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Torture, Play, and the Black Experience



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1. I invoke the phrase “descended from slaves” because this essay argues specifically that torture—as a trauma that is passed down from one generation to the next—is a unique part of this specific subset of the Black experience in North America. I mean this to be an entry point into a larger discussion about trauma within communities of black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) globally who have faced racial discrimination. Although this particular experience is a key part of the analysis this essay performs, 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. 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.

ABSTRACT

This essay considers how the experience of Black folk descended from slaves in North America helps us to rethink a definition of play that has been largely informed by scholars and philosophers working within a White European tradition.¹ This tradition of play, theorized most famously by Dutch Art Historian Johan Huizinga, French Sociologist Roger Caillois, Swiss Psychologist Jean Piaget, and New Zealander Brian Sutton-Smith reads play in a mostly positive sense and asserts that certain practices, namely torture, are taboo and thus cannot be play. I argue that this approach to play is short-sighted and linked to a troubling global discourse that renders the experiences of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) invisible. In other words, by defining play only through its pleasurable connotations, the term holds an epistemic bias towards people with access to

the conditions of leisure. Indeed, torture helps to paint a more complete picture where the most heinous potentials of play are addressed alongside the most pleasant, yet in so doing the trauma of slavery is remembered. In rethinking this phenomenology, I aim to detail the more insidious ways that play functions as a tool of subjugation. One that hurts as much as it heals and one that has been complicit in the systemic erasure of BIPOC people from the domain of leisure.

INTRODUCTION

This essay considers how the experience of Black folk descended from slaves in North America helps us to rethink 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 Art Historian Johan Huizinga, French Sociologist Roger Caillois, Swiss Psychologist Jean Piaget, and New Zealander Brian Sutton-Smith reads play in a mostly positive sense and asserts that certain practices, namely torture, are taboo and thus cannot be play. I argue that this approach to play is short-sighted and linked to a troubling global discourse that renders the experiences of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) invisible. In other words, by defining play only through its pleasurable connotations, the term holds an epistemic bias towards people with access to the conditions of leisure. Indeed, torture helps to paint a more complete picture where the most heinous potentials of play are addressed alongside the most pleasant, yet in so doing the trauma of slavery is remembered. In rethinking this phenomenology, I aim to detail the more insidious ways that play functions as a tool of subjugation. One that hurts as much as it heals and one that has been complicit in the systemic erasure of BIPOC people from the domain of leisure.

There is presently an urgent social imperative for this work. The Black Lives Matter protests that were staged globally in the summer of 2020 speak explicitly toward how the erasure of BIPOC people from White social spaces in North America continues to subjugate entire communities through the threat of torture, violence, and worse. Practices that divide and exclude only exacerbate the issue. For this reason, I argue that it is crucial to rethink the politics of play in our present moment. Approaches to play that misconstrue it as an innately good or positive activity play into this problematic as 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 so as to make space for those it has oppressed as well as those it has elevated. By doing this we recognize how the politics of play have also set the conditions for toxic communities to thrive within the space of the alibi it provides. After all, gamergate, the alt-right, steroid use in sports, and hazing rituals of all sorts 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 consider a more inclusive and also reparative definition of the term.

The road toward a more inclusive study of play has been a bumpy one. To this end, I find it useful to disambiguate studies of games from the study of play. Game studies, a younger area which draws on many canonical studies of play, has been more proactive in addressing inclusivity. I concur with Kishonna Gray's assessment of the problem, "a focus should be placed on how technology is mobilized to fulfill the project of white masculine supremacy" (Gray, 2020, Introduction). Technology here is implicitly theorized as games. 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, 1995, paragraph), and what David Leonard considers digital minstrelsy (Leonard, 2006, p.87). For these scholars, and others like Jennifer Malkowski and Treaandrea M. Russworm who see an immediate and direct correlation between the textual content of games and the everyday politics of gamers, representation matters (Malkowski and Russworm, 2017, p.3). But what if these theorizations that address inclusivity as a problem of gamers, games, and gaming are too specific? This essay aims to consider how these insights from the intersectional analysis of games and gamers might be considered if they are applied first and foremost to the practice of play.

