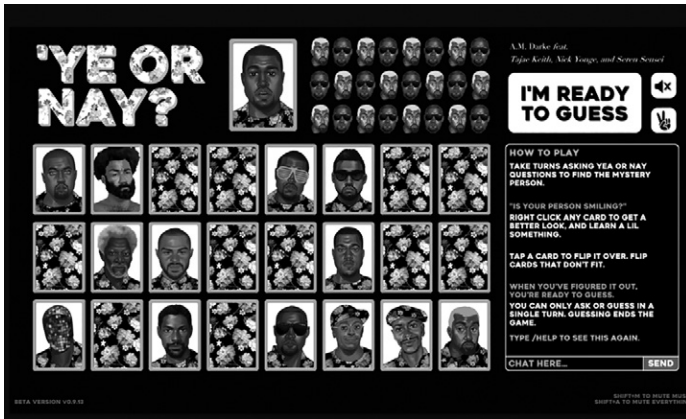


Figure 1
A.M. Darke's *'Ye or Nay?*

Finally, repairing play is an ongoing project. Play cannot be repaired without acknowledging how BIPOC artists work at play through the games they design, songs they sing, and murals they paint. What's more, we repair play when we acknowledge how it drifts above, under, around, and through all artistic media. As it stands, play has been fragmented into aesthetics that have been ghettoized by discipline. A Black phenomenology of play looks to the affects that Black artists aim to conjure to theorize a sense of repair. In other words, there is a common thread that runs between game designer A. M. Darke's brilliant game *'Ye or Nay?*²² (figure 1)—a clever reskin of the game *Guess Who?* that asks players to identify the correct persona of Kanye West by giving the other player clues and thus contending with their implicit and internal biases—and the

Black performativity of Bad Brains, the first and only Black hardcore band in the Washington, DC, notoriously White hardcore scene. The violent thrash of Black men in DC appropriating and performing music that had been only performed by White men forced people to contend with their biases about what hardcore music was and what it represents. Henry Rollins explains in the documentary *Bad Brains: A Band From D.C.*, “It was the summer of 1979. Word was that there was an all-Black punk rock band in Washington, DC. Never seen one of those before.” Repairing play means appreciating how play is polyphonic and can produce affects for both players and listeners across media.

Repairing play is also that which subverts and appropriates the narrative of White play to center BIPOC people and participation. Souvik Mukherjee describes how India’s national embrace of the sport cricket is a way of “playing back” by appropriating a British game and embracing it as a symbol of independence and Indian identity (Mukherjee 2017, 4–5). Finding respite from the trauma of colonialism, in other words, and making space for the pleasures of cricket—despite its fraught roots in colonial cultural exchange—is a necessary part of repair. Joy and pleasure are a necessary part of reparations. Mukherjee’s ability to find pleasure within cricket despite its dark history runs parallel to the Black phenomenology of play that I have sketched in this book, as it is fundamentally a story of ambivalence that layers pleasure and pain within the singular act of play.

For many, repairing play will undoubtedly be an approach that aims to surface BIPOC narratives that have been rendered invisible by colonialism. This means challenging erasure in all of its many forms. Rhett Loban, a Torres Strait Islander, devised a brilliant modification of the grand strategy title *Europa Universalis IV*—a game that simulates war, exploitation, and colonization—called “Indigenous People of Oceania.” The modification is simulationist and succeeds in better reflecting the culture of the indigenous oceanic peoples. Yet despite this success, Loban laments the structural limitations he ran into during the modding process. Better representing indigenous people in *Europa Universalis IV* meant buying into the agonist and colonial context of the game itself and making them their own nation-states (Loban and Apperley 2019, 94–5). Here the act of repair became also an act of assimilation, interpolating the narrative of war, power, exploitation, and colonization onto the islanders represented in Loban’s modification.

Perfection cannot be a virtue as we strive to repair play. Moving forward means recognizing that perfection itself is a European value that churns and erodes our wayward souls. Perfection and perfectionism are internalized forms of discipline that elevate purity as an aesthetic value. Repairing play is aligned with the messy imperfect and everyday values that are at ease with the postindustrial landscapes we inhabit where things are often imperfect and broken, and people are

just “making do.” For this reason, “Indigenous People of Oceania,” cricket, Darke, and Bad Brains all repair play. This coalition is exemplified by a broad and aesthetically diverse set of radical projects, all of which resist facile readings that would undermine their critical strengths for the pleasurable capture of perfection.

The colonial project of play that aligns its potential with civilization is in its sunset years. Repairing play must tend not only to the legacy of civilizing play. It must tend toward a speculative Black future where we play together in a web of mutual aid, supporting one another through both challenging and joyful times. I chose the adverb “repairing” to modify play not only because it is part of the etymology of “reparations.” I also selected it because I see repair too as a form of play that is able to address the production of painful affects that it produces. In so doing, repair might heal the damage that colonialism has wrought.

In the introduction to this book, I drew attention to the enigmatic Black children’s game, “Hide the Switch.” Let us end with it, too, as it shows how repairing play helps to make sense of play that would have been previously been read as barbaric. Defining this game as not play at all would contribute to Black erasure. “Hide the Switch” forces game scholars to reconsider what and who has been left out of spaces that curate games and play. It shows how the traumatic memory of Black people descended from slaves cannot be read as play, as it is often theorized. Therefore, such trauma cannot

easily fit into White memory institutions like museums that merely celebrate play. We prefer our games to be safe and consensual, but as a result, we have forgotten that games themselves are not always safe and consensual. In fact, it is a privileged position that assumes this because play is often violent. Play forces us to contend with the truth that we must always negotiate our own experience with that of others. This is what the brutality of “Hide the Switch” reveals. It shows how torture is as mundane a phenomenon as play and that all are capable of its cruel pleasures. To forget this is to aestheticize the experience of play and to resign ourselves to the cultural norms of White supremacy.

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A Black Phenomenology

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