

Editorial

Introduction. Method as Play / Play as Method

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Anisha Anantpurkar and Pasha Tretyakova

...and as the birdie passed from you to you to you and back to us, we saw constellations of play emerge. As we connect the stars, new shapes appear, illuminating new pathways from one star to another, from a snake to a ladder, one thought, one contributor, one playful method to others.

Our call for proposals asked: what would emerge if we thought of method as a process, as a space of play—of role- and code-switching, of subversion, of difference? We sought explorations: an engagement with the process. To move beyond play as a game, ritual, or phenomenon, we looked at play as a force within doing, making, feeling, thinking. What does it mean to play as knowledge makers? we asked. Where does play emerge for you?

We started by prompting that play is generative. Our contributors, turned interlocutors, gave us plenty to play with. Imprints, margins, scenes, realities, planets, rivers. Together, we are interested in what we can see as play, what it generates, and what it destabilizes. The authors help us think through what comes of that space of encounter, instability, and emergence or, as Miguel Sicart suggests in his article, a space of mess. Gregory Bateson (1979) observed that 'play is not the name of an act or action; it is the name of a frame for action' (p. 139). We thank Bateson for this frame and push its boundary further. Like him, we pursue play that breeds heterogeneity (Nachmanovitch, 2009, pp. 11–12): Bateson viewed play as a dynamic space where differences are not barriers but the foundation for collaboration. This issue brings together game scholars, dance scholars, anthropologists, documentary makers, and artists, as well as the many ways they position themselves vis-à-vis their craft. As they share a table, they do so with different orientations, yet all discussing where we see play emerging for us. In this special issue, play is a unifying force between many disciplines and questions. The project of this volume has been to sit with the relationships that emerge as we place the contributions side by side, to follow their continuous, uneven unfolding, and to play along with the contributors and their interlocutors as they move and co-generate.

Miguel Sicart messes with machine learning, playing with the process of computer logic.

Jared Epp plays with his interlocutor, reality, academic conventions, and himself through film and the characters that they portray.

Marie R. B. Odgaard plays with indifference, questioning traditional notions of positionality and how one views the field.

Natalie Schiller plays with her hips, her washing machine, a toaster, and a scythe. She asks the readers to play by moving their hips as they think through domesticity and shades of play with her.

Roman Smirnov plays with immersion and analytical distance, past and present.

Natan Diacon-Furtado plays with technology, getting rivers to communicate their histories.

Eman Shehata plays with racial ontologies by seeing humanness as a verb rather than a noun.

Terje Toomistu plays along with the scene, building the spirit of her field into the method of capturing it.

Andrei Zavadski reflects on the serious role of the scholar and editor, allowing himself to be prodded by Cia Rinne's recent volume of poetry on footnotes.