The problem of inclusivity in games that the above scholarship engages with is symptomatic of a larger problem in play studies that the above scholarship draws upon. In order to address the problem of inclusivity in play studies, this essay will engage in yet another taboo—it will attempt to challenge and decolonize White European thought through the theory and language used by White European critical theory. Although I admire the work of theorists like Samantha Blackmon and Treaandrea M. Russworm who show how the language of the "mix tape" can be used to recenter Black women in the narrative around games that seeks to decenter their importance (Blackmon and Russworm, 2020, paragraph 11), I choose to challenge White European scholarship from within by addressing how a theory of torture may prompt us to rethink a popular, yet tautological, definition of play. The unfortunate consequence of this decision is I spend less time in this essay discussing contemporary games and contemporary work on inclusivity in game studies as would be typical, because I will be focusing specifically on amending the work taken up by a lineage of White European theory that has historically excluded BIPOC on its own terms. Consider it a personal conceit of my own, that I, a Black North American philosopher and historian, might find engaging in this particular avenue of argumentation important.

At the heart of my argument lies the premise that theories of play that see it as a constructive and positive form of leisure must work to reconcile this point with the fact that play is often hurtful, toxic, and haphazard. Historically this theorizing has taken place in several domains. Johan Huizinga neglects gambling in the entirety of *Homo Ludens* because of its associations with the amoral

connotations that were associated with the activity at the time (Huizinga, 2016). Roger Caillois uses the term “corruption” to discuss forms of play that he finds troubling or unpalatable (Caillois, 2001).² Jean Piaget (1962) and Lev Vygotsky’s (1966) entire theory of play—and the educational theory of constructivism that follow—are predicated on the idea that play is precisely 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 (2004) 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). A host of 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.

Some theorists have worked to reconcile these radically different aspects of play. Brian Sutton-Smith argues (1997) that play is a term which holds a variety of valences, and is thus 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), imaginary (play and creativity), the self (playful hobbies that result in individuation), or frivolous (play as an idle, leisurely activity) (pp. 8-11). In approaching play through a rhetorical lens, however, Smith treats all of the above rhetorics as equal in impact. I differ from Smith, however, as in this essay I argue that play itself is a power relationship. The moment one engages in what Judith Butler (1990, p.xxxiii) terms a performative act and plays, or terms an activity play, they are conjuring the power of play. As this essay will explain in detail later, this act is an uneasy and violent grammar that casts the player as a subject and the game and all other players in it as objects. A radical phenomenology of play centers on how it can be productive of pain (as opposed to pleasure) in order to recenter the BIPOC narratives that center around the traumatic and violent aspects of games and play.

The trauma of slavery in North America is not only remembered through story, it is also memorialized in some forms of play. Amongst the most mythic and controversial games that young Black children played in the antebellum—or 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 reign to flog the other players while they parried. Historians considering the game’s persistence within slave culture have been somewhat challenged by it as play of the game seemingly reinforces the martial conditions of bondage. Many explanations have been offered. Some say that the game allowed children to practice avoiding punishment, and others suggest that the game allowed enslaved Black children a brief moment of liberation—allowing them to role-play being the “master” (King, 2011, pp.117-8). Both explanations are ultimately uncomfortable as they work to reconcile the violence of the experience of Black

2. It is worth noting here Rosa Eldepes’ historical work that reveals a critique of Roger Caillois by Theodore Adorno for holding “cryptofascist tendencies.” Adorno was contended that Caillois was uncritical in how he often defaulted to a sublime notion of the “natural order.” (Eldepes, 2014, p.9) Although I agree with this critique, I take an ambivalent stance toward the political beliefs of the Caillois and the other play scholars described in this essay. I believe that the theorizing of play done by these figures is problematic only insofar as they adopt a moral stance toward the concept. By recentering the ways that play can be torturous, “corrupt,” or even painful in our collective knowledge, we curb fascist, racist, and sexist tendencies that set White culture or “civilization” against a “barbaric” natural order.

folk descended from slaves with the inevitable lighthearted connotations of play. Violence, specifically 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.

I define torture within the Foucauldian tradition. As a practice, it is a long-term form of discipline that uses coercive techniques to subjugate people. This definition is a key part of this essay’s argumentation. I argue within this essay that it is a mistake to view other more “innocent” connotations of torture—tickle torture, BDSM—as anything other than the above. 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. Thus, pleasure is that which drives desire. Pleasure is often juxtaposed against pain, another affect, or that which is torturous. Torture and play are both practices. They produce pleasure and/or pain, which are affects.

In this essay, I gesture toward brutal, disciplinary, and militaristic torture, because I feel they are undertheorized and 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 practice within BDSM communities worldwide. J. Tuomas Harviainen’s work shows how BDSM might be considered play (Harviainen, 2011), yet it—and other similar analyses—stop short of including military and disciplinary torture within their definitions (Weiss, 2011, p.211). This because BDSM is theorized here as a form of consensual play. I feel this definition is putting the cart before the horse, an approach to torture that understands it as that which is always disciplining would read consent itself as a technique of mitigation against the barbaric tendencies of torture.

