The Aesthetics of (Un)Charted Play: Negotiating Nostalgia and Digital Demons in an Era of "Post-Truth" Educational Research

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Abstract: Caught between reverence and dismissal, play has long been a fixture of childhood and youth. However, play is far from uncontested terrain and in this session we bring together multiple disciplinary perspectives to the exploration of play that is both structured and unfettered. Drawing from perspectives in the learning sciences, Afrofuturism, literacies, and early childhood imaginations, the presenters in this session will map out a robust landscape of conditions, practices, and purposes of play in the lives of children and adolescents, and in the practices and considerations of educators and researchers who study aspects of childhood and adolescence. The session underscores the importance of paying serious attention to the aesthetics and materiality of play.

Session objective and overview

For generations, play has been an object of study, an elusive phenomenon about which much has been written and pondered. Likewise, the pursuit of play in education has resulted in numerous curricular interventions, causal explanations, and pedagogical innovations aimed at either codifying or controlling play in some way. The latest incarnation of "play panic" lies in responses to increased digitality of the materiality of childhood (e.g., Twenge, 2017) that opens up greater plains of unpredictability in young people's practices.

In contrast, we embrace a view of play that is not tethered to a priori outcomes, rules, and externally imposed goals, what Gray (2013) calls "free play." As such, the papers in this session issue a call to action for educators and researchers to pay close and serious attention to the multiple contours of play as intellectual, and challenging work—we demonstrate that play is "neither reserved for only the world of children nor is it the least bit trivial" (Kuschner, 2009, p.xi). We share multimodal artifacts that provide textured, multi-sited, and in some cases multi-genre examples of how individuals engage playfully with their "work" and how they develop and cast their imaginations across different contexts and platforms, using a myriad of modes and forms while interacting with objects, ideas, other people, and technology. We forefront how identities (e.g., media producers, designers, agents of change) are reimagined as participants play around with materials, space, and cultural artifacts—how "fancied selves become material" (Holland, et al., 1998, p. 236) through building and tinkering with pivotal tools, artifacts, and spaces (Vygotsky, 1978).

Through a nuanced discussion on play, we show how individuals play across various contexts (e.g. classrooms, after school spaces, community spaces) along a wide range of age groups (from small children to adolescents to adults). In each case, play functions as an aesthetic experience where individuals engage and design new frames and identities within a free and flexible space (Millar, 1968) – thus the space to freely play with multiple possibilities is essential to conditions for play.

Scholarly significance

The focus on aesthetics in this session calls forth understandings of how play is experienced affectively, thereby broadening the scope of where and how to understand the importance of play in mediating imagination of self, others, and the surrounding world. Ultimately, play is a valuable, cultural activity that allows for innovation and invention. It gives both children and adults a space to consider different perspectives, "to abandon one-dimensional viewing, to look from many vantage points and, in doing so, construct meanings scarcely suspected before" (Greene, 2001, p.187)—imagining possibilities rather than reproducing static ideas about learning, impact, and other measures that currently dominate the discourses of evidence in educational research.

Session structure

The co-chairs will begin by framing the conditions, practices, and purposes of play and playfulness. Following the four presentations described below, the discussant will invite audience members to contribute to a digital

artifact designed to prompt responses and connections to the session. The digital artifact will be shared after the session in an effort to propel inquiry about play beyond categorical binaries and outside of the boundaries of a symposium. We will allow ample time for questions and discussion between the presenters and audience.

Paper 1: The play of art: The aesthetics of radical play

Christopher Moffett, University of North Texas

Play-based pedagogies in the U.S., often designed under the influence of developmental theories, rely on the learning potential of activities developed and facilitated by teachers. Yet what of the aesthetic dimensions of play: "the sensory, sensual, mind-body connection that goes into imagining, forming, and enacting roles and dramatic situations" (Guss, 2005)? This paper starts with the description of a play-based pedagogy emerging out of Anji, China--a mountainous region several hours outside of Shanghai--that allows us to conceptualize play as an aesthetic practice. Within this curricular model, children ages 3 to 7 self-direct their play with large-scale materials (Figure 1.1) within vast outdoor spaces (Figure 1.2) over the majority of the school day.