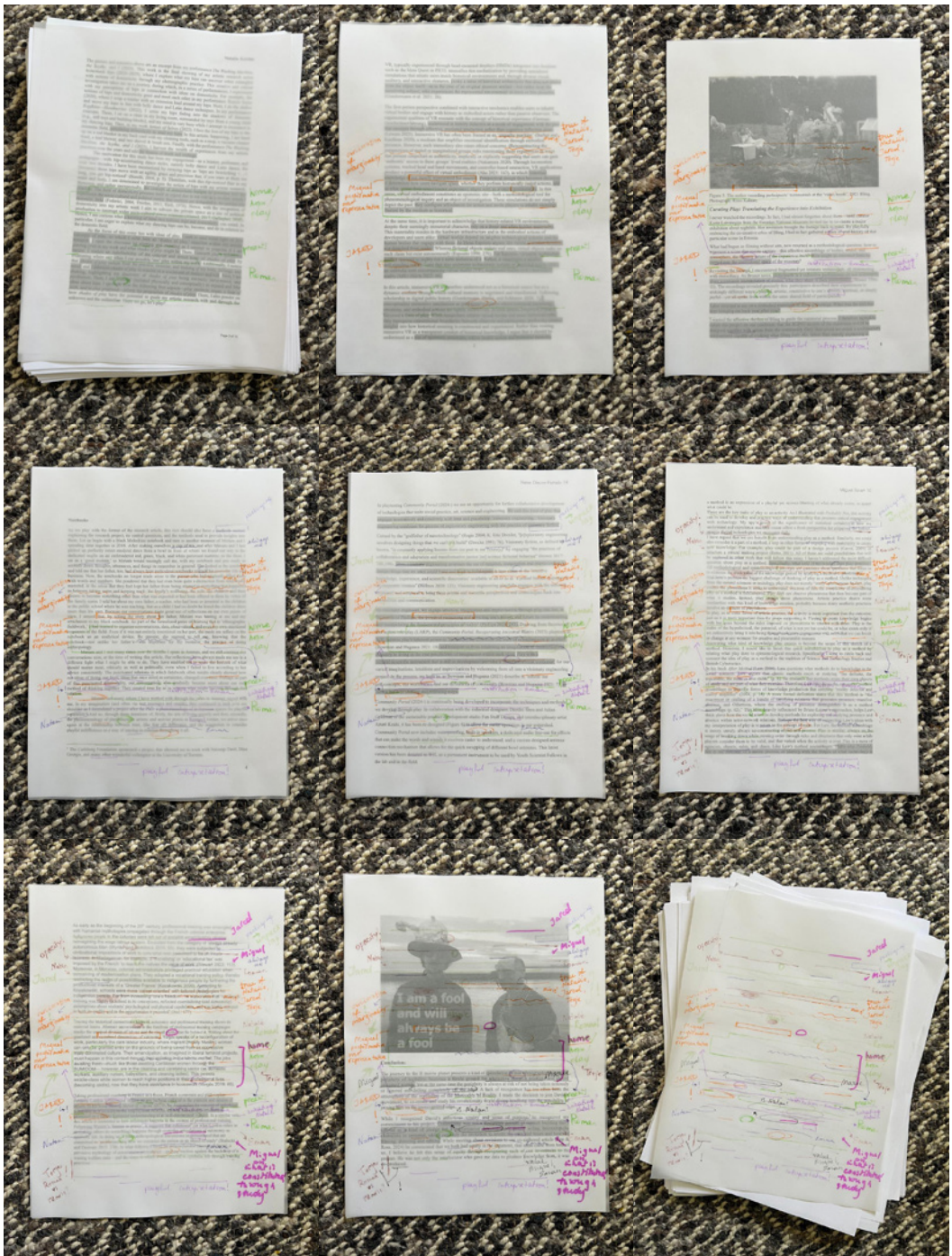
From Sylvia Wynter to Rosi Braidotti, from Roger Caillois to Johan Huizinga, Faye Ginsburg to Trinh Minh-Ha, Christina Sharpe to Maria Lugones*, we see play as more than a canon of literature: a mode of engagement, a state of mind, an epistemic condition, as our authors have posited. The editing has been a process of 'communing with the history of ideas' (Epp, this issue, p. 37) of our contributors. Our point of departure was that current epistemological frameworks were and continue to be insufficient. It would be foolish, indulgent, and wasteful to throw the baby (our beloved methods) out with the bathwater (academic conventions and frameworks we've attached to them). To find the baby, one must commune, engage with history and method—playfully. The impulse is not towards postmodernism but towards messiness.

Much academic work focuses on the formation of cohesive structures. This page is one such structure. Research output is influenced by the ways we are taught to conceptualize our research. Naisargi Davé (2023) talks about structures that emerged from an obsession with difference. She says,

'Let's be honest. There is no shortage of the opposite of indifference in our world, which is the desire for difference—finding, wrangling, and utilizing it. And where has that gotten us? Anthropology? Heterosexuality? Capitalism? Empire? Friends, I think we can do better' (Davé, 2023, p. 1).

