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Method as Play / Play as Method

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Introduction. Method as Play / Play as Method

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.

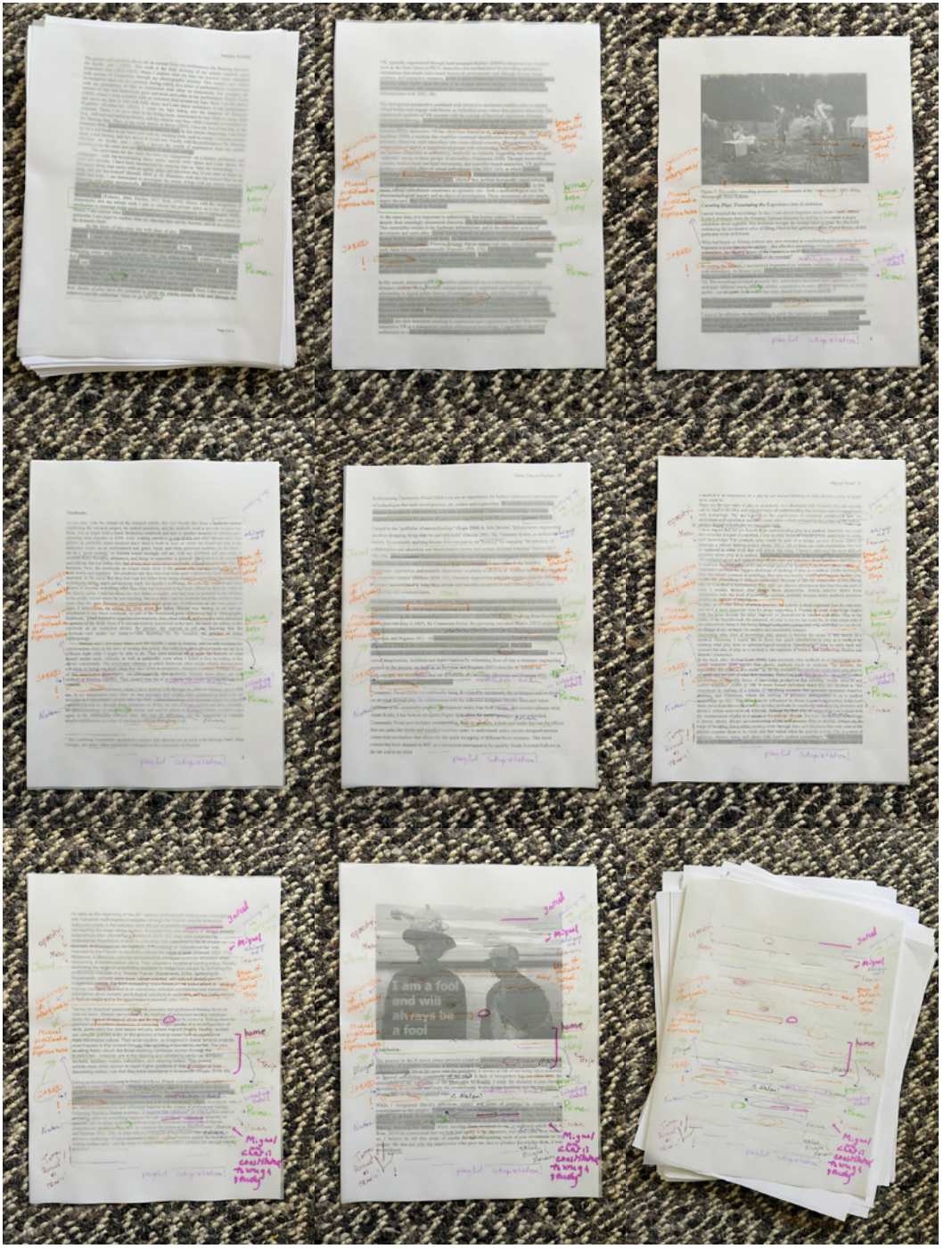
From Sylvia Wynter to Rosi Braidotti, from Roger Caillois to Johan Huizinga, Faye Ginsburg to Trinh Minh-Ha, Christina Sharpe to Maria Lugones*, we see play as more than a canon of literature: a mode of engagement, a state of mind, an epistemic condition, as our authors have posited. The editing has 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).

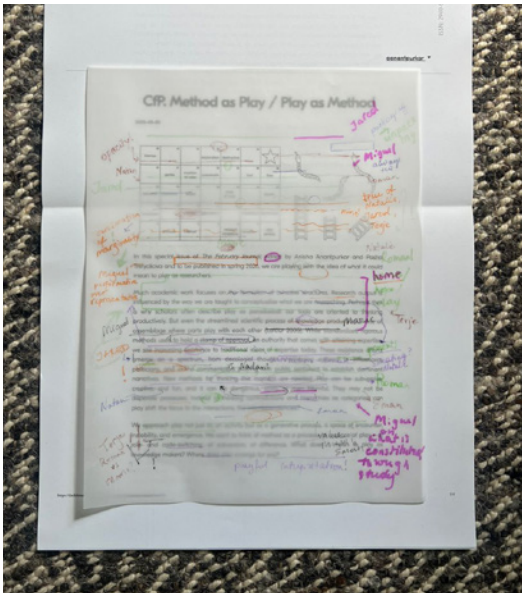
Davé (2023) warns against the grasp of curiosity, one of the 'traditional' methods of anthropology (p. 3). To do better than to see otherness, a key source of marginality, she proposes indifference over difference. Eman Shehata, in this issue, proposes a different praxis of humanness (more on this later). 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

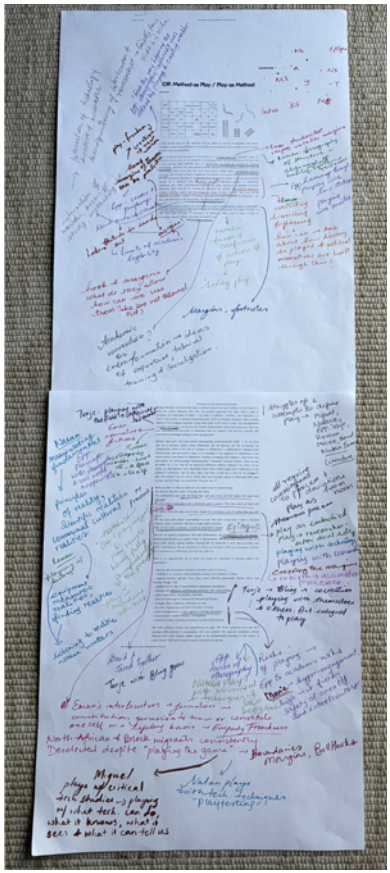
* This footnote is in protest of citational conventions. The line should have read like this: 'From Wynter to Braidotti, from Caillois to Huizinga, Ginsburg to Minh-Ha, Sharpe to Lugones…'



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.

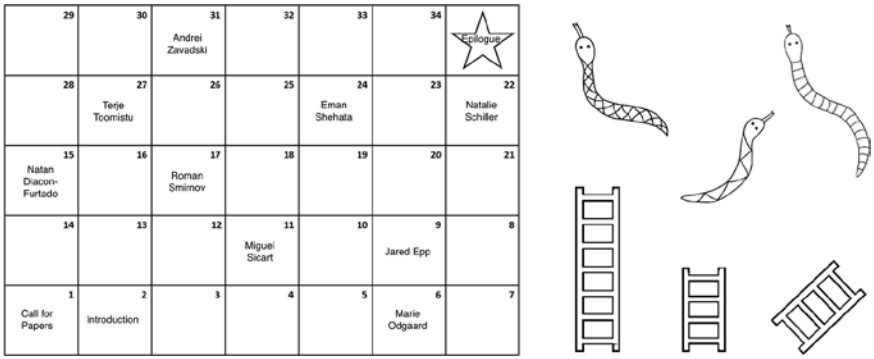


Figure 12. A map of snakes and ladders. A template found online (https://quickquarantinegames.com/design-your-own-snakes-and-ladders/) and customized by the authors.

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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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Pasha Tretyakova (pseudonym, any pronouns) is an early-career researcher of anthropology with a focus on movement and embodiment. 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. Pasha develops performances based on ethnographic research and is interested in collaboration as a decolonial method. They are a member of *The February Journal*'s editorial board.

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Article

Play as a Method

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Play as a Method

Miguel Sicart

This article argues that play can function as a legitimate epistemological method: a structured way of generating new knowledge about the world. Drawing on anarchist theory, feminist philosophy, and Science and Technology Studies, the author develops a theory of play as a free, relational, and performative engagement with the world that produces knowledge not through representation but through enactment. Play, in this framework, is characterized by voluntary rule adoption, world-appropriation, and the blurring of boundaries to reveal what is possible rather than merely what is. This argument is grounded in a concrete case study: Probably Not, an iOS application that exploits the statistical uncertainty of machine vision systems to generate critical insight into how AI 'sees.' The app demonstrates how a playful method can contribute to critical technology studies by making hidden assumptions in machine learning visible through humorous, rule-breaking interaction. The article positions play as an epistemology of the liminal, the temporary, and the possible.

Keywords: critical technology studies, epistemology, method assemblage, machine vision, play

I may be unhealthily obsessed with how computers 'see' the world. To me, it is fascinating that there is a branch of computer science that works on algorithms and software that can translate visual data into computable data. How can my car understand how to park itself? Why does my phone recognize my face? My obsession has led me to write quite a few applications, more toyful than useful, that have helped me understand how machine vision works and what kind of sociocultural implications emerge from having computers look at the world. With *Tastegram*,[1] I created an app that delegates the decision about a picture's quality to a machine-learning-trained taste model—that is, a Machine Learning model trained to be a judge of taste in images, using corpora from Instagram as well as from museums. In *Existential Check*,[2] I use a model trained on data from *thispersondoesnotexist.com* to let users take selfies and check whether they exist, which intends to be a joke about how, in the era of visual social media, *we selfie therefore we are*. Neither of these apps solves any problems, but they are useful for thinking about the relationship between software, artificial intelligence, and our culture. Making them, and probably also using them, are ways of making sense of phenomena. It is, in other words, creating knowledge, a process of revealing novel understandings about phenomena that can be communicated, in this case through ridiculous software. Was there a method to that madness? Or was it just playing around?