This essay argues that we must theorize how military and disciplinary torture with its connotations of pain and not pleasure (and not pleasurable pain) should be understood as play in an argumentative grammar that allows torture in the BDSM scene to be understood as play. What’s more, I advocate for an approach to defining 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, from BDSM, to memorizing long lists of rules, to exhausting one’s physical limits, to simply playing Monopoly. This seeming paradox—that torture both is and is not play—can be resolved. Torture *is* play, and it reveals a good deal about how play works to subjugate and discipline people.

An approach to play that recognizes how it is often experienced as torture might help us to better understand how the application of the term has been historically used to exclude BIPOC, women, trans, and non-binary folk from historically White and masculine spaces of play as well.³ When play is only theorized as pleasure, minoritized people are made to act as killjoys when they describe how their experience was torturous instead.⁴ An inclusive phenomenology of play must contend both with how play includes (through pleasure) as well as how play excludes (through torture).

3. Mahi-Ann Rakkomkaew Butt and Thomas Apperley have argued that approaches to inclusivity in gaming often involve assimilation into a problematic heteronormative male status quo. I would add to this that the assimilative norms of inclusivity frequently suggest that Black folks should assimilate to a White supremacist status quo as well. (Butt and Apperley, 2018, p.39).

4. Russworm makes this point well in their essay on game history that explains how the history of games is itself a White supremacist enterprise (or in their words “White. White. White.”) The stories of BIPOC people, developers, and designers are often occluded in historical projects that center White designers and developers of games. (Russworm, 2019).

Although the above example can be interpreted through any of Smith's rhetorics of play, the discomfort I noted within the example relate to the relationship between play here and cultural identity. "Hide the Switch" predominantly exists within an oral history of slavery passed down through generations of Black folk, and is kept separate from the play space of today's playground. It is best pondered as an artifact of a bygone era better left in the past. The social repression "Hide the Switch" is both a process through which the dynamics of play are culturally controlled and regulated. Similar to the hyper vigilant policing of Black people in early 21st century America, Black children's games are also repressed and policed. Small and invisible, this policing of play of contributes 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.

The provocations above can only hold if we concede that torture is a form of play. This problem is philosophical, not categorical. Because there are many reasons that disciplinary torture might or might not be categorized as a form of play, the first half of this essay is dedicated to addressing these reasons and developing a logical framework for its inclusion as a form of play. The second half of this essay considers the relationship between torture and the experience of Black people descended from slavery, and what this might add to our understanding of play and games today.

TORTURE IS PLAY

Ten children walk in a playground casually speaking to one another. One of the kids, reaches out to another and cries "You're it!" The tagged child lunges at another in a desperate bid to rid themselves of the stigma. Soon the group scatters as a melee ensues. The game is tag, and its very grammar suggests that even innocent play may well be a violent activity. The game divides players into subjects and objects. Once a player is tagged they are moved to reconcile this by tagging another. The very basis of this engagement is that one player has been reduced to the status of an other, an object even, in the game's vernacular—like it or not, they are "it." "It" implies less than human. "It" has been fundamental to the lexicon of bigotry and White supremacy in America since before the American Revolutionary War in 1776. The very basis of "it" equivocates human-ness with object-ness as it strips "it" from the fundamental rights granted to other subjects—namely consent. One does not consent to play tag, nor does one offer their consent to become "it" in tag. In this, the simplest of play, it is revealed that play is not a relationship between subjects. Instead, it is a relationship between subject and object.

The critical hinge upon which the relationship between torture and play swings is the question of consent. Play, as many contemporary game design theorists have argued, is a fundamentally consensual relationship (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004, p.474; Stenros and Bowman, 2018, p.417). Because consent is

central to many definitions of play, we are left with the paradox explained in the introduction where consensual torture satisfies a definition of play while non-consensual torture does not. The examples given to justify this distinction are almost always formal. They speak more to a desire of what play *should be* rather than from an observation of what play *is*. Is consent negotiated when we play with a computer or when we play with ourselves? Play mediates in ways that are not as straightforward as they may at first seem. In fact, it forces us to reconcile the violence that lies at the heart of innumerable social relationships.