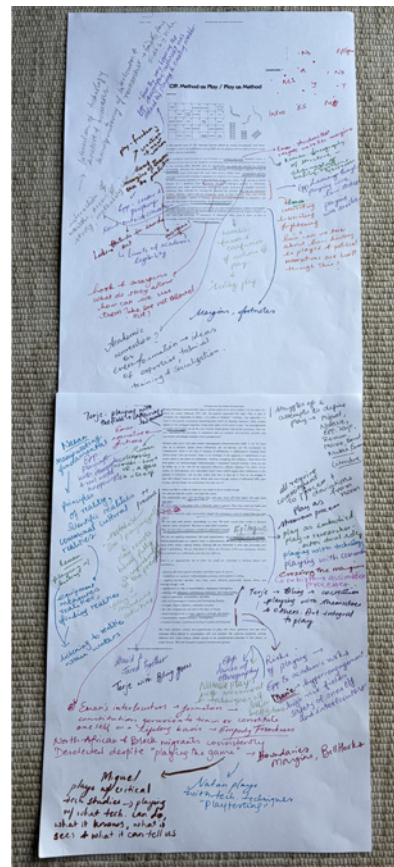
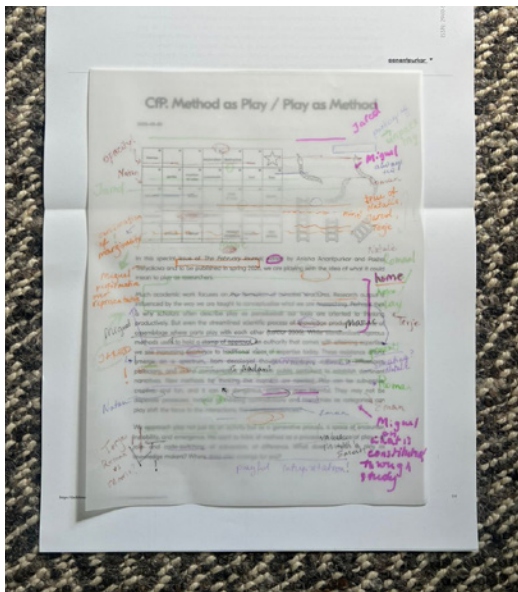
Davé (2023) warns against the grasp of curiosity, one of the 'traditional' methods of anthropology (p. 3). To do better than to see otherness, a key source of marginality, she proposes indifference over difference. Eman Shehata, in this issue, proposes a different praxis of humanness (more on this later). We offer the possibility that play's modality frames curiosity not as a grasp, a stare, an acquisition, or an exhibit, but rather as a participant. The insistence on sovereignty and dignity as a condition of relationality—proposed in W. E. B. Du Bois's (1935) general strike, Édouard Glissant's (2010) opacity, Elizabeth Povinelli's (2001) incommensurability, Audra Simpson's (2014) refusal, to name but a few—stakes the place of the autonomous subject. We have come to a socio-political moment when it is paramount to think about how we might invite others into, inhabit, and share place as well

* This footnote is in protest of citational conventions. The line should have read like this: 'From Wynter to Braidotti, from Caillois to Huizinga, Ginsburg to Minh-Ha, Sharpe to Lugones...'



Figures 1–9. Notes in the margins. We tried doing it the analogue way to highlight the process. We have never been more grateful for computers. Anisha Anantpurkar & Pasha Tretyakova, Method as Play / Play as Method, 2026. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the authors.

as space. So, how might we come to it? Davé (2023) suggests 'indifference [as] a posture of immersion, side by side, rather than face to face' (p. 1). While she proposes posture, bell hooks (1989) speaks of location. 'I am located in the margin,' she says (hooks, 1989, p. 23). She speaks of the margin as a 'space of radical openness' (hooks, 1989, p. 19). Marginality that one chooses, as opposed to that which is imposed by oppressive structures, 'offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds (hooks, 1989, p. 20). The theme of play for us is thus an amalgamation of leftover questions from art and academia-making; a bricolage of thoughts that never took center stage/page. Our call for papers saw playing with posture and orientation as one way to subvert structures. This issue's contributors shifted our gaze to the margins. As we look 'from the outside in and from the inside out' (hooks, 1989, p. 20), we notice what they hold, resist, and generate, and together offer a new view of the center. How do various margins connect? Or, drawing from Roman Smirnov, in this issue, when does the opposition between the two collapse? When does the center dissolve? Like hooks, we ask you to enter that space and meet us there. Maybe we can enlarge the margins.