Understanding the nature of play has been a key topic in anthropology, sociology, philosophy, and biology for the past two hundred

years. Play has been described as the source of culture, an activity shared across species, a way to build communities and maintain solidarity among individuals, a form of entertainment and comfort, and a means of creating disorder, chaos, and social and cultural harm. Playing can be viewed as leisure, a method of learning, or a way of representing and communicating the world. Although there are similarities in various definitions of play, scholars who study play agree only on its ambiguity. This makes it essential to be cautious when describing our approaches to play, recognizing that when we use the term 'play,' we must clarify the type of activity we refer to. Novel theoretical claims should be carefully examined, as they are often not as new as we might assume.

Here be dragons: I present one such theoretical novelty in this article. I argue that play can be understood as a method, an epistemological process that produces new knowledge. Playing can therefore be structured as a method for exploring and answering research questions. This paper outlines the epistemological capabilities of play and how these capabilities can be central to formulating a method. I draw on the concept of method that John Law (2004) proposes in his reflections on methodology and Science and Technology Studies (STS) and Andrew Pickering's (2010) work on cybernetics. I will define the method of play as a type of method assemblage that derives its epistemological results from being performative and relational, rather than representational. The method of play is therefore analogous to the non-modern project of British cyberneticists (Pickering, 2002) and related to feminist, postmodern, and new materialist modes of engaging with the world (Coole & Frost, 2010; Haraway, 2016a, 2016b).

What does all of this mean? Essentially, playing is always a messy relation between people, rules, contexts, and intentions. Whether we are playing a game, playing with a toy, or having joyful sex, play is always a mess. From that mess, sometimes we discover new things about us, others, or the world. In this article, I argue that we can embrace this mess because it is related to the mess of method in social sciences (Law, 2004), and we can use that messiness to formulate new knowledge about sociotechnical phenomena.

The play and game studies communities have already discussed the idea that play can generate knowledge. Johan Huizinga (1971) states that play creates culture through expressions such as poetry, war, and games. Roger Caillois (2001) is less aspirational, arguing that play does have a role in shaping worlds that are part of culture, but not necessarily in the origin of culture. Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) identifies at least two viewpoints: Play as Progress and Play as the Imaginary, which produce novelty through innovation (the Imaginary) or as part of a child's developmental process (Progress). Education research aligned with Jean Piaget's (1997) framework recognizes play as a key method for children to learn about and navigate their environments in structured settings.

However, none of these works considers what type of knowledge play may create, or how that epistemological capability could be used to create new knowledge. Even in the tradition of play and education, the activity

is seen as a vehicle for transmitting already existing knowledge, rather than creating new knowledge.

In game studies, there is also a tradition of questioning how play can be a form of creating knowledge (Hunsinger, 2021; James, 2021; Karppi & Sotamaa, 2012; Kücklich, 2007; Leorke, 2025; Linde, 2021; van Vught & Glas, 2018). The idea of play and playfulness that informs these works is slightly different from the one I am presenting here. Some of these works focus on how playing a game can be an act of interpretation and, thus, of knowledge generation. The common aspect of these works is that play can be analogous to humanistic hermeneutic methods, serving to validate the kind of knowledge produced in game studies. Other works examine how higher education practices can be seen as, or can benefit from, being more playful. Unlike these works, my idea of play as a method is limited neither to games nor to the context of higher education practices. My central case study in this article will be an iOS application, a manifestation of my obsession with machine vision that is probably not a game. Play, as a method, is a messy way of dealing with the mess of the world, extracting some knowledge by embracing, appropriating, and manipulating that world, for fun.

To do so, I will start by outlining a definition of play that will let me relate playing to creating knowledge. I will draw on María Lugones (1987) as the primary source for understanding play as epistemology, complementing it with contributions from postmodern philosophy (Haraway, 2016a) and anarchist theory (Graeber, 2014, 2016). I will illustrate this idea through *Probably Not,*[3] an app that uses this technology to describe what things are not. I will argue that this app is an example of how play can operate to engage with critical discourses on technology.

Once this concept of play is explained, I will place it within the framework of modernity's epistemologies, primarily drawing on Law's (2004) STS research and Pickering's (2002, 2010) work on British cybernetics. I will conclude that play as an epistemology, and thus the method of play, fosters ways of understanding the liminal, the temporary, and the possible.

This article aims to sketch a theory of play as a method. The scope of this idea makes it impossible to reach satisfactory conclusions. In the findings, I describe the work done in this contribution. Future research will develop this idea of ludic methodology as a way of better understanding this world and other worlds that could be.

Play?

The first step is to establish a working definition of play to understand its epistemic and methodological potential. This is the most complex and challenging part of the project, since Western research on play agrees only on its impossibility to define. Therefore, definitions should not be seen as ontological, formal categories but rather as lenses or perspectives through which knowledge about the world can be gained. In other words, I am not

trying to define play here; instead, I offer a specific way to understand ludic activities. This approach, this lens allows me to frame the liminality of play (Turner, 1982) and how it manifests in activities, actions, and attitudes. By doing so, this frame helps me see how playing generates new knowledge about the world.

Each of us can probably come up with examples of play. Children playing with dolls. A game night with friends enjoying *Pictionary*. A flock of kids running amok in a playground while parents try to warn them about the imaginary dangers they perceive in their orderly unruliness. Most of these examples involve an object that mediates the experience, or they occur in a space culturally designated for play. My understanding of play is broader than this. Going to a club for a night out can be a form of play. Having sex could be play, as could flirting. Writing posts on social media pretending to be outraged, or acting on perceived outrage, can also be play. Learning how to drive, how to use a new power tool, or practicing knitting or embroidering or weightlifting—all these activities can be play if they become a practice of taking over the world for expressive purposes, where we can leave our imprint while exploring different forms of pleasure (Sicart, 2014).

Any work that tries to conceptualize play needs to address the theories that explain how the ludic relates to cultural and social expression. Huizinga (1971), whose *Homo Ludens* is considered the foundation of modern Western views on play, identified a ludic drive as the origin of culture. In his cultural anthropological study of human expression, Huizinga finds traces of play in various manifestations, such as poetry, war, law, and, of course, games. For Huizinga, Western culture stems from agonistic play, understood as a ludic drive that channels competition into a form of culture that mediates conflict. Huizinga's theory of play is mainly conveyed through an analysis of games, and his work remains highly relevant. Nonetheless, *Homo Ludens* has been critiqued and revised (Ehrmann et al., 1968) and should be read both as a profound insight into why the study of play should be central to understanding modernity and postmodernity, and as a reflection of its time and author: a white European scholar writing in the interwar period.

We should also adopt a similar approach to Roger Caillois's (2001) *Man, Play, and Games*. While Caillois's work primarily examines what games are and what their cultural role is, it still reflects a European humanist perspective, written during the postwar period and at the start of decolonization. Like all historical research, Caillois's insights should be understood within that context and critiqued accordingly (Trammell, 2023). Nevertheless, his analysis of games, his categories of play, and the distinction between *paidea* and *ludus*—the organized and unorganized types of play, respectively—remain relevant for understanding why we play and create games.

A canon of Western theories of play should also include Bernard Suits's (1978) *The Grasshopper*, a philosophical argument emphasizing the pleasure derived from being bound by the inefficient rules of games. Brian Sutton-Smith's (1986, 1997) work should also be central to this canon, as he organized most play studies that preceded him and laid the groundwork

for more recent research (Henricks, 2016; Sicart, 2014; Stenros, 2015). Other important contributions to understanding play in this tradition include Hans-Georg Gadamer's (2004) adaptation of the concept to analyze the phenomenology of experiencing artworks, Erving Goffman's (1961) investigation of what people actually do when they play, and Victor Witter Turner's (1982) examination of the connections between play, theater, and other liminal cultural expressions.

At the risk of being overly simplistic, I would argue that all these works share an understanding of play as a creative force (a manifestation of Sutton-Smith's rhetoric of the Imaginary). In broad terms, the Western tradition of play regards the ludic as an (aesthetic) source of cultural expression and social behavior, often structured around objects governed by rules that meaningfully constrain human behavior. These rules are frequently freely accepted, and people experience a sense of fun or enjoyment when they are followed. Play is then understood as following voluntarily accepted rules to find enjoyment within those constraints, which can also be seen as cultural expressions. In other words, most of these theories of play are actually theories of playing games. And while there is nothing wrong with that, it does explain why we have comparatively little work on toys or playgrounds, phenomena that are less easy to identify and to configure as objects of study (Giddings, 2024; Sutton-Smith, 1986).

This tradition of play research could be used to justify my argument about the epistemological possibilities of play. However, I find the margins of the canon to be more productive. After all, defining something as liminal as play from the canon's fixed center may be quite paradoxical. The center of a Western canon of play tends to privilege the men, the white, the central European. I will, however, use my previous work on play as a starting point, but only as a springboard to move beyond the canon of play and propose other readings, different understandings, and alternative methodologies outside the core of the ludic.