The consensual relationship structured by play often works by way of another term—that play is negotiated. As Miguel Sicart (2014) explains, “We play by negotiating the purposes of play, how far we want to extend the influences of the play activity, and how much we play for the purpose of playing or for the purpose of personal expression” (p.16). Here, Sicart nests the idea of negotiation within the concept of play, building on the prior work of Jesper Juul who sought to locate the idea of negotiation within the concept of the game instead. For Juul, all games have negotiable consequences, negotiation being a key differentiation between what is a game and what is war. In either case, whether negotiation is considered fundamental to play or games, it reflects a broader understanding of either phenomenon that is consensual. To negotiate assumes that the player respects the other player’s ideas, positions, and sovereignty. When players negotiate, they treat one another as fellow humans, and not as objects. Yet, so often play is not negotiated. David Leonard argues that in sports video games where the presumed White player is invited to take on the role of Black athletes, without being forced to live through the trauma of Black experience, play is not negotiated (Leonard, 2004, paragraph 5). The Black community has not consented to this form of identity tourism, yet this sort of minstrelsy is an unfortunately common form of play. And to the larger point of this section, negotiation is more of an ideal than an observed reality of games and play today.

Others concur that not all play is consensual. I want to signal an appreciation here of work that acknowledges how the assumed norms of consent that are hailed by the “magic circle of play” are often transgressed by White men. In her autoethnographic writing on the topic, Emma Vossen explains, “Unfortunately, because of contemporary practices surrounding game play, most video game play that I have participated in has contained practices that were not consensual or enjoyable, such as harassment, gender-based insults, or trash talk” (Vossen, 2018, p.206). To better appreciate how play is wielded as an instrument of power, we must begin by recognizing those accounts of play, which would otherwise be lost to a definition that foregrounds its voluntary nature.

My argument relies on three premises. First, drawing on the work of Johan Huizinga (2016), I argue that play is voluntary if you are the player (p.7). Second, building on the work done by Miguel Sicart recently, and Clifford Geertz historically, I concur that play is a way of being (Sicart, 2014; Geertz, 1972). And third, I am moving from the proposition laid forth in Roger Caillois’ (2001)

work, that play is not necessarily voluntary for the played (p.52). And therefore based on these premises, if play is voluntary for the player, but not necessarily voluntary for the played, then play is a subject-object relationship and not a subject-subject relationship. Following this, if play is a subject-object relationship, then torture is a form of play even in its most brutal and disgusting forms.

Play is voluntary (for the player)

The first point that must be addressed is the voluntary nature of play. The idea that play is voluntary has been part of play theory since Johan Huizinga penned *Homo Ludens*. Huizinga (2016) writes:

“First and foremost, then, all play is a voluntary activity. Play to order is no longer play: it could be at best a forcible imitation of it. By this quality of freedom alone, play marks itself off from the course of the natural process. It is something added thereto and spread out over it like a flowering, an ornament, a garment. Obviously, freedom must be understood here in the wider sense that leaves untouched the philosophical problem of determinism. It may be objected that this freedom does not exist for the animal and the child; they *must* play because their instinct drives them to it and because it serves to develop their bodily faculties and their powers of selection...Child and animal play because they enjoy playing, and therein precisely lies their freedom.” (pp.7-8)

Here when Huizinga argues that play is always and essentially a voluntary activity, he finds himself considering animal and child play. He considers these categories specifically because, as he articulates them, children are yet to develop the rational faculties we attribute to adult humans. He is wary that the subjectivities of children and animals may be different than that of adults, and thus they may be driven to play by instinct. It’s worth noting here that comparisons to animals have long been a White supremacist tactic used to dehumanize BIPOC. I make this comparison, because as I will argue in more depth later, the experience of Blackness holds remarkable similarities to the experience of play. We can find these similarities here—albeit in a different shape—in Huizinga’s comparison of children and animals.

Despite these comparisons, it’s important to note here that Huizinga is situating voluntarism within the assumption that every participant of a game is a player. But what if someone decides they don’t want to play? Say in the example of tag posed earlier. In this example, if one acts as a spoilsport and chooses not to play after they are tagged, they still become “it.” The suggestion that play is voluntary neglects all the instances where for individuals play is not voluntary. It presents a radically subjective vision of play instead of one that is always already constrained by a shifting set of social relationships and experiences. The spoilsport still engages in play even if they don’t engage with the game.⁵ By recognizing that play is only voluntary for the individual initiating play, we

5. In his reading of Huizinga, play theorist Peter McDonald describes the figure of the spoilsport as being key to understanding the free and liberating dimensions that Huizinga wanted to theorize within in play. For play to be truly liberating, in Huizinga’s philosophy, one must have the freedom to transgress the rules and spoil a game (McDonald, 2019, p.257).

demystify the spoilsport by showing how their violence toward the game may a result of another player's violence toward them and their feelings.