Drawing on several weeks of site visits to multiple kindergartens in Anji over the course of three years, as well as interview data with principal figures in the movement, I discuss how artistic forms run through aspects of play that gives it aesthetic dimensions. Primarily I provide a multimodal analysis of one videotaped data excerpt of two 5-year-old children playing with a water hose (Figure 1.3). The children's own play reflections, as part of the curriculum, highlighted their experimentations with the principles of form and water. Their children's sophisticated aesthetic and scientific explorations were made visible through an aesthetic-reflective dimension (Guss, 2005): the multimodal assemblage of the materials at hand, the video-recorded moment, the children's narrative responses, and the teacher's methodological openness.

This project uncovers what actually happens, 'what's good' in a play-based curriculum that young children design for themselves when afforded time, significant degrees of freedom, large-scale materials and fluid indoor-outdoor play spaces. The aim of this paper is to map out the aesthetic dimensions of play, the distinctive elements of play in Anji that might account for its thriving within a culture known for its grueling educational model. A second, related aim is to examine the relationship between this play and another right of children, as described in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: "to participate freely in cultural life and the arts" (United Nations, 1989). That freedom can be viewed as a form of egalitarian politics, all the more striking as it emerges in a place often demonized as being authoritarian. In fact, recent educational reform in China is calling for this model of education to serve over 3 million children.

High stakes testing and the "banking model" of education have been perhaps nowhere as entrenched as in China (Zhao, Selman, & Haste, 2015), but this form of curriculum is gaining momentum in the East. Meanwhile, academic pressures continue to intensify and threaten learning and teaching in the West (Taubman, 2010) despite research that touts play as critical to development. In considering how play can not only thrive but push back against high stake models, we need to consider its varied modes of manifestation and, in particular, the ways in which aesthetic appreciation and practices can be integrated across time/space.

Figure 1.1. Large-scale materials used in play.

Figure 1.2. Vast open spaces in children's play.

Figure 1.3. Still of two children with a water hose.

Paper 2: "Cowabunga Dudes": Multimodal stories in a multimedia world

Haeny Yoon, Teachers College, Columbia University

Drawing from data collected in a kindergarten classroom in New York City, I highlight how children use literacy to navigate social issues and (re)appropriate popular culture themes. I show children's play as socially complex—the intricacies of collaborating, the role of popular culture/media, and the issues/ideas children engage with from the larger culture.

Children's multiple social worlds (e.g. home, school, media) are places where they interpret knowledge and position themselves, ultimately constructing ways of "knowing" and "being" (Dyson, 2003; James, 2007). Children draw from these varied resources and ideologies to participate with others in play. Despite the depth of childhood play, these activities are relegated to the margins of school curricula in favor of tangible evidence as proof of learning (Dyson, 2013). This ignores children's multimodal artifacts, drawn from their media and popular culture repertoires (see Figure 2.1). Therefore, while difficult to fully capture, childhood culture(s) are defined by play as both a social and ideological space (Templeton, 2013)—children take up the tools of literacy to understand self, others, and the world.

The play episodes in this paper come from a classroom (see Table 2.1) predominantly populated by children of color and inclusive of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The classroom teachers offered children opportunities to play, a practice otherwise denied children in similar contextual spaces (e.g. communities of color, children with disabilities). Data sources include field notes, children's written artifacts, informal adult interviews, and multimodal, play stories. These play stories, composed of children's reflections on play, drawings, media materials, and photographs, were co-constructed and shared with children weekly (see Figure 2.2). Play stories and field notes were used to construct narratives of three focal children: Jalen, Lila, and Trevor, as a way to interpret the play episodes within the larger context of children's identities and explore the research questions:

1. How is children's play mediated by the environment, materials, popular culture, and others?
2. How are children using literacy and its various forms as tools for participation?
3. How are children navigating the tensions of racial, gendered, and disabled identities?