In *Play Matters* (Sicart, 2014), I proposed a minimalist theory of play inspired by the Romantic tradition of studying the ludic, emphasizing play's aesthetic and phenomenological aspects. In my theory, play is a mode of being in the world characterized by being appropriative, expressive, personal, and autotelic. When playing, we take over the world and reshape it for expressive purposes meaningful to us, deriving the purpose from the activity, not from external sources. How the world is reshaped is negotiated through a conversation among all players, ensuring that everyone is involved in the appropriation and construction of the ludic world. Different play technologies, from games and toys to playgrounds, are designed to facilitate this world-appropriation. However, the playful attitude also allows us to appropriate objects and contexts not initially intended for play, which are then reconfigured to support the ludic activity and its goals.

Bernie De Koven (2013) and the New Games Movement have influenced my focus on the activity of play rather than the formal properties of the game object. However, my existing play theory remains too focused

on individual agency and tends toward aesthetic practices. This theory needs revision to incorporate epistemological work and relationality into how we understand play. Additionally, it can be too easily co-opted for gamification, mainly for capitalist-driven exploitation (Hon, 2022). A comprehensive theory of play supporting ludic methods should move away from dominant discourses and examine the ludic from the peripheries, both geographically and disciplinarily.

For example, the use that Amazon makes of gamification tools to ensure that workers can meet production quotas is a direct outcome of the rationale of play in the classic Romantic tradition (Sicart, 2021). By turning dehumanizing labor practices into a game, these services engage in exploitative work by wrapping it in a discourse of play and fun that justifies workplace abuse. Because playing games is seen as being a creative act of appropriating the world, the application of games to exploit workers could be interpreted not as exploitation, but as liberation from demeaning work. Of course, this is a deeply unethical instrumentalization of play, but one that is at least superficially supported by a tradition of play studies.

Therefore, I turn to anarchist theory, feminist theory, and posthumanist philosophy to better understand play as a source of knowledge.

The anarchist basis of my understanding of play comes from Bob Black's (1991) *The Abolition of Work*, David Graeber's (2016) interpretation of Huizinga's work, and James Scott's (1998) analysis of the state's high modernist project. Black (1991) presents a compelling defense of the ludic not only as an alternative to work but as a way of life that opposes the regimes of production and control defining modern society. For Black, the ludic represents a form of freedom that is governed not by rules but by the joy of freely choosing to do something. Black explains carefully that this freedom is not unproductive or unserious. On the contrary, what is created through play endures because people care about it, having expressed their freedom through those actions. Therefore, play should be seen as joyful, free engagement with the world, defined not by the objects involved but by the voluntary freedom that underpins the activity. Play is a display of both freedom from and freedom to.

Graeber (2016) expands on these ideas in his critique of Huizinga and his reflections on play theory. He argues that games are the utopia of rules because they impose structure, removing ambiguity and guiding collective action. For Graeber, games perfectly exemplify bureaucracy. However, he emphasizes that play is not about strictly adhering to rules or eliminating ambiguity, but about the emergence of form through creative, free action. Games limit play; play creates games—and sometimes even destroys them. Graeber helps us understand that when we play, we see form emerge through the free actions of individuals.

Finally, in his analysis of the state's high modernist project, Scott (1998) distinguishes between epistemic knowledge, which is standardized and centralized, and mētis, 'the kind of knowledge that can only be gained through long practice at similar but rarely identical tasks, requiring constant adaptation to changing circumstances' (Scott, 1998, p. 175). While I will not argue that play

is a form of mētis, Scott offers a way to frame other types of knowledge that do not fit into the traditional epistemologies of the modernist project. Play as an activity is neither techne nor mētis. It contains elements of both, but the process—where form emerges through freely and joyfully exploring the world's appropriation—makes the ludic a distinct way of creating knowledge.

To summarize, from anarchism I take the idea that joyful play is a demonstration and practice of freedom: a practice that leads to the creation of new worlds. These worlds are forms that emerge from the activity of play itself, with rules that shape them and give meaning to the actions taken in those worlds. These actions are at the core of what I consider to be the knowledge created by playing.

I want to expand anarchism with Lugones's (1987) concept of playfulness. In her work, Lugones critiques Huizinga and Gadamer for their agonistic conception of play. Lugones's work is essential because play is not seen as inherently competitive. Lugones does not write about play but about playfulness. Her focus is not on an activity but on an attitude, similar to the idea of playing as a way of being in the world. However, Lugones's concept is based on 'world traveling.' To play is to journey to other worlds and existences we connect with. From Lugones's idea of world traveling, I want to adopt the concept of playing as a relational mode of being in the world. Play appropriates the world, but without imposing itself on it. In Lugones's approach, rules are necessary but not essential. Therefore, games are important but secondary to the relationships built through play. Lugones's playfulness is a life-affirming way of engaging with the world, not taking things too seriously, and learning about others and the world we create together.

Lugones's theory helps shape the anarchist view of play as an expression of freedom. The idea that playfulness is a way of relating to others and the world—having them in relation without trying to dominate them—defines what 'appropriating' means. Appropriation is not an aggressive conquest of the world, but the creation of freely formed networks of agency that collectively shape a world. That world relies on rules, but those rules can be adapted, changed, or discarded based on the importance of the relationships that build that world. Play is pleasure, fun, humor, and a focus on building and rebuilding the world that is being appropriated and the self that inhabits it.

I have so far presented an idea of play that focuses on the ludic as a free appropriation of the world, established through the creation of relations among different agents and aspects of that world. These relations are not dependent on rules; they use structure and form to create new configurations of the world. So far, we have freedom and relationality as central to the ludic. The final element in this understanding of play as the foundation for an epistemology is intentionality. Donna J. Haraway's (2016a) cyborg theory provides inspiration for understanding what we want to do when we play.

The idea of play as world-appropriation can be misunderstood. We might see it as a way of imposing new structures on the world: structures that appear to offer freedom but actually serve as forms of order and control

through rules that promise joy but limit the choices of its meaning. Therefore, we should view the appropriation of the world through play as a transgression of boundaries, rather than as an imposition of boundary-creating structures. Like Haraway's cyborg, players should not be 'afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints' (Haraway, 2016, p. 15). The cyborg is a myth, and as such, it can be understood as a departure from the high modernist project of knowledge through rationality and quantifiable scientific practices (Maley, 2016; Weber, 2009).

Haraway's (2016a, 2016b) feminist philosophy transcends dualisms and uses the myth of the cyborg as a tool to think beyond seeking 'unitary identity and so generate antagonistic dualisms without end' (p. 65). The cyborg is playful beyond agonism, just as Lugones demanded. Cyborgs produce knowledge, but 'there is no drive to produce total theory <...> there is an intimate experience of boundaries, their construction and deconstruction,' because '<...> the production of universal, totalizing theory is a major mistake that misses most of reality' (Haraway, 2016a, pp. 66—67). The cyborg offers a foundational idea for a pocket theory of play that explains how the ludic creates knowledge.

Play is then a voluntarily chosen activity in which freedom is demonstrated through creating a world governed by rules and actions willingly accepted, not forced, and always open to change. This world exists within the real world where players meet, but it also provides an alternative through the appropriation, modification, and distortion of that existing world. This distortion occurs through the creation of rules and boundaries that blur traditional categories and suggest new arrangements of agency and being. That world is not just a space for play but also a place of and for knowledge: about oneself, others, and the possibilities that were either only partly accessible in the appropriated world or entirely impossible. The realization of these possibilities in a temporary world lets players experience, explore, enjoy, and learn from them, emerging from play with knowledge of what is and what could be. However, that knowledge does not produce major theories, nor is it outside of play. Play does not just embody existing knowledge; it creates a brief epistemology of the liminal and the possible, and it is up to players to preserve that knowledge and make it real even when they are not playing.

In the next chapter, I will make this play theory more concrete by analyzing a ridiculous software mobile app I developed to explore what machine vision actually does.

Probably not a method

The core aim of methods is to ensure that knowledge is accurate and reproducible. Any new ideas we experiment with and share must go through processes of thinking and refinement that make their arguments truthful. This process guarantees that what we discuss, create, and build are not

merely random outcomes of individual, self-centered misunderstandings of experience, but shareable worlds, ideas, and knowledge. This principle is threatened by the ideologies of the dark enlightenment and the greed of North American tech giants, for whom truthfulness takes a backseat to profit (Golumbia, 2009). Therefore, one of the best ways to demonstrate how play as a method can generate knowledge is to apply it to understanding one of the flagship computational technologies of the last 40 years: machine vision. And not just to learn more about the technology itself, but also to question the dominant ideologies that surround digital technologies. This project is also challenging the 'tech bro's' understanding of the world.

Critical technology studies is a broad, multidisciplinary field that examines how technology shapes culture, society, and politics. The growing presence of artificial intelligence technologies in our daily lives, along with the rapid global impact of generative AI across all areas of culture and society, has made this field central to disciplines such as media studies, science and technology studies, and sociology. The most influential research in this area has drawn on methods from these disciplines (Benjamin, 2019; Crawford, 2021; Joque, 2022; O'Neil, 2017).

What if we approached critical technology studies through play? What if the act of play, as defined earlier, could contribute to the discourse of a unified research field like critical technology studies? With this question in mind, I created the playful software app *Probably Not*, an interactive joke about how machine vision works and the values embedded in technology. The app is available for free on Apple's App Store, and a demo version can be found on the Ridiculous Software website.[4] The purpose of this inquiry was first to make fun of machine vision and then to think through how the technology works and what effects it may have, through playfulness.

The first step in the method I followed to create this app was to research what the technology can do. Machine vision is a field of computer science that uses pattern-matching algorithms and statistical data analysis to enable computers to produce probabilistic results from visual data (Goldenfein, 2019; Moore et al., 2023; Passi & Jackson, 2017). Typically, this type of machine vision relies on a large dataset of labeled images to train a deep learning model. The images in the dataset are manually labeled. A machine learning system processes this labeled visual data to identify the statistical relationship between the visual data and the labels. This creates a model that provides a percentage indicating how closely new data matches the dataset's labels. In simple terms, if a machine vision system is trained with thousands of images of bananas, all labeled 'banana,' the resulting model will be able to determine how similar a new banana image is to the images in the dataset (Joque, 2022; Pasquinelli, 2019).