Figures 10–11. Enlarging the margins. Anisha Anantpurkar & Pasha Tretyakova, Method as Play / Play as Method, 2026. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the authors.

One might start with David Ross (Jared Epp's interlocutor), who practices his denial of academic thinking through playful collaboration with an academic. Epp and Ross expand the peripheries, 'unburdened' by academic conventions. As they practice an 'aesthetics of responsibility' (Ginsburg, 2019, p. 39), they push the limits of academic legibility through their speculative fiction ethnography. Play foregrounds process over product. As Epp's thoughts make it from the margins onto the main page, he opens up space for new notes in the margins: can the process of knowledge production matter just as much as the product? Can the process itself be socially relevant? For Natan Diacon-Furtado and their collaborators, it can be, as they develop playtest formats that expand their senses of community and connection with their waters (this issue, p. 119). Marie R. B. Odgaard cites Madhavi Menon's (2015) theorization of queer as 'longings across borders' (p. 127). We also see play emerge as a longing to go beyond the page, to expand the margins, and to give what exists in the margins space within academic structures. Sicart sees the importance of margins in both his app *Probably Not* and his theorization of play. As he plays with the margin of certainty with which machine learning models provide an output, his app tells us with a 100%-certainty what an object is *probably not*. Play helps us think, experience, and be past the conventional, much like at the Estonian house music party Bling, where 'everything that unites us is welcome' (Toomistu, this issue, p. 149). Stephen Nachmanovitch (2009) points to the fluidity of definitions, which Sicart's article echoes: a computer 'sees' a banana and says that it could be, but is not, a dildo or a pen. Invert the uncertainty into a certainty, Sicart says. As he theorizes his playful method, he moves beyond the canon of play, which often centers white Western European academics**, finding the 'margins of the canon to be more productive' (Sicart, this issue, p. 20). Shehata's piece, however, reminds us that some boundaries are rigid and some margins have been designed to send a message: that you are not worthy of having a place in the center. Shehata's interlocutors—people who have recently migrated to France and are undergoing professional reconversion—have to abide by strict boundaries of integration—almost like crossing a threshold, like a rebirth—to be allowed space in European society. As Shehata thinks from the margins, with the people relegated to them, she works to destabilize the category 'human.' She sits face to face with authority, analyzing 'the enactment and regeneration (or not) of dominant mythologies of being human' (Shehata, this issue, p. 123).

And what of the place of authority? Terje Toomistu points, in this issue, to how play transforms worlds and relationality, beyond convention. As Smirnov describes his Virtual Reality (VR) engagements, these spaces can constitute 'a parallel self-standing reality' (this issue, p. 91). Authority arises out of interpretation. The responsibility of interpretation opens new worlds but can also silo those worlds. Freudian dream reading, Turnerian ritual analysis, and Geertzian thick description risk replacing the thing that happened with

** This footnote is a space of self-critique, as even our call for proposals was heavily drawn from White Euro-American academics.

an explanation of it. That is what ethnographic refusal (Simpson, 2014) resists. In play, interpretation is never final: it is processual. The interpretative work is happening in the present, and what it generates allows the happening to continue. Play is not reifying—it is iterative. It ends only when people stop playing because there is no completion, no end. Standardized rigorous methods used to hold a stamp of approval, delineating the edge of authority that comes with attaining expertise. Unbounding methods means unbounding authority; it means focusing on attuning methods to ways that redistribute authority (along the margins). Diacon-Furtado and their team at the Water Justice Lab encounter the Mahicannituck watershed in its industrial colonial afterlife: polluted, unsafe, measuring short. They re-use technology that could break down the flow of the water into mere metrics to instead concoct a listening device. They listen for regeneration, seeking to link indigenous engagements of the past to the present. Rather than packaging knowledge, we want to parse through it, while acknowledging that the ground is neither even nor sound. Play affords this project its inner logic—the unfolding that does not happen on the terms of structures but creatively enfolds them. Natalie Schiller, in this issue, does just that: tracing the *shades of play* in her performative practice, she (de)composes the entanglements of her hips with domesticity, childbearing, and labor, conditioning via a ‘cutting together-apart (one move)’ (Barad, 2014, p. 168). Schiller writes of this endeavor,