I present three play episodes as examples of children's participation in sociocultural issues, play with media materials, and connections to literacies. Each episode opens with an analytic narrative of the child's identity and positioning, accompanied by a play scene involving other children in the classroom. Within each episode are ideas drawn from contemporary culture (e.g. gender expression) creating unique and situated narratives of children at play. Additionally, I highlight digital media/popular culture discourses that created new kinds of play—discursively changing the plot, dialogue, content, and possibilities of familiar storylines.

Possibilities in play are expansive given the rise of social media, digital tools, multimodal platforms within an ever-changing world. Where older generations look upon play with childhood nostalgia (e.g. running outside, playing in the yard), the contexts and practices of play have changed significantly against a technological landscape. Therefore, the elusive nature of play is worth studying and illuminating in contemporary times.

Figure 2.1. Example of child artifact, guided by media materials.

Table 2.1: Demographic Information for the Class

Name	**Gender**	**Race/Ethnicity**	**Free/Reduced Lunch?**	**Services**
Lila	Female	Black/Haitian	N	
*Aurelia	Female	Latina/Dominican	Y	Social Work
Trevor	Male	White/Jewish	N	ASD
Evan	Male	Latino/Puerto Rican	Y	
*Joshua	Male	Black/African-American	Y	
Lucas	Male	White	N	ASD
Jalen	Male	Black/African-American	N	Occupational therapy; speech services
Xiarra	Female	Jewish/Puerto Rican	Y	Social work
Aliyah	Female	Black/Puerto Rican	Y	
Isaiah	Male	White/Jewish	N	ASD**
Aylon	Male	Black/Puerto Rican	Y	Speech services
Riley	Male	White	N	
*Olah	Male	White/Russian-Canadian	N	ASD
Xavier	Male	Black/African-American	Y	Speech services
*Mila	Female	Puerto Rican/Mexican	Y	Social work

*Mila moved two months after the school year. Aurelia joined the class mid-year. Joshua joined the class in March. Olah moved to a new school around the time Joshua joined.
**Children labeled with ASD receive several services: occupational therapy, speech therapy, physical therapy, social development interventions.
***The children highlighted are featured in this presentation.

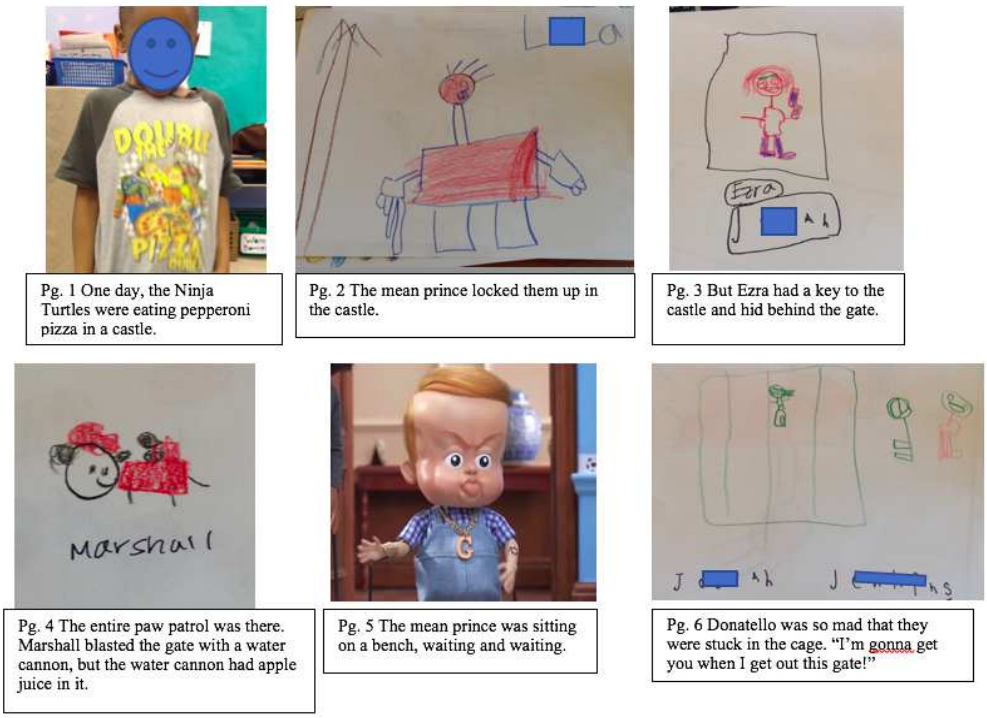

Figure 2.2. Pages 1-6 of a 13-page story entitled, "Cowabunga Dudes".