In other words, a machine vision system does not 'see' or 'understand' the visual data it processes. These systems perform statistical calculations that link the data to a label with a level of certainty. A machine vision does not know what a banana is, but it estimates, within a margin of certainty, that the data can be assigned the label 'banana.' A people's

understanding of machine vision systems, however, gives the computer agency and knowledge: it 'knows' what a banana is and can see it. However, the truth is that it only 'knows' that something is 'probably' a banana.

While engaging with the literature that explained these facts to me, I did not quite understand how this actually worked. This led me to read the documentation for Apple's iOS machine vision libraries. In doing so, I learned that Apple's implementation, which is an industry standard, essentially uses these machine learning models to sift through data and then return an ordered array in which the first element is the label that has returned the higher-accuracy result. For example, when using machine vision to process a picture of a banana, the system would return an array with banana as its first item, followed by a list of other things the image could be but is not. The software is not *seeing*, it is simply performing a statistical guess.

Therefore, computers are never 100% accurate. Machine vision systems are very precise, but they do not always produce results with complete certainty. In simple terms, the computer will never have a confidence level above a certain threshold when processing and categorizing visual data. It does not definitively state that the object in the dataset *is* a banana. Instead, it provides a likelihood score indicating whether the object belongs to the banana category. This means the computer also states that there is a statistical chance that, in a photo of a banana, the object is another object, like a pen or a dildo.

This fact led me to think about the notion of accuracy. A machine vision system cannot be 100% accurate about what an object is because it is making statistical guesses based on limited information. So, let's play with this idea: is it possible to create a perfect, always-accurate machine vision system? My answer was *Probably Not*.

Probably Not is an iOS app that uses machine vision not to identify what an object is, but what it probably is not. Essentially, the user takes a picture of anything, and the app returns the third element in the array the machine vision system produces when analyzing the image.

From a programming perspective, the system is fairly simple: it sends the visual data to a standard machine learning model (ResNet50), which, as I said, returns an array of results ranked by certainty. *Probably Not* outputs the third item in this array—that is, the third-most-likely pairing of object and label in the input image data. In a layman's terms, the computer has a relatively low certainty that the object in the visual data matches a particular label. The pairing exists somewhere in the results; it just isn't the most likely.

However, this playfully means that *Probably Not* is always correct because the object in the visual data is probably not what the printed label indicates. So, there you have it, a machine vision app that is always right because it rejects the idea that statistical certainties equal truth.

Probably Not appropriates the way machine vision systems work and then distorts the results by creating a temporary, playful world in which the app is always right because it is always wrong in what it sees in the world.

But this also creates knowledge: by seeing what other things a computer deems possible for any object to be, we can better understand the risks of machine vision, and of deploying it in the world. It is fine if my app thinks there is a coffeepot in the reproduction of René Magritte's *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* (see Fig. 1). But most machine vision systems operate with the same procedures. So, somehow, the camera on your self-driving car is evaluating what is happening around it, basically saying, 'Yes, that is probably a pedestrian.' And probably not a dust devil. Probably.

Figure 1. *Probably Not* a screenshot. Courtesy of the author.

When I demonstrate the app to users for the first time, they usually start wondering why the program 'sees' something in the data. That is, users tend to examine why the computer labels the object in the image the way it does. Users start to theorize and see patterns in how the computer 'sees.' In other words, my casual, non-systematic experience with *Probably Not* shows that, to understand how computers work, having them *not behave as expected* shifts the understanding from being told what is happening to developing curiosity on their own.

Probably Not explores how the statistical certainty models that most AI rely on affect the world. When we let an image recognition system be part of decision making, we are bringing into this process a system that does not have any knowledge about what it processes, just a statistical guess about the data it has analyzed. Additionally, when breaking standard computer conventions, *Probably Not* also points toward new kinds of knowledge created for users, not through traditional understanding, but by allowing them to experiment with how a computer works in a controlled, humorous, and ultimately playful way.

That is precisely how play functions as a method. Through the playful nature of *Probably Not*, we open up a new way to critically interact with machine vision. This interaction is not 'scientific' or 'artistic.' It demands an attitude toward things characterized by free appropriation for expressive purposes, with a disregard for rules. *Probably Not* functions as a method and a toy, serving as a playful tool for generating knowledge about the world.

There is a madness to this method

Everything in this article so far has outlined the concept of play as a method. The idea that play generates knowledge through action is simple, even as I push the concept of play away from dominant 20th-century discourses on the ludic. The play activity I describe here as a method is fundamentally a free way of engaging with the world for personal expression, aiming to break down boundaries and redraw them in search of fun and pleasure that are ironic and disrespectful of rules. There are other types of play, but the kind that could serve as a method is an expression of a playful yet serious blurring of what already exists, to assert what could be.

These are the key traits of play as an activity. As I illustrated with *Probably Not*, this activity can be used to develop and practice ways of understanding that promote critical engagement with technology. My app's grasp of the significance of statistical certainty in how we understand and experience machine vision offers a fresh perspective for critiquing the hidden, opaque digital technologies we encounter daily.

I have argued that we can benefit from understanding play as a method. Similarly, we could also consider it a part of a method, a step in other forms of engaging with materiality to create new knowledge. For example, play could be part of a design process (Gaver, 2009) or structure a critical making project (Ratto, 2011). All of these are valid possibilities that will be explored in other work that will follow this essay. I have not addressed the most difficult question about play as a method. Specifically, what kind of knowledge does play generate? All methodological and epistemological concepts are questions about questions that force us to examine the truth value of the knowledge gained by applying a method to phenomena.

And here is perhaps the biggest challenge of thinking of play as a method. Unlike techniques from the natural sciences or sociology, play

does not merely 'study' phenomena. In fact, play creates the phenomena it seeks to understand. Because of this, the complexity of considering play as a method is fundamental. Play does not observe phenomena that then become part of what it studies. Instead, play creates those phenomena. Artistic practice shares some similarities with this kind of knowledge creation, probably because many aesthetic practices involve an element of playfulness.

In play, as in some forms of artistic practice, the activity is more important than the outcome, just as it is more important than the props supporting it. Playing to create knowledge begins with but goes beyond the rules imposed on phenomena to interact with them. Play is the realm of the hypothetical, the potential, of what is not yet but could be, or what exists only if we collectively bring it into being through voluntary engagement with rules that we can break or change at any moment for creative and pleasurable reasons.

Answering what kind of knowledge play creates is beyond the scope of this sketch of a method. However, I would like to finish this quick introduction to play as a method by relating what play does to epistemological research. Specifically, I want to circle back and connect the idea of play as a method to the tradition of STS and British Cybernetics.

In his book *After Method*, Law (2004) questions what methods do to knowledge in the social sciences. Law argues that classic methods excel at studying 'the definite, the repeatable, the more or less stable' (p. 6). He contends that methods create their own objects of study and are part of what they examine. Therefore, Law introduces the concept of method assemblage to describe forms of knowledge production that combine 'reality detector and reality amplifier' (p. 14). A more formal definition states that this method is 'the enactment or crafting of a bundle of ramifying relations that generates presence, manifest absence, and Otherness, where the crafting of presence distinguishes it as a method assemblage' (p. 42). This idea, heavily influenced by Bruno Latour's approaches, helps Law think about how the social sciences develop methods for exploring and studying presence and absence within actor-network relations. Perhaps the best way of connecting Law's ideas with my interpretation of play is to return to the concept of mess. For Law, the method assemblage is messy, unruly, always co-constructing object and process. Play is similar: always on the verge of breaking down while creating order through rules and structures that only exist while players consider them to be valid and that vanish when the activity is over. Play is a mess of agencies, objects, rules, and chaos. Like Law's method assemblages. That's why *Probably Not* is the outcome of a messy process, of playing with the fringes of what technology is designed to do, making an app that reconfigures what 'image recognition' means. Play is not a tool for detecting reality but a way of creating new realities. Games, along with toys and rules, become the instruments through which that potentiality becomes something that can be experienced, discussed, and reflected upon. The ludic method makes the actual possible, given a particular set of freely accepted rules, for a limited time.

From a slightly more epistemological perspective, play creates *knowledge of possibilities* by making them real through rules that restrict actions, limit the existence of that possibility in time and space, and serve as a free commitment to realizing that potentiality. This brings us closer to understanding the kind of knowledge play produces, but it still does not resolve its epistemology. We need one more step to move closer to answering that question, and I will take that step by using theories developed by Andrew Pickering (2002, 2010). The playful aspects of some British cyberneticians' work come from a blend of scientific reasoning and aesthetic interest, rather than a single philosophy. Gordon Pask's work on music systems and other technologies that interact with users through feedback loops was closer to artistic expression than scientific research. However, his work still kept a scientific outlook, investigating how the brain functions, how computers can perceive, and what kinds of relationships between people and their environment can be modeled using cybernetic principles.

Pickering (2010) describes British cybernetics as the idea of a 'non-modern ontology in which people and things are not so different after all' (p. 18). This ontology is based on the concept that the world consists of black boxes, and that the best way to understand and interact with them is through performative relations rather than representational ones. In other words, what representations a black box might contain is less important than how the black box performs in relation to its environment. Pickering argues that this relationality and performativity are what create cybernetic knowledge. That's why I want to conclude this piece by suggesting that the playful method is part of the intellectual tradition of British cybernetics.

