
Guest Editor's Introduction

Blackness and Play



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PLAY IS AS PERSONAL as it is contextual, social, political, and culturally located. I like to begin sessions of Radical Play (a public humanities program that I designed to engage Black and Latinx youth around their love of video games) by asking participants to share some of their memories of and associations to the word “play.” I will inaugurate the *American Journal of Play*'s first special issue on Blackness and play by doing the same, by presenting some of my free-flowing associations and memories as a way of situating where and how I enter this important but often critically deemphasized area of study.

I played my first video games on an Atari 2600 with my young, trash-talking aunt Franchell. Seven years my senior, Franchell spent an eternity's worth of extra lives beating me in *Pac-Man*, *Donkey Kong*, *Frogger*, and virtually any game we played. When learning how to play my first card game, Spades, at the age of six, I also learned that the faint of heart (i.e., me) are not constitutionally suited for being Spades partners with indomitable Black women players like Franchell and my mother Tracy. One does not sit idly across the kitchen table from Spades legends without being thoroughly vetted through lower tier demonstrations of skillful play (a family truth and Spades rule set that persists to this day).

In outdoor play, I played hard with the boys as the only girl my age in my apartment complex. When we reenacted scenes from *Star Wars*, I always insisted on playing as the Black Han Solo because my oversized pink and white bike with the wide banana seat made the best Millennium Falcon. During that time, I began to collect a small colony of Cabbage Patch Kids—all Black like me except Justin, who had poorly stitched feet and who was clearly a cheaper replica that my single mother purchased in the Garment District in Los Angeles at the height of the Cabbage Patch Kid craze. Once I was old enough to make extra money babysitting, I collected more Cabbage Patch Kids (along with all

of their furniture and accessories), and I began to amass a large display case full of He-Man and G.I. Joe action figures. I played volubly with my collections, and one of my favorite games was playing school with my silent but captive audience of Kids and action figures. In this role-playing imaginary, I would always teach them how to spell and write their names because, when I was born, a white nurse dared to joke that I would be lucky if I knew how to spell “TreaAndrea Marie Russworm” before I graduated from high school. (Dear Nurse Karen: Rest assured, I knew how to spell my name at the age of three, and my mother made sure I was reading before I started kindergarten. For your listening pleasure, I recommend Nas’s classic “Hate Me Now.”)

My predilection for collecting as playing has persisted into adulthood. However, instead of collecting dolls and action figures, now I transgress racial, gender, and class boundaries by playing in the mostly white, mostly male, and mostly wealthy hobby of wristwatch collecting, where I avidly research and hunt for rare wearable mechanical art. (By the way, at the time of this writing, Ralph Ellison’s 1968 Omega Speedmaster is up for sale at Phillips’s New York auction gallery. It is set to sell for \$20,000, an embarrassingly low price when compared to actor Paul Newman’s watch that sold for \$17.8 million. The monetary discrepancy between the two collectors’ items says a great deal about how much this particular scene of play values Black ingenuity.)

Always the only Black and queer woman on location (besides my spectating wife), these days I also play in the weird and competitive world of dog sports where I have trained our two extremely high-energy Airedale Terriers to excel in timed contests—primal play—by sniffing out rats that have been hidden and encased in tubes and bales of hay. As Nicki Minaj raps in DJ Khaled’s song “Nobody,” the pups and I are “addicted to winning and [we] can’t be benched.” We are well on our way to achieving the coveted title of Master Rat Hunters. And then too, as a professor who writes about and teaches classes on video games, I play at work every day.

But why begin this special issue in an academic journal with all of these deeply personal accounts of my random acts of play? I have offered a brief version of my own play history here because the multidisciplinary field of play studies (which has been predicated on notions of liberal humanism) assumes a privileged and protected subjective whiteness as the default agent of play. One way to begin to retrench the field’s default assumptions in this regard is finally to listen to and center the experiences of Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC). The urgency of this need for specifically centering Black identity in

play studies is perhaps underscored by the fact that the first issue dedicated to Black identity and play in the journal's history is also a double issue that includes five interviews, an extended conversation, and seven articles. The contributions in this special issue stand in stark contrast to a play studies canon that has never been even marginally self-reflexive about its racial and cultural exclusions (Piaget 1962; Huizinga 1955; Caillois 1961; Winnicott 1971). Contemporary theories and scholarship about play and games have been plagued by similar practices of exclusion when it comes to race (Sutton-Smith 1997; Salen and Zimmerman 2004; Juul 2005; Bogost 2016; Sicart 2014). Then, too, as I have written elsewhere, there are ways in which mainstream play practices have been intentionally misogynistic, homophobic, and overtly committed to reanimating white supremacy (Russworm 2018a).