Play is not voluntary for those who are subject to it. Yet, in all cases here—that of the child, other, and animal—pleasure is offered as the primary explanation for what drives individuals to play. In pleasure we find a common link between the actions of subjects and the actions of objects. If we are to understand how objects play, we must consider, as Miguel Sicart does, the relationship between play and pleasure.

Play is a way of being

Moving away from an instrumental understanding of play, which defines play as an activity, Miguel Sicart (2014) posits instead that play is a way of being which exists (to some degree) within all activity (p.6). Sicart's work is a sharp turn away from Huizinga's approach to play which, pioneered by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004, p.95), suggests that play thrives in ritual spaces marked distinct from everyday life. Although the opacity of the magic circle has been questioned by many, these questions provide what is perhaps the best proof of Sicart's philosophy. Play exists within all things, but is often focused during events, within play-objects (like games), and in particular spaces.

Sicart's radical philosophy of play prompts a rethinking of questions that have long excited curiosity about the field. It makes no sense to oppose labor and leisure if we can locate play within both concepts. Similarly, it helps us to rethink definitions of game like those proposed by Jesper Juul (2005) which though comprehensive also show how many exceptions and grey areas exist in the word's common usage. Sicart suggests that games are "play objects" and are thus objects that relate to others in so far as they are played with.

Then, in defining play, Sicart suggests several characteristic that this mode of being takes on. Play is contextual he argues, varying in degree by circumstance. It is also carnivalesque, a way of challenging traditional understandings of status and power. Sicart also argues that play is appropriative, suggesting that it can latch on to almost any circumstance and transform it. Finally, and most salient to the arguments in this essay around torture, Sicart (2014) argues that play is pleasurable:

It is pleasurable but the pleasures it creates are not always submissive to enjoyment, happiness, or positive traits. Play can be pleasurable when it hurts, offends, challenges us and teases us, and even when we are not playing. Let's not talk about play as fun but as pleasurable, opening us to the immense variations of pleasure in this world." (p.3)

The substitution here, of pleasure and fun, is a helpful way to understand how play exists in the world. If we look to pleasure as opposed to fun, we turn away from the rhetoric of play as progress that tends to see play as a positive

activity. This thinking helps to explain how some forms of play, like BDSM, which is not always fun, is also a form of play. Following this line of reasoning, should brutal, disciplinary torture also be considered play? Some might draw the line here. Yet, I feel these approaches to play are naïve. Although there is a strong sentiment amongst many that the phenomenology of play is wholly positive, we know from the feminist accounts such as Vossen's above that this is far from the truth. Thus, I argue that brutal, disciplinary torture is always, unfortunately, a form of play—I maintain that this is wholly consistent with Sicart's definition of the term. In order to argue this, I draw a distinction between *player* and *played*. This distinction is significant in so far as it begs us to rethink how we classify others in multiplayer games.

Play is not necessarily voluntary for the played

The distinction between *player* and *played* has been an invisible and substantively policed distinction in play scholarship. It is best brought to focus by Roger Caillois in the introduction to *Man, Play, and Games*, as he considers the historical circumstance of Huizinga's work. Caillois attributes the curious omission of games in Huizinga's work on play to the somewhat sordid connotations they had in early 20th century society. As Huizinga sought to construct a theory of play that would show how all civilized society related to the concept, he was forced to omit games because of their close connotations to street life and gambling. Caillois (2001) argues that if Huizinga was to include morally dubious games in his theory of play, he would undermine his assertion that all civilization springs from play (p.5). Hence, the morally grey act of gambling itself undermines the idea of civility that Huizinga's play is premised upon. In other words, games—or as this essay considers them: the *played*—are taken to be an invisible and thus inconsequential part of the play phenomenon.

Caillois' work continues this mode of policing. In making a case for how war functions as a game, Caillois acknowledges war's most brutal and amoral characteristics with a caveat. War is a game, Caillois (2001) argues, but when brutal, it is play that has been corrupted:

Various restrictions on violence fall into disuse. Operations are no longer limited to frontier provinces, strongholds, and military objectives. They are no longer conducted according to a strategy that once made war itself resemble a game. War is far removed from the tournament or duel, i.e. from regulated combat in an enclosure, and now finds its fulfillment in massive destruction and the massacre of entire populations. (p.55)

Play is not necessarily voluntary for the *played*. Caillois was aware of this, in these remarks he argues that brutal moments of war is a "corrupted" form of competition. Where Huizinga reserved that moments of grotesque and extreme warfare ceased to be play (Huizinga, 2016, p.9), Caillois' recovers a conversation about play and games free

of what he considered somewhat arbitrary delineations about what could not be play in Huizinga's work. For instance, gambling.