‘I imagine myself falling backwards, knowing that someone or, better yet, something, namely my fused choreographic and academic practice, will catch me. But while I am falling (leaping)—where I am playing artistically and analytically—I am connecting to the realm of unpredictability and unfamiliarity’ (Schiller, this issue, p. 83).

In her description, we can trace the ebb and flow of detachment and support, of enfolding the known into the unknown. Johan Huizinga (1949) insists, ‘In play there is something “at play” which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action’ (p. 1). We see Schiller lean into this transcendence in her performance and then step back to see where the movement took her, communing with us. As Sicart says, ‘play creates the phenomena it seeks to understand’ (Sicart, this issue, p. 28); it is both process and method. Foregrounding the performative and relational in method assemblage allows us to perceive the liminal, the temporary, and the possible. Since co-creative engagement was part of the play at Bling, Terje Toomistu also brings it into her method. Her video booth at the festival captures experiences from within the experience. It helps her to ‘ask the right questions and to develop appropriate analytical frames’ (Toomistu, this issue, p. 147) Many of the contributors point to this necessity of presence: Marie R. B. Odgaard and her contemplations on her moleskin notebook as a way to document the present or, as her interlocutor alludes to it, a barrier to attunement, to presence; Jared Epp’s interlocutor proclaiming ‘time is not money... time is the present’; Miguel Sicart’s argument of the ephemerality of play that rests on a moment of consensus; Terje Toomistu’s party scene always

playing in the present, making interventions and improvisations possible only then and there; Roman Smirnov's need for embodiment to animate a world, to ignite an experience; Eman Shehata's cycle of symbolic death and rebirth into a new role, a new place, a new presence; and Natan Diacon-Furtado's presencing of ancestral knowledge via technologies.

A question then arises, spurred by Epp's contribution: can the process itself be socially relevant? Odgaard carries these concerns throughout her fieldwork in Amman, Jordan. Traversing the boundary of difference: testing, remapping, and redrawing. The boundary (the margin) is never a straight line. Is it ever clear and agreed upon? It is malleable, in moments shapeless, in moments flickering, in moments stark. Odgaard is playing with the boundary of identity: when does something/one start and when does it/do they end, where do they/we converge? Foregoing conclusions and dwelling in the back-and-forth, the mess of the process, may be the more productive way for this conversation to happen. As Toomistu says, play is also a mode of becoming. But what we have found is that difference and indifference, curiosity, opacity and transparency are all always present: layering, highlighting, and weaving.

If play reveals hidden realities, dreams, old or new realities, what do playful approaches reveal? Shehata shows that a methodological inversion—instead of focusing on the shortcomings of a sociological type, she interrogates its production in the field—helps keep the focus on those for whom portraying convention (playing a role) is the only way into livelihoods. Alternatively and similarly, Smirnov proposes in his contribution that when we position immersion as a performative space, where historical knowledge, emotions, and embodied actions interweave, research as an activity becomes a form of play. In VR, the layering of space and perceptions blurs to become something new. Engaging with it means taking up unstable roles: experiencing, situating, creating, and reflecting. These constructions remain translucent even as we have been in/attentive (cf. Schiller, this issue) to them because they are *happening*. They are the generative interplay: recognizable and new, almost a fiction of the original thing. Roberte Hamayon (2016) posits that the ambiguity between fiction and reality is at the heart of play. The entanglements of 'reality' and 'fiction' are the core of emancipatory and artistic processes and can be the mechanism of stereotyping. Sylvia Wynter (2007) reminds us that it is myths of shared origin that maintain the story-boundaries of a space and endow its participants' symbolic life, which Eman Shehata explicates in her field. In giving ourselves over to play's fiction, we also have to ask what this risks. Jared Epp and his interlocutor co-create films that are meaningful to them. Epp argues that we should pay attention to the relations art produces: what is at stake for those who participate and those who view? He provoked critics, artists, and audiences to ask if a work denied or affirmed anyone's ability to be themselves. The entanglement of fiction with reality that Epp and Ross pursue becomes a medium of exposure on film: it shows their failures and risks their social standing. But through this play, they create worlds and relations. If our goal is to pursue relations, failure