Despite the evident gross limitations in this field's history, expansive and ever-changing understandings of play have been central to intraracial and global understandings of Black life. For example, in "The Problem of Amusement" (originally published in 1897) W. E. B. Du Bois argued that play and amusement should never be dismissed as frivolity, as vice, as morally corruptive (Du Bois 2011). On the contrary, as Du Bois envisioned, amusement and play were absolutely fundamental to Black progress, health, and wellness; intentionally excluding play in Black communal spaces and in the wider context of American life was not only a problem of increasing concern at the dawn of the twentieth century, such practices were patently detrimental to Black individual and collective survival. Du Bois adamantly defended any activity that contributed to nonwork-related pleasure, including dancing, playing cards, going to the theater, drinking, smoking, singing, kissing, playing football, and excelling at billiards. The "problem" Du Bois perceptively sought to address was the way in which play had been relegated to or monitored by social institutions like schools and the Black church. Du Bois also directly criticized structural and systemic preclusions of Black play by noting that Black Americans continued to face "exclusion from the public amusements of most great cities" (134). As Du Bois concluded in this important but lesser known essay, restricting play compromises "the natural joyousness and pleasure-seeking" that are critical for Black people to live a life in balance (136).

Black play framed by Du Bois as amusement, pleasure, and joy—the very components of what he deemed "a people's recreation"—has been dynamically advanced by scholars who have been writing about Blackness and diffuse notions of play across a variety of fields. Simply put: play studies is late to the party when

it comes to centering Black identity. Specifically, scholarly studies of Black early childhood development (Weinberger and Starkley 1994), studies of Black humor and satire (Haggins 2007), histories of Black players in organized sports (Wiggins and Miller 2003; Sheppard 2020), and explorations of Black media production, reception, and fandom (Warner 2015) are imminently relevant but remain unengaged in studies of play. Similarly, even the work of scholars who directly write about Blackness, play, and games remain in the margins of citational practice (Everett 2009; Gray 2014; Murray 2017; Russworm and Blackmon 2020; Brock 2020; Trammell 2020).

Just as Du Bois was concerned about the ways in which Black play might be policed and prohibited, several of the articles in this issue grapple with the ways in which play has been used to subjugate Blackness. In this regard, we need not look far to discern how both the theorization and practice of play has been marked by what Franz Fanon (1967) would have described as the “fact of Blackness” or what Saidiya Hartman (2008) has called the “the afterlife of slavery.” That is, since Black identity continues to function as a “pejorative social inscription” that seems to justify “alienation and exclusion” (Russworm 2019), playing while Black can be life threatening. Evidence of the inequities that inform the social and structural barriers to Black play include the instances in the United States when police have killed Black children who were playing (Tamir Rice, age twelve); the time when a Black cosplayer was murdered while carrying a decorative sword (Darrien Hunt, age twenty-two); the viral videos of Black pool parties, birthday parties, and cookouts interrupted by gatekeeping bystanders; the practices of a school-to-prison pipeline where Black children are more likely to have their recess breaks replaced by in-school detention; the many times over when Black adults are forcibly and violently excluded from fan conventions and other adult play spaces; and the effects of the COVID-19 global pandemic, which rages on as I write and continues to exacerbate inequities and complicate any notions of play as safe and carefree.

While such barriers and contexts are importantly explicated throughout this special issue, so too are the contravening accounts of Black people playing creatively and disruptively in spite of systemic oppression. The contributors importantly and urgently reframe Blackness and play in light of all the surprisingly hopeful, ingenious, and joyful accounts that also define the intersection of Black identity and play. From linguistic play, jumping double Dutch, playing the dozens, and hosting dance parties to Spades tournaments, memes on Twitter, and modding video games, the forms, methods, and tools that comprise Black

play are infinite. The more complete account of the state of Blackness at play is expansive and generative in ways that stretch beyond imagination.

The ways in which this special issue frames a constant tension between perils of Blackness at play, on the one hand, and pleasures of Blackness at play, on the other, warrant a concluding explanation of the use of the word “Blackness” here. Throughout this introduction I have mostly used Blackness and Black identity synonymously, but “Blackness” is more fluid than a single racial, national, or cultural categorization. The term has most recently been framed in Black studies and scholarship on media aesthetics as a global designation of the Black Diaspora, “a liberatory formation” that is deliberately intended to subvert “white supremacist systems that seek to restrict the movement of Black bodies, silence Black voices, and quell Black thought” (Wade 2017, 36). Hence, the use of the term Blackness in these pages also implies that there is no essential Black subjectivity—thus unnerving and expanding our conceptions of the social construction of race. Reframed in this special issue, then, Blackness at play is “an immense and defiant joy” (Perry 2020, n.p.) that portends to decenter the (white) elephant on the play studies’ playground.

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