Play as a method focuses on the possible, on making it real for a limited time, not on representing knowledge but on performing that knowledge. Any knowledge created through play results from the performative relations established during play, facilitated by rules. Play embodies the awareness of vanishing potentials, a way of understanding what could be rather than what is. Play does not produce an object or offer a representation of what is known. Instead, it enacts a temporary, fleeting world where that new knowledge unfolds, through the free collective effort of players, until play ends and everything stops. Afterward, what remains is the knowledge gained from play.

To paraphrase Pickering, the ludic is provocative in its non-modern method. It is not about measuring or representing the world but about establishing relations based on a what-if, which creates realities in previously unthought ways. Play is an unruly way to generate unruly knowledge while having fun.

1. See https://apps.apple.com/us/app/tastegram/id1598526379 (accessed on 24 March 2026).
2. See https://apps.apple.com/us/app/existential-check/id1659816000 (accessed on 24 March 2026).

3. https://apps.apple.com/us/app/probably-not/id1491823325?l=fr-FR (accessed on 24 March 2026).
4. See https://ridiculous.software/ProbablyNot/ (accessed on 24 March 2026).

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Visual Essay

Playing the Self and Other Otherwise: A B Movie Journey through Low-Expectation Co-Creativity and Outsider Knowledge

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Playing the Self and Other Otherwise: A B Movie Journey through Low-Expectation Co-Creativity and Outsider Knowledge

Jared Epp

My co-creator David Ross and I made what we called 'ethnographic B movies' as the central element of my doctoral fieldwork. These low budget and cheesy speculative fiction films, written primarily by David, became an opportunity for him to share his ideas of a revolution based on the concept of the Musicality of Reality. The films gave David a chance to perform himself otherwise: no longer on the socio-economic margins, as a failed academic living on a senior's fixed income, but as a legitimate thinker leading a global movement. Together, we gave into and created a mad world of possibility, a place where I could also become an Other to my ethnographic self, performing a version of my actual self as always unsure about what was happening in the field. In this visual essay, I share a series of film stills in a montage-like fashion and with an accompanying text, to mirror the absurd silliness of our films inspired by the B movie genre. I focus on moments across our filmic output that highlight how giving into playfulness provided very serious self-disclosure opportunities both for David and for myself. By bringing the reader into the space of our films in this way, I want to encourage others to experiment and play with the possibilities of ethnographic becoming afforded by low aesthetic expectations and absurdist creativity.

Keywords: alternative knowledge, collaboration, filmmaking, research-creation, madness, speculative fiction

> *Is not thinking outside the university a mad act—given the scholastic bureaucracy that passes for thought?*
>
> David Ross

David Ross and I met during my doctoral fieldwork, in December 2019, at a community meeting in Parkdale, Toronto, Canada. He wanted to institute systemic change to housing activism through his vision of shamanic neo-Marxism. I was at that meeting interested in the spirit of place amidst gentrification. David invited me to attend a theater group at the same center, serving those living precariously in the neighborhood.

From the very beginning, the ethnographic moment was defined by playing and creating worlds. Inspired by our improv skits and sidewalk

wandering conversations, we decided to make films. Neither of us had much experience, but we did it anyway, learning through playing, with low stakes. We were working on our first film, *Ectoplastic*, in spring 2020, as the pandemic became hyperlocal. What started as a commentary on plastic consumption became our own conspiracy theory: Bezos, Zuckerburg, Musk, and other tech giants let COVID-19 spread across the globe to put the wheels in motion of total virtual reality.

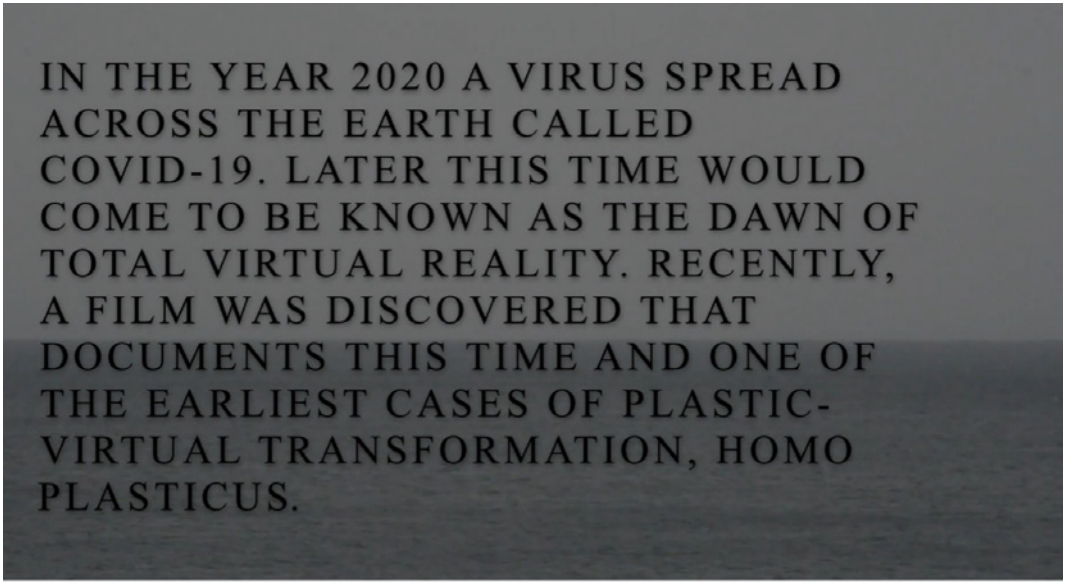


Figure 1. A screenshot of the opening phrase of *Ectoplastic*. Courtesy of the author.

...It is May 2025, years after that first film and days after my dissertation defense. I wanted to spend time with David to celebrate my defense, and we decided to shoot another film. In this film, there is an alien from the Alpha Centauri B movie planet, who recruits a prospecting fool. Because I was anxious about my professional prospects, the filmmaking, meant as a celebration of my defense, became a cathartic opportunity to play with my anxieties. I played the prospector, 'a fool with a PhD and no prospects.' Now, the relational moment felt less like doctoral fieldwork and more like two friends making a film and having fun.

In this visual essay, I share film stills that document our work together, primarily focused on the film, *Fools of the B Movie Planet*, mentioned above. Through these stills, I invite the reader to think about the center and periphery of anthropology as well as about what David calls 'playful absurdity' (Epp & Ross, 2024, p. 60) as ethnographic relationality. We made the films for each other, for David's ideas and my ethnography. We developed a form of filmic research-creation that Michael MacDonald's (2023) concept of 'Cineworld' helps situate. We were beholden to our

own vision and each other, practicing what Faye Ginsburg (2019) calls an 'aesthetics of accountability.' It was our co-creation that mattered and not the foregrounding of a predefined ethnographic context. Nicholas Bourriaud's (2002) idea of relational aesthetics further grounded our co-creative ethics. He argued that we should pay attention to the relations that art produces—not only objects. He provoked critics, artists, and audiences to ask if a work denied or affirmed anyone's ability to be themselves.

While our films were meaningful to us, how could that meaning translate to an academic audience? Here, Ethiraj Gabriel Dattatreyan and Isaac Marrero-Guillamón's (2023, 2019) concept of the 'politics of invention' remains helpful for thinking through the entanglement of worlds imagined and enacted ethnographically as well as their reception within the discipline. But why would anyone watch our recent post-research film? What kind of patience and openness should be expected of an audience for outsider ethnographic filmmaking? Is the baseline a learning opportunity of disciplinary relevance, a pleasing aesthetic journey, or maybe something else entirely?

The question of relevance to an audience opens space for reflecting upon the center and periphery, and upon the conventional and unconventional within anthropology. David is a thinker; he has a PhD and briefly held an academic position.[1] Now, his ideas live on the periphery, and he has failed to return to the sites of normative knowledge production. He finds purpose in this failure, staying true to the vision of his thinking. He rails against the formalities of conventional academia, or 'scholastic bureaucracy,' as evidenced in his opening quote. It is this denial of conventional thinking that David affirmed and that I followed in our filmmaking.

Being creative, following David's desire to remain outside conventions provided a space to produce and share alternative knowledge beyond academic standards. The periphery unburdened by conventions provides a fertile ground to be creative on the disciplinary fringe. I follow the call of *Peripheral Methodologies* by Francisco Martínez et. al (2021), who show the peripheral, whether 'vague, contradictory, unfinished, superficial and eccentric,' is not a 'flaw to be banished' but 'a source of creativity' (p. 1). There was no denying David's outsider knowledge and its filmic embellishment. We leaned into the strangeness of it, wearing tinfoil helmets, running around empty wading pools, circumambulating garbage in a parking lot, or creating conspiracy theories. It was all somehow fieldwork and collaborative creative ethnography (Criado & Estalella, 2023). Making films became an experiment in taking this call of peripherality and creativity to the limits of academic legibility.

We re-imagined ethnographic film as speculative[2] B-movie fiction beyond documentary.[3] Together, David and I have written about making 'ethnographic B movies' and the research relations and possibilities we generated. (Epp, 2024; Epp & Ross, 2024). B movies, as Becky Bartlett (2021) points out, are defined by a lack of skill and resources to realize a vision or an inability to adequately render an imagined world but doing it anyway. It is this acknowledged B movie failure that gave us courage. We knew our techno-

dystopic pandemic reality or alien encounter would be rendered less than it could have been, but it didn't matter.[4] We gave in to a 'playful absurdity' (Epp & Ross, 2024) and an openness to expression with very low expectations of the outcome.