The object of massive destruction in the game of war does not volunteer. Nor does the object of abuse in "Hide the Switch." In both examples, play has turned grizzly and corrupt. Although there have been attempts to make invisible the violence of play, I argue that it is important to recognize that play is not always a voluntary activity. When we neglect what Caillois refers to as the corrupt aspects of play, we participate in an act of policing that aims to remove BIPOC from discourse around play and games.

Play as a subject-object relationship

The above has been an attempt to justify three premises which lead to the conclusion that play is a subject-object relationship. I argue that play is voluntary for the player (but not the played), that play is way of being in the world (and not an activity), and that play is not necessarily voluntary for the played. For these reasons, I feel there is a strong case to be made for how play constitutes a subject-object relationship.

One concern that one might have at this proof is that the played does not necessarily occupy and object position and so therefore play is not necessarily a subject-object relationship. For example, if both participants in tag willingly engage one another in the game, play is then a subject-subject relationship, and therefore a consensual relationship.

This counterexample is important as it highlights a simple way that this argument can be misunderstood. I am not arguing that either player in this example loses a sense of subjectivity when played with, or an ability to consent, I am instead arguing that neither characteristic is necessary to a definition of play. On the other hand, it is necessary to a definition of play that locates play as a fundamental part of being to recognize that play is not necessarily a relationship that invokes consent. When we play, we transform others and the world around us into play-objects. The destructive and violent aspects of play must be contended with if we are to understand the term.

The definition of play as a subject-object relationship leaves us with a new paradox to contend with. If play is a subject-object relationship, then how should one reconcile their own subjective experience with the fact that through play they will be treated as an object? In order to answer this question, we must turn to philosophy that concerns itself the phenomenon of double-consciousness and the Black experience.

TORTURE AND THE BLACK AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

W.E.B. Du Bois (1994) wrote *The Souls of Black Folk* in an attempt to explain the unique experience of Black Americans. He explains Blackness by offering the metaphor of the veil as a way to understand the Black experience, where an individual must reconcile their identity through two lenses—a projection of how

they appear within society (how the veil appears to others) alongside a historic and communal understanding of the self (life behind the veil). He refers to this as double-consciousness, “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.” (p.5) The depth of experience to which Du Bois refers is a result of the dehumanization wrought by slavery and its consequences. In America, even today, Black folk are constantly negotiating stereotypes that conspire to reduce them to objects. The Black American experience, that of double-consciousness, is thus one where one must occupy and negotiate positions of both subject and object.

In order to show how the experience of torture relates to the Black American experience, we must consider torture on both a societal level and an individual level. By exploring torture within these two modalities, this essay prompts a discussion of play that recenters Black people within our conversations around play and games and nods toward a radical reconstitution of torture within all of our understandings of play and games.

State Sponsored Torture

Torture, as part of the institution of slavery, is a disciplinary mechanism in this project of dehumanization. Just as Huizinga and Caillois’ thought on war categorized certain forms of destructive and barbaric play as corrupt (or not “civilized”) the philosophy of torture contends with these same boundaries. William Schultz (2007) notes them when defining torture in his collection *The Phenomenon of Torture: Readings and Commentary*:

Somehow inflicting pain on a creature is less acceptable, less “civilized” than doing away with them altogether. That is why we go to great lengths to make sure that the process of capital execution is as sterile and painless as possible. If we actually appeared to be enjoying another’s suffering, if we indulged too openly that part of us that revels in revenge on those who do us wrong, we would see something about ourselves mighty important to keep hidden. The State is meant to be a projection of our values, a mirror of our best selves, and hence, though the State may do away with criminals, it may not gloat in their demise. (p 8)

Of course this critique relates mainly to state-sponsored torture, such as that performed by U.S. military personnel on Iraqis in the detention camp at Abu Ghraib. Although these boundaries are often transgressed, in warfare, even torture is policed. Just as Huizinga and Caillois sought to exclude games that would turn violent or exploitative against vulnerable populations, Schultz and Méndez illustrate how torture is similarly policed in definitions of warfare. All pretenses of civility in matters of both play and war must be abandoned when torture is invoked. Despite this unfortunate conclusion, the practice of torture lies at the heart of both.