is one of the basic ingredients of the recipe. In the speculative, fictional, playful mode we can feel the weight of each ingredient and fold it into the batter. And in critical fabulation, one lends their body to the void into which those unaccounted for disappeared, making and marking paths through it (Hartman, 2007). We can recuperate realities by calling and responding to them, re-imagining what has been lost (including lost selves) into futurity, as Diacon-Furtado et al. add.

While closing out the work on this issue, the question that moved from the center to the margins and back was: have we failed to play? Have we edited playfully? Sometimes we pushed conventions, other times we gave in. We revisited the contributions at many stages, many times, sometimes recognizing them, sometimes seeing them anew. We played with each other, bringing our daily happenings into our impossibly long Zoom calls, having many ideas and scrapping most of them. We are surprised to have gotten this far. We now pass this to you, letting the playing and the happening continue. But our path still hails from the first box on our board, the initial framing that resonated with our own:

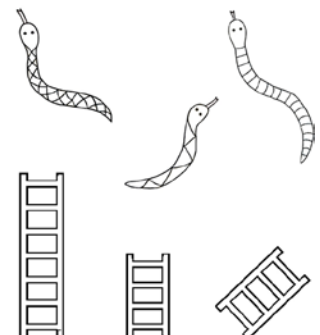
'Play is easy to recognize but impossible to define. We may try to define it, but our definitions will be clumsy, inadequate, and circular. That is because play is about definition. It is meta to "ordinary" activities like aggressing or kissing, but especially, it is meta to the activity of defining. In playing, we are fluidly changing definitions of things: the piece of rubber is a sword, the sword is a penis, ad infinitum' (Nachmanovitch, 2009, p. 15).

The stars are dots, the dots are points, the points are lines, curves, thoughts, snakes, ladders, shapes, prisms, and lenses. As we play, constellations form, the frames are made and erased, patterns come together, boundaries mold boards. As the Alpha Centuria Alien tells us (Epp, this issue): once we understand that what we have is a state of mind, we can let go and lose our minds.

As we continue to sit, screen to screen, we fill in each other's silences and populate each other's margins. We are interested in where you find play within your processes, whether it's a moment or a millennium, and why you call it so. Here's some snakes and some ladders to navigate our map. We hope you find new paths and constellations.

Figure 12. A map of snakes and ladders. A template found online (<https://quickquarantinegames.com/design-your-own-snakes-and-ladders/>) and customized by the authors.

29	30	31 Andrei Zavadski	32	33	34 Eclogus
28	27 Terje Toornistu	26	25	24 Eman Shehata	23 Natalie Schiller
15 Natan Diacon-Furtado	16	17 Roman Sminov	18	19	20
14	13	12	11 Miguel Sicart	10	9 Jared Epp
1 Call for Papers	2 Introduction	3	4	5	6 Marie Odgaard
					7



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early fuel for these thoughts. Similarly, for all the lesbian movies we watched last June, while wading through the proposals and imagining this issue. And also for 'The L Word.'

Authors' Bios

Anisha Anantpurkar (she/they) is a performance maker and researcher who grew up in Bengaluru, India. They completed the Erasmus Mundus Choreomundus—International Master in Dance Knowledge, Practice, and Heritage program through Université Clermont Auvergne, the Norwegian Institute of Science and Technology, the University of Szeged, and the University of Roehampton. Anisha is interested in gender and sexuality studies, performance studies, and memory studies. Anisha works in arts pedagogy and curriculum development.

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