We made a new world on our own terms, on David's terms. He shared his life as he saw fit, blending a 'real' past with imagined present and future through different characters. In his words, he had 'failed to have a middle-class life.' While failure saturates his sense of self, it animates his resolve to live and think beyond the mainstream. He generates ideas, communing with the history of ideas, crafting and living the Musicality of Reality. The Musicality of Reality, David's central concept, is an assemblage of knowledges, including but not limited to, quantum physics, Marxism, Heidegger, Lacan, Platonic ethics, and Shamanism. Reality is music—and playing that music will change the world. During a zoom call, as we talked through the material for our article, David provided a summary:

> 'It's to liberate and to articulate how matter is the space of musical structure and how existence is essentially an exercise in musical composition that undercuts the notion of capitalism and the notion that the bottom line is making money. Time is not money... time is the present. I would argue that the invaluable tool and weapon for overcoming capitalism is the systemic affirmation of shamanistic consciousness as delimitating the electronically mediated gathering and hunting of information.'[5]

David is serious about achieving his goal and does so resolutely along a whimsical and singular course. He is not trying to barge into a lecture hall at the University of Toronto wearing a tweed jacket, khakis, and loafers—as David Ross, PhD. No, he is a tinfoil-helmeted alien from Alpha Centauri wearing flamingo glasses and leather jacket and teaching, in a graffitied alleyway, that foolishness is wisdom. Or he is David Ross wearing his ideas on a sandwich board sign, wandering up and down the sidewalks of Toronto, carrying around his agora and hoping for public conversation.

The style of sharing ideas or, as David called it, the method of his madness, and our B films, the madness of the method, became the fieldwork. Writing about madness as a catch-all signifier for what eludes categorization in anthropology, Sarah Pinto (2023) draws attention to how the discipline implicates itself in creating the thresholds and concepts it seeks to study in the field. I follow Pinto here to think about the binding of form and content in knowledge creation and mobilization. There are no graffitied alleys in the Ivory Tower, nor unvetted agoras of public dialogue. Anthropologists talk to other anthropologists about the messiness of life and fieldwork, but that messiness seems to dissolve when we write to and for our discipline. What was madness in the field becomes cultural politics or the subjectivation of normativity and difference. David refuses to conform—and I hoped to affirm that refusal in all its absurdity and vital energy.

Jean Dubuffet's (1988) ideas of outsider art provide a frame to think through the kinds of worlds where knowledge emerges beyond the academy:

> 'The production of art is the playground of the whimsical spirit. Nothing is more damaging to the whimsical spirit than being subjugated to state reason, than being administered by the community which then controls it and decides upon the direction it is to take' (p. 28).

For Dubuffet, the outsider is unbridled by conventions and free to express themselves in raw singularity. David is more interested in sharing his own ideas than in an exegesis of Marx or Lacan, which he could do with ease.[6] This refusal frees him from the academic self-bound by conventions and citations. Martin Fredericksen (2018) in *An Anthropology of Nothing in Particular* references Gilles Deleuze's Nietzsche-inspired concept of radical nihilism. Whereas, traditionally, nihilism refers to a denial of meaningful existence, radical nihilism speaks to meaning that has nowhere to exist. Without an academic world to perform his thinking, David creates one in the everyday spaces of public life, on a podcast[7] and on our YouTube channel.[8] He shares his ideas on sandwich board signs with no Ivory Tower to back him up. While he has credentials, his knowledge is not precluded to an academic CV, publications, or position. He has only himself and the agora of public dialogue. I entered that agora, following the realm of the 'cosmic nutbars' and thinking about where, how, and with whom knowledge matters.

As we filmed, David and I became fictional versions of our real selves, akin to a silly ethnographic psychodrama. He plays with his failures and bipolar depression, talking to stone statues under a freeway or talking to himself on a rotodial phone along a busy sidewalk. I am an ethnographer but a pretend one, a prospectless prospector, a hyper-sensitive and self-deprecating anxious anthropologist playing a harmonica in an alley. If all anthropology can ever produce is a kind of fictional interpretation of 'real' worlds (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Geertz, 1973), then what is real and what matters? What are the thresholds that we legitimate as disciplinary? And what gets left on the margin?

The visual journey here starts with stills from our filmography,[9] with accompanied dialogue to show how playing with speculative fiction generated opportunities to shuffle and subvert the roles and power dynamic of researcher/researched. In these opening stills I ask: what does it matter if the whole thing is a kind of inside joke of questionable academic relevance or the world of one person who constantly fails to become mainstream? In this spirit, calling out from the periphery, I guide the reader to question how we all want to define our acceptability thresholds. I ask these questions without an answer but to provoke conversation on the fringes of the discipline, the fertile ground for David's independent, alternative knowledge.

Figure 2. A still from the film *The Quest for the Musicality of Reality: An Ethnographic B Movie* (2025). Courtesy of the author.

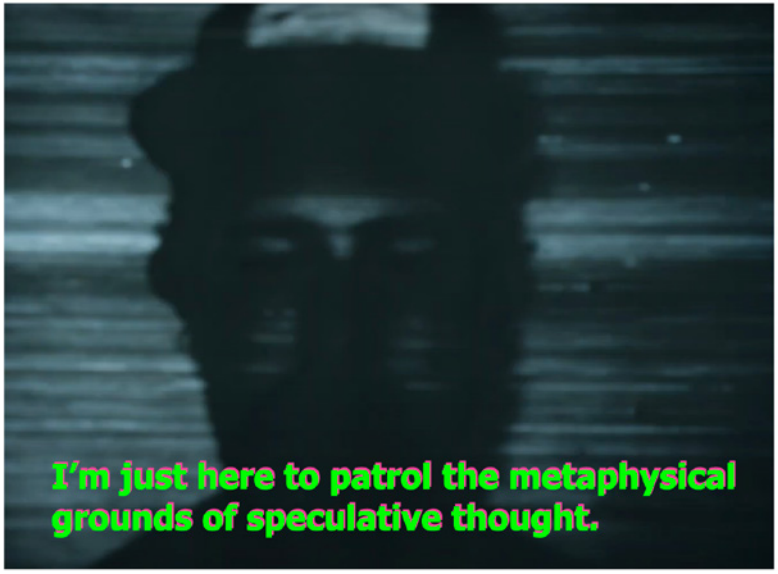
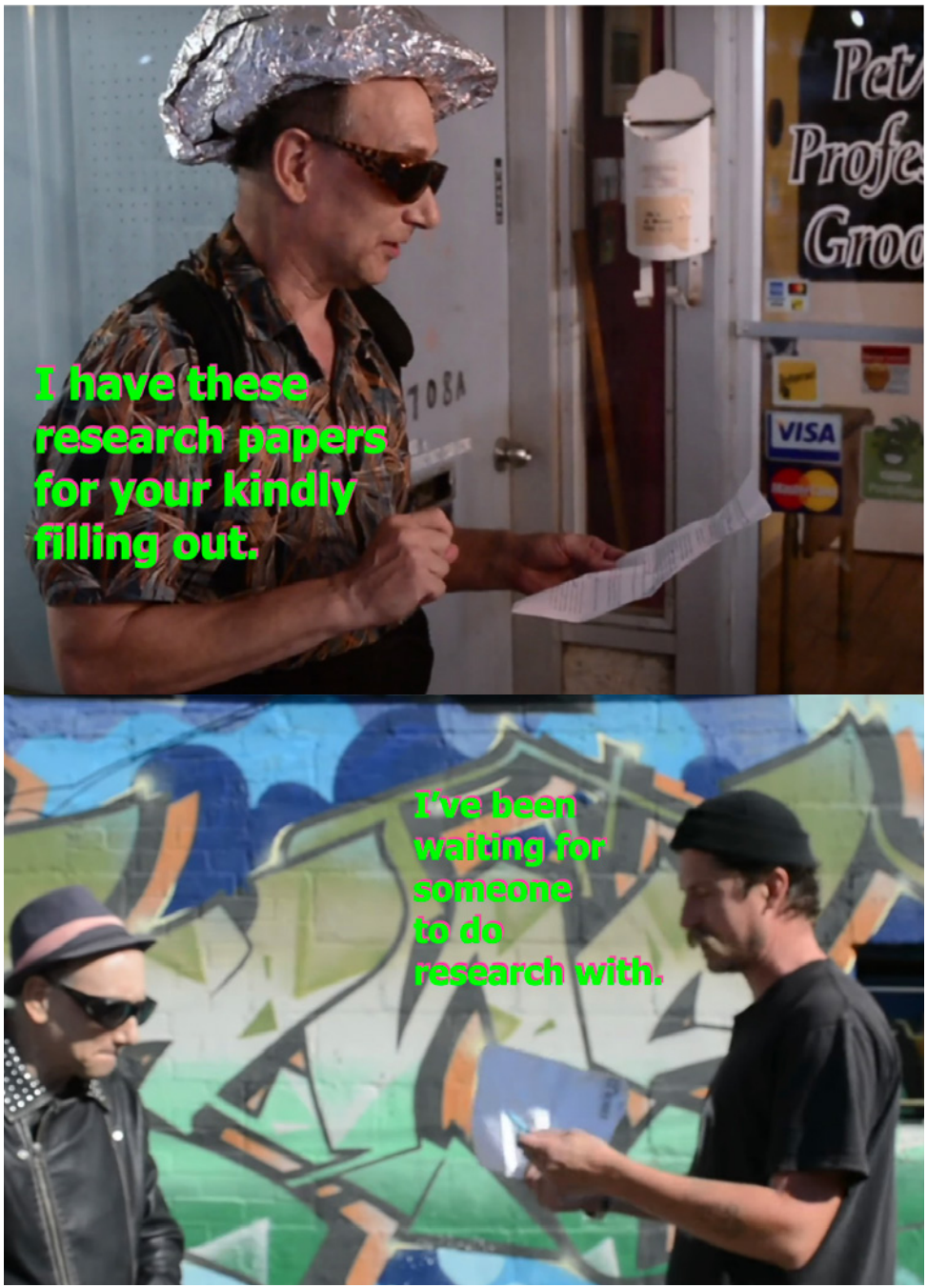


Figure 3. A still from the film *The Sisosopher Dialogue* (2025). Courtesy of the author.