Paper 3: Playing with future-pasts: Afrofuturist design as critical praxis

Nathan Holbert, Teachers College, Columbia University; Michael Dando, St. Cloud State University; and Isabel Correa, Teachers College, Columbia University

Despite its long history in the African-diaspora, the box office success and cultural impact of the movie Black Panther has elevated Afrofuturism in the public consciousness. As learning scientists who study youth culture and learning, we are interested in examining the ways youth from communities historically underrepresented in the arts and sciences create new representations of themselves through Afrofuturism and critical making practices. In this session we examine Afrofuturist Design as critical praxis and share artifacts and insights from a maker workshop co-designed with youth of color.

Afrofuturism is a literary and cultural aesthetic that shares features of Critical Design. Critical Design imagines potential futures that question "the cultural, social and ethical implications of emerging technologies" (Dunne & Raby, 2005). Similarly, Afrofuturism plays with science fiction, magical realism, and non-Western cosmologies to project forward from the lived realities and (deleted) histories of people of color. In doing so it questions and reimagines the present and past—seeing them as collections of objects, representations, and meanings that can be modified, mixed, and repurposed to design future societies and technologies that center people of color (Jennings, 2017). Afrofuturism explicitly addresses systems of oppression by redefining these systems—and race itself—as technologies developed to subjugate communities of color. But like any technology, these systems of white supremacy can be "hacked into and rewritten" (Jennings & Fluker, in preparation, p. 13). This hacking has an element of play to it which can be seen in novels (e.g. Octavia Butler), contemporary comics and film (e.g. Black Panther, Luke Cage), and popular music (e.g. Janelle Monae).

We see Afrofuturist design as a dynamic aesthetic space for young people of color, that are no longer children and yet not quite adults, to play (Harris, 2000). How might Critical Design, and Afrofuturism more specifically in this case, provide a space for young people to openly discuss and challenge the unsettling pressure of what it means to be an adult of color in America? When youth are encouraged to play with their personal past and present, and though a critical making workshop invited to imagine future technologies, societies, and

communities, how might they recreate themselves and their communities? What superpowers, or super societies, might they imagine to overcome the villains of the present and future? What technologies can be created to enhance the community's strengths or to emancipate it from systemic oppression?

In a series of maker workshop co-constructed with Harlem youth, we have we have begun to develop and study the nature and potential of a critical constructionist design practice. Over eight design sessions and in collaboration with professional comic artists, activists, and scholars, five Black teen girls were invited to imagine futures that center their experiences and priorities by designing and fabricating original pieces of art and technology (Figure 3.1). In this session we share exemplar artifacts and excerpts from interviews taken throughout the design process to illustrate how designers proposed alternate visions of science and technology by playfully constructing novel technologies and societies that highlight their relationship to the environment, their community, and themselves.