Michael Foucault's (1977) *Discipline and Punish* begins with a discussion of torture. The book, often remembered for its discussion of panopticism, opens with a vignette of a man being drawn and quartered in mid 18th century France. The act is described in detail, "Then the executioner, his sleeves rolled up, took the steel pincers, which had been especially made for the occasion, and which were about a foot and a half long, and pulled first at the calf of the right leg, then at the thigh, and from there at the two fleshy parts of the right arm; then at the breasts" (pp.3-4), precisely to invoke a contrast between the seen and the unseen. Torture, which used to be an act of public spectacle, used to exert a social and behavioral pressure upon social bodies, had by the time of his writing in the late 20th century been rendered invisible in most Western societies.

The critical takeaway from *Discipline and Punish* is that although it's been made invisible, the threat of torture lingers within a variety of social institutions as a mode of social control. Just as the spotlight of Bentham's watchtower shines upon prisoners in order to occlude shape of the guards monitoring their behavior (Foucault, 1977, p.201)—and by extension the ever-present threat of torture—we must consider whether games also act as a similar disciplinary apparatus, concealing the possibility of torture within their play. Is it possible that when we challenge or begin a game that a faint hint of danger lies beneath the supposed connotations of fun? After all, if the object of the challenge were to decline, they might be labeled stubborn, or a bad sport. Some games, games related to the experience of Black people descended from slaves in North America like "Hide the Switch."

Intimate Torture

Of course, Foucault's writing on torture is not limited only to thought on the state. He returns to the idea in the *History of Sexuality*, where he notes that torture is used in tandem with and alongside confession as a way of understanding another body's sexuality. Torture and confession are mechanisms for extracting truth from people, "Since the Middle Ages, torture has accompanied [confession] like a shadow, and supported [confession] when it could go no further: the dark twins." (Foucault, 1978, p.59). For Foucault truth in this sense relates specifically to the truth of one's sexuality. Du Bois also contends with torture in this more personal, intimate sense. He explains how torture was used as a method for extracting the truth from slaves. Intimate torture relates specifically to the ways in which truth is gathered from people seen as objects—as less than human.

The slave's body is seen as an extension of the master's body, explains Du Bois, when relating the phenomenon of torture to the Black American experience. In his essay, "Torture and Truth," he draws on an Aristotelian construction of torture in order to show how Black slaves were reduced to an object status through the apparatus of torture:

The slave is a part of the master—he is, as it were, a part of the body, alive but yet separated from it. (Politics 1255b)

Thus, according to Aristotle’s logic, representative or not, the slave’s truth is the master’s truth; it is in the body of the slave that the master’s truth lies, and it is in torture that his truth is revealed. The torturer reaches through the master to the slave’s body, and extracts the truth from it. (Du Bois, 2007, p.14)

Through Aristotle’s writing Du Bois shrewdly points both to the association of the slave (and therefore Black people generally) with the body—the body which is made an object through a traditional understanding of the Cartesian dualism—and its intimate relationship with the master. The slave is the object (body) in a relationship where the master is the subject (mind). This understanding of torture and truth is mirrored in the player-played relationship where the player takes the role of subject and played takes on the role of object.

As to what truth is extracted through the intimate relation of torture (and play), BDSM becomes an interesting practice to consider in so far as the truth derived from practice is that of one’s sexuality. BDSM play, as theorized by many within the game studies community,⁶ is far removed from the experience of Black people descended from slaves. Within the tradition of Du Bois, it is difficult to locate an example of torture that has been similarly recuperated. Torture, according to Du Bois, is always a violent expression. Practices around safe words within the BDSM community allow players the space to practice torture—albeit a softer and more socially appropriate form of torture than that which is practiced by the military—without accidentally harming one another. This essay reads interventions such as safe words as an intervention intended to blunt the dangerous, toxic, and harmful potentials of play. Importantly, in the spaces of toxic game play highlighted by theorists like Vossen (2018) and Gray (2011), no safe word exists to extract minoritized people from abusive conversations with White men. Yet, sadly, I feel that this only furthers the points above that play is not a voluntary activity, and that by getting in touch with its traumatic aspects, we engage in the work of repair that must acknowledge shared histories of pain.