Figures 4 and 5. Scenes from two different films dealing with performing research ethics consent forms: *Music Sound Noise* (2021) and *The Quest for the Musicality of Reality* (2025). Courtesy of the author.

Figures 6 and 7. Scenes from two different films—*The Quest for the Musicality of Reality* (2025) and *Ectoplastic* (2020)—put together in a single montage for a conference presentation at EASA 2024 in Barcelona. The scenes are dubbed over with David reading from a script for a mock thesis defense scene between my thesis supervisor (him) and myself. Courtesy of the author.

Figures 8 and 9. Stills from *The Quest for the Musicality of Reality* (2025). Courtesy of the author.

Figure 10. A mock thesis defense scene from *The Quest for the Musicality of Reality* (2025). Courtesy of the author.

Figure 11. The closing scene of *Ectoplastic* (2020). Courtesy of the author.

'Oh, ectoplastic discharge of logocentric recalcitrance!' David as Dr. Carlos Popper exclaims to open his closing monologue in *Ectoplastic* (2020). A fragment of outsider knowledge, a call from the periphery, a moment of ethnography? Maybe all of these. It is how David represents himself through his own words, through the script he wrote and the ideas he shared. Does it matter that it was spoken or if it was meaningful to an audience? Is it the singular language of madness or anthropological knowledge?

The next section contains stills from our most recent film Fools of the B Movie Planet (2025). This is the film, mentioned at the outset, that we shot after I had just completed my defense. Here, I invite the reader to ask if, how, or in what ways this film matters. Is it the importance of cultivating, celebrating a creative ethnographic friendship, or does it matter as a piece of anthropology? Can bad films that don't share anything intentionally ethnographic even matter to anyone else but their creators? If they don't matter and are a waste of the viewer's time, can they still be a form of scholarship? And if not, then what is the threshold of mattering in anthropology? Is it that only the most professional and socially relevant films matter?

The ethnographic B movie approach follows others who have questioned the conflation of quality scholarship with quality filmmaking. Further, it explores how the standards of commercial documentary film have laid the foundation for the standards of quality filmic ethnography[10] (Macdonald, 2023; Minh-ha, 1991; Ruby, 2000; Worth, 1966). Our films, as ethnographic B movies, follow this line of critique as an invitation to accept and celebrate limitations. What about the relationship between ambition, openness, and limitations in knowledge production? What stops limitations from being an invitation in the emergent worlds of scholarship? How can we take the call put forward in *Peripheral Methodologies* (Martínez et al., 2021) to let what escapes knowledge production become a source of creative energy and ethnographic possibility? The genre of documentary has become the standard of ethnographic film. How can this be otherwise? What if the standard were fiction, and it was creativity and imagination that drove knowledge, not what was already knowable 'in the world' and open for interpretation not invention? I ask the reader to keep this constellation of questions in mind as you scroll through images of a couple of mad fools on the B movie planet.

Figures 12–30. Stills from *Fools of the B Movie Planet* (2025). Courtesy of the author.


Capital is the gift. It is the present.
The gift that vibrates
through all things.
What is truly gold is recognizing
your own foolishness.


I thought I'd find prospects
but have found nothing of the sort.
I'm the only fool around here
and there ain't no gold neither.

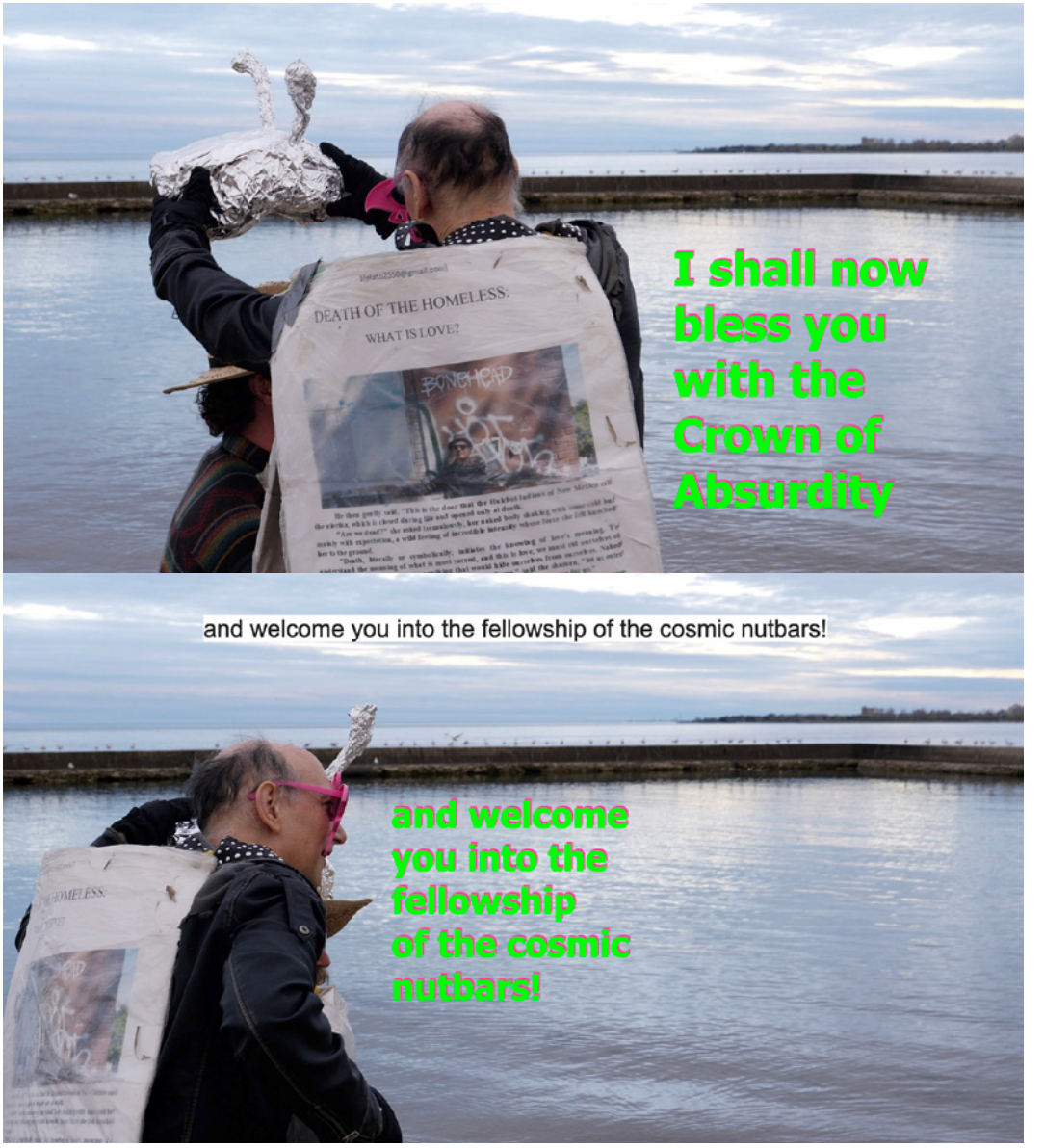

Recognizing your foolishness is the first step to wisdom.
How can I prospect with this non-physical reality that's important in terms of grounding my positionally as a human being?


Matter matters my friend,
because it is the space of
musical structure.
Through these perilous pathways that I make while
I walk and think about what really matters.


Here we are experiencing the Musicality of Reality!
Surmounting the conventional banalities that imprison.


Please let me join you!
We shall be immersed in the waters of the music!


OBEY WARNING FLAGS AT ALL TIMES
I now invite you to go with me
to the very edge of madness!
Knowing you
My fellow mad person
My fellow fool
DEATH OF THE HOMELESS
WHAT IS LOVE?


DEATH OF THE HOMELESS:
WHAT IS LOVE?
I shall now bless you with the Crown of Absurdity
and welcome you into the fellowship of the cosmic nutbars!
and welcome you into the fellowship of the cosmic nutbars!

Conclusion

The journey to the B movie planet presents a kind of speculative fiction ethnography that, existing on the periphery of legibility, becomes a fertile ground for alternative research relations and absurd imagined worlds. Yet at the same time, the periphery is always at risk of not being taken seriously or being ignored and falling completely off the edge. A lack of recognition has too often been the atmosphere of the revolution of the Musicality of Reality. I made the decision to join David's movement, to co-create and study his revolutionary world diving headlong into the possibility of joining him on the unrecognized edge.

While I recognized David's infectious vitality and sense of purpose, he recognized my commitment to his project. Committing was not a discursive gesture of rapport building that I offered as a kind of pledge but a performative demonstration; poorly acting, becoming the characters he invented, taking seriously the invitation to invent my own, as well as hours and hours of filming, directing, and editing. While we were meeting about revisions to our co-authored article (Epp & Ross, 2024), he commented that we both had equity in the argument, that ideas came from both of us. I believe he felt this sense of equity through recognizing the investment to the project that each of us made. He was not only the interlocutor who gave me data to produce knowledge from: the knowledge was co-produced.