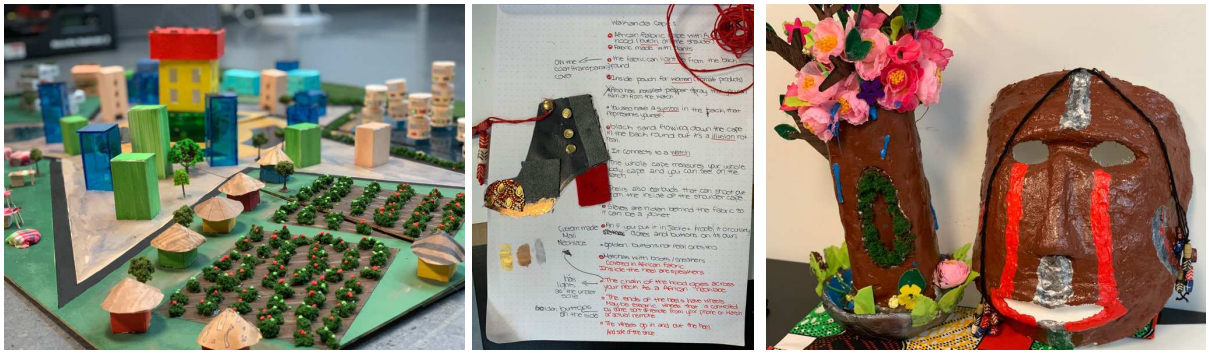

Figure 3.1. Afrofuturist artifacts constructed by participants play with the role of spirituality, the environment, and aesthetics in imagining future technologies and societies that address issues experienced in the present.

Paper 4: Constructing collaborative (ad)ventures: How young children engage (un)sanctioned play in elementary english language arts

Cassie Brownell, University of Toronto

Using data generated in a year-long case study design (Dyson & Genishi, 2005), I explore how a multilingual and multiethnic group of third grade boys engaged in (un)sanctioned play to resist the standardized, "official" curriculum (Dyson, 2013).

As a participant observer, I primarily generated data using ethnographic methods (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). Adapting a retrospective analysis (Dalton et al., 2015; Prior, 2004; Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa 2009), I conducted small group interviews. For example, I provided children still images and asked them to think aloud their process for creating their final product. The focal boys' (Table 4.1) comments served as the basis for analysis as I aligned them with other data. The findings illuminate the group an exemplar of how children playfully curate the curriculum for their own purposes under the radar of adults (Wohlwend, 2013).

Table 4.1: Participant Information*

Participant	Race	Languages	Age
Carter	Black	English	8 years old
Evan	Mixed-Mexican & White	Spanish & English	8 years old
Jace	Asian	Thai & English	9 years old
Oscar	Mexican American	Spanish & English	9 years old

*Participants self-identified for all information listed including pseudonyms

Affectionately known as the "Lego Boys," during the two-week composing period children had free reign of digital (e.g., tablets, cameras) and analog (e.g. Legos, craft supplies) materials to retell a written personal narrative. Each boy initially began with an individual project. As Jace and Carter described, however, they quickly

found similarities in their personal narratives (e.g., hotel, boat, family reunion) and their selected composing tool (e.g., Legos). Thus, the two began weaving their narratives together to build a single product (Figure 4.1). Each day, their collaborative composing group grew. Still, the boys told a cohesive narrative about how their stories fit with the goals of the sanctioned prompt. Yet, as the Lego Boys threaded their stories together to satisfy the expectations of the adults, they also engaged in more unsanctioned play.

Figure 4.1. Jace (L) and Carter's (R) Day 1 Lego Composition.

Findings illuminate how the Lego Boys expertly 'played' supervising adults (including myself) and how we only became aware of their sophisticated play practices during post-composing interviews. For example, through talking with Oscar, I learned the "family picture" taken mid-way through the unit was in fact of their Lego characters before their "war with villains and heroes." (Figure 4.2). This is but one example of how the boys used sanctioned play to develop counterstories.

Figure 4.2. "Family Picture" of Lego Boys and Lego Characters.

Although the boys discussed instances when they deliberately kept their play from adults, at other times they negotiated their desire for play with teacher surveillance. Oscar, for instance, brought in another Lego plate to build on, telling me, "they needed one more space to do the war and stuff." However, I later learned he also desired to bring in another Lego character, but he "didn't want Mr. Holiday [teacher] to see it." This final example demonstrates the pervasive power and fear children face as they engage in (un)sanctioned play.

Although Lego play was purported as acceptable curriculum by supervising adults, the kind of "unsanctioned" play described by the boys was still in and of school. Their play, fueled by a shared nexus of practice (Scollon, 2001), facilitated moments of belonging and relationship. In this way, the intricacies of the Lego Boys' play holds significance for educational researchers insofar as it demonstrates play as a collaborative, embodied (ad)venture.

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