6. As noted in the introduction, “dark play” and the often-related BDSM play have been a fascination of both game studies scholars and some contemporary scholars of play. These accounts of play generally share the common premise that play is voluntary and consensual. As Jaakko Stenros observes, the very category of “dark play” is predicated on the premise that most play is “positive.” (Stenros, 2019, p.13) My account of play aims to deepen this work on by suggesting that play is rarely voluntary. For more on this see *The Dark Side of Gameplay* (Mortensen, Linderroth, and Brown, 2018) and *Transgression in Games and Play* (Jørgensen and Karlsen, 2018).

RECENTERING BLACKNESS IN GAMES AND PLAY

One of seminal voices of Black feminism, bell hooks, begins the essay “Understanding Patriarchy,” with an anecdote about a game of marbles. In the story a four-year-old hooks asks repeatedly to join her brother and father in the game. Her father repeatedly scolds her and tells her “no,” until the pressure mounts to a point where her father breaks a board from the door and beats her repeating “girls can’t do what boys do” (hooks, 2010, p.2). Of course, the story here is an illustration of the intersectional nature of oppression and how what hooks terms “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” is internalized even by Black folk. For the purposes of this essay, hooks’ story reminds us of exactly the kinds of stories that are lost to the White European definition of play that

sees it as productive of pleasure and not pain. hooks' experience is an earnest retelling of how play can produce affects of trauma, pain, and abuse. In a sense, it is a reminder of how the continued and shared trauma of slavery continues to haunt the Black community today.

Let me offer another example of how a definition of play that embraces its fraught and painful tendencies helps to recenter the experience of minoritized people. Jeremy O. Harris' play "Slave Play" is a story about a trio of interracial couples who are engaging in sex therapy because the Black partners are no longer attracted to their mates. The play brings race to the forefront of the conversation by foregrounding the discomfort of the White characters in referring to their partners' race, and, perhaps even-edgier, having the White characters take the role of the masters or mistresses in literal BDSM slave play (Harris, 2019). In one performance, the "Black Out" performance, Harris requested only Black identifying people attend the play in order to subvert the affluent White norms of Broadway. He explains to *American Theater*, "For me it was about Black work begetting Black work and Black audiences" (Tran, 2019, paragraph 15). This decision immediately attracted controversy from the conservative theatergoing community—the presumably White identifying National Review critic-at-large Kyle Smith quipped "It would be illegal to refuse to sell tickets based on this or that race," evidencing the very discomfort with discrimination that all BIPOC are well acquainted with (Smith, 2019, paragraph 2). The themes of role-reversal and trauma sharing that are imposed here upon White theater audiences help drive home the point that recentering how play intersects with the experience of BIPOC people will rarely produce the same pleasurable affects that games like *Mario Kart*, and *Dungeons & Dragons* build into their core gameplay loops.

When Clifford Geertz (1972) wrote "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" he argued that cockfights, no matter how violent and brutal they appeared to outsiders, were a way for the Balinese to understand themselves as a culture. He gestures to the Dutch occupation of 1908 to show how the violence of colonialism brought with it European customs which forced the cockfight—which had previously been situated in the center of all village life—to the margins of society. Similarly, slave games, have been forced to the edges of our society. They exist now in a handful of history books and through the oral histories shared by the descendants of slavery.

White Supremacy conspires to make Whiteness invisible, and likewise, make Blackness shameful. Kishonna Gray shares how the experience of black gamers today involves the pain of disclosing their race online. She explains how the question "Are you black?" in a gaming session of *Gears of War* prompted one gamer to play down their Blackness, shooting back "Why? Are you white?" Things only devolved into race-shaming from this point on, with taunts of "nigger, nigger" accenting the trauma, that the gamer's blackness was shameful in the eyes of the other players (Gray, 2011, pp.267-8). Approaches

to play that read gaming sessions like this as constructive of socialization and learning, while suggesting that the racism occurring in chat alongside the game is somehow separate are complicit in White Supremacy. The approach to play suggested by this essay is anti-racist because it foregrounds how the most painful dynamics of play often exist alongside its most pleasurable aspects.

Play reduces humans to objects because play is violent. Accepting this allows us to recenter and better appreciate games that exist primarily at the margins of Western society. We give in to colonialism and White supremacy when we assume that play must always be productive of affects of pleasure. Despite the violence of play, something important might be recovered by a closer analysis of its more dangerous tendencies.

“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, and so therefore cannot be fit into White memory institutions like museums that aim to celebrate play. We expect our games to be safe and consensual, but in this turn we have forgotten that games are not always safe and consensual. In fact, it is a privileged position that assumes that games are safe and consensual. 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 “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 to ourselves to the cultural norms of White supremacy.

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