After participating in a dramatized exorcism ritual for his depression,[11] I couldn't help but ask if he had been acting or not. Because he had failed to have a middle-class life, hold a job, have a family, he

explained, he had nothing to lose. Can this spirit travel beyond the margin? Having nothing to lose can be a license to take risks, to fail with nothing on the line, or to achieve something brand new when there is nothing in the way. Acknowledging the risks we each took investing ourselves in the collaboration solidified our bond. David risked exposing and sharing his failures, vulnerabilities, and ideas to me and whatever audience we have on our YouTube channel, even as he knew well that I would take, edit, translate, and rearticulate all of it beyond his control. I risked both the same public exposure of my acting while also making the content that David initiated and we co-created into the material of my fieldwork and my contribution to anthropology. When David wanted to lambaste the reviewers of our article for their perceived lack of platonic fluency, I had to tell him to relax. I still wanted conventional legitimacy and to get the article published. Making fiction films together provided a middle ground for our ethnographic relations. It created the space of mutual risk as we both made ourselves vulnerable on screen, open to being laughed at or, worse, ignored. The intentional low stakes of our work softened this sense of risk. We became a couple of mad fools creating something between ethnography and the Musicality of Reality.

1. David has a PhD in sociology and had a position at an English-speaking university in Istanbul. We didn't talk much about how he lost his position, but he did mention that he hadn't been a good lecturer and his students wanted him fired.
2. I choose speculative fiction, instead of science, or ethno-, or simply fiction because our films are intentionally oriented towards an imagined future, but we are other to ourselves, in a similar context. We were speculating on who we would be, as a different kind of ethnographer, or a different kind of radical thinker.
3. I acknowledge the historical place and importance of the ethno-fictions of Jean Rouch and more recent works that channel this genre and challenge the ubiquity of conventional documentary, such as, but not limited to, the films of Johannes Sjoberg and Rajat Nayyar. Though Rouch provided an alternative way to tell ethnographic stories, it seems that ethno-fictions have remained peripheral to the dominance of the documentary genre as the primary style of ethnographic filmmaking.
4. For a deeper exploration of how our lack of skill and resources intermingled with an inability to render a world David imagined, see Epp, 2024, pp. 83—88.
5. A Zoom call with David Ross, conducted by the author on 21 May 2024.
6. I have encouraged David numerous times to give paid courses on major thinkers, especially when he talks about living precariously only on a Canadian senior's pension of 750$ CAD a month. Not that this would be easy, but it would be an option. But he is not interested at all. Though fluent in the ideas weaving Plato with Marx, or Heidegger with Lacan, he wants to share a neo-shamanism on electronic information hunting and gathering.

7. See David Ross's podcast, *The Musicality of Reality*: https://podcasts.apple.com/de/podcast/the-musicality-of-reality-building-a/id1881851003?l=en-GB (accessed on 31 March 2026).
8. See Jared Epp and Davis Ross's YouTube channel: https://www.youtube.com/@Nomad787 (accessed on 31 March 2026).
9. See Jared Epp and Davis Ross's films: *Ectoplastic* (2020), https://youtu.be/HXBBJXQ9mJo; *Music Sound Noise* (2021), https://youtu.be/rJjlcFikFiU; *The Quest for the Musicality of Reality* (2025), https://youtu.be/0rNO1EOyluk; *Fools of the B Movie Planet* (2025), https://youtu.be/Z4oNClSPaHo (all accessed on 31 March 2026).
10. I provide a more in-depth discussion on the topic of the relationship between quality film and quality research in an article on the ethnographic B movie (Epp, 2024).
11. I expand on the exorcism ritual in my dissertation (Epp, 2025).

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Playful Indifference in a Hyper-Engaged Field

Marie Rask Bjerre Odgaard

This article starts with a provocation: *can* and *should* we be playfully indifferent to the differences that keep us from being able to trust each other? Can we imagine playing together in fieldwork and beyond in ways that allow our differences to not be made an object of scrutiny? Beginning from a seemingly minor yet weighty utterance—'I trust you' by a friend and mentor in Amman, Jordan—I reflect on the preoccupation with difference that can emerge when writing ethnographically about queer life and relations in contexts where visible gender and sexual 'difference' is both charged and potentially dangerous. This leads me to consider anthropology's ambiguous role in both studying and defending the importance of social and cultural difference, and the role of identity politics in decolonial iterations of anthropology. Drawing on Madhavi Menon (2015) and especially Naisargi N. Davé's (2023) recent theorization of indifference as a queer virtue, alongside María Lugones's (1987) notion of playfulness as an openness to world-travelling, I develop the concept of 'playful indifference' both as a response to the politics of queer relation-building among artists and activists in Amman and as a suggestion as to how we might mobilize playfulness in order to remain open to trusting relations and the possibility of becoming otherwise (Povinelli, 2012). *Playful indifference* is proposed as a relational ethic and a politics of solidarity that observes, but also willfully disregards, paranoid hyper-attention to positionality and moralizing impulses of difference-making.

Keywords: activism, ethics, indifference, playfulness, politics

As anthropologists, I think we all have those moments in our ethnographic fieldwork that stick with us—or that get stuck in our thinking. Moments that we, when thinking of indifference in the sense that this word is often used in colloquial language, feel anything *but* indifferent to. One of these moments for me was when Miriam[1] told me something in 2021. This was after we had been going over a text I was writing, inspired by conversations with her. We were at her house in a central neighborhood in Amman, Jordan, accompanied by her cat. Miriam was—and is—a long-time conversation partner during fieldwork in Amman and a mentor on all matters queer, art, and activism in the country. She very simply said, 'I trust you' as I was leaving her place. We both knew it would be a good while before we would see each other again, as I was traveling back to Denmark to finish my dissertation.

At the time, her words overwhelmed me. How could she—and I—know whether I could be trusted? Trusted with the immense responsibility of writing about queer artistry and queer lives in Amman, a topic with so many possibilities for being politicized. This topic and project lend themselves

easily to critique from the perspective of current approaches to postcolonial contexts and identity politics. What did that trust entail for Miriam? For me? In my hyper-engagement at the time, it felt like a punch in the stomach—and, in the days that followed, a heaviness that left me wanting to stop putting words on paper. I wanted nothing more than for her to trust me with the task of writing and with staying true to what she had taught me over the years.

Miriam is known in the arts community in Amman to be forthright about her opinions and views. She is someone you will turn to for honest advice—but also the kind of advice that at first feels impossible to follow. Throughout the years, several people in Amman recounted specific observations made by Miriam at an early stage of rupture in their lives. Some of these observations had referred to their relationships to parents, partners, or other family members. Some had been in relation to leaving the country or to confronting their own desires. Her words kept resonating and pushing them ahead in their life choices.

But at the same time, Miriam's declared trust weighed on me because I didn't trust myself at that point. After years of critically—at times bordering on navel-gazing—examining my role as an anthropologist and as a Northern European woman working in an Arab-majority country in the so-called Middle East, with all the contextual history that this entails (including how I came to represent 'the North,' and how the region in which I work came to be termed 'the Middle East'), how could I trust myself?

There was so much to be hesitant about in that positionality and in the structures that had enabled it. While intersectional agendas originally built by Black feminist scholars had been so incredibly important to so many scholars coming after, their intention had never been an obsession with difference, but a politics of friendship and solidarity, and a radical commitment to finding ways to work against multiple oppressions being reproduced (Harney & Moten, 2013; Lugones, 1987). But from a paranoid reading (Sedgwick, 1997) of anthropology, there are reasons enough for a hesitant —or even abolitionist— attitude to the discipline itself (Jobson, 2020). I had a fear of going along with the liberal focus on producing marginalized groups and identities through writing about them and their unique identity claims, rather than from the midst and mess of actual relations. In addition to this simultaneously theoretical and relational fear, I had developed a watchfulness born out of working in a place with a highly competent intelligence apparatus that keeps an eye on all activist labor and visibility while framing their non-conformist opinions as breaches to national security. Well-meaning colleagues told me: 'Do not allow your friends to be present with their own names in your work, even if they so desire. Do not trust yourself, nor them in their vulnerable positions.' They suggested to trust the academic institution and its tried and tested protocols, spaces where trust becomes legal obligation.

There was so much to feel strongly about. There were too many differences made and reinforced between us for trust to seem possible.

Can we trust in playing with indifference?

At different points in time, queer activists and artists in Amman have made spaces for being together, spaces that quite quickly had to make visible for whom they were meant and why, in order to stay afloat, which also made them visible targets for moral scrutiny based on the difference they are perceived to introduce to society. I will return to such spaces, but for now I will mention that spending time with activists and artists that constantly play at the edge of 'too much' engagement from the surroundings has made me consider some of the differences that are central to decolonizing the anthropological discipline. Beyond any individually manifested paranoia, difference plays a central role in how Deleuzian poststructuralist and some decolonial scholars have defined their *raison d'être*, or when Derrida (2000, p. 7) says '...yes to who or what turns up' against modernist claims to authenticity, sameness, and identity. Difference also, obviously, plays a central role in anthropology, whether in critiques of its colonial legacies of studying sameness and difference in far-away societies as a mirror of the imperial project, or through cultural relativism's (moral) project of describing co-existing differences, especially in the North American tradition following Franz Boas and later Clifford Geertz (Brown, 2008). Difference also stands at the center of intersectional thought, which has been crucial for decolonizing anthropology and the anthropologist (Haraway, 1998). As Marilyn Strathern (2020) has pointed out, cultural and societal ways of working out relations are key to understanding why, in Anglo-European contexts, we have become interested in sameness and difference as a way of conceptualizing the individual's relation to others. While in modern Anglo-European thinking, the individual was separated as different from close relatives and kin, speaking of sameness between the individual and its kin was still essential to underscoring how there are even greater degrees of difference between that individual and those who are outside the kin relation (see also Sahlins, 2013). For a conservative version of identity politics, built on a similar kind of sameness-difference obsession but completely ripped out of its foundations as a liberatory project[2], we need only to think of the US vice president J. D. Vance's suggestion that a key moral commitment of the modern Christian is to love your family, neighborhood, community, and fellow citizens, and then (maybe, just maybe, I might add) you love 'the rest of the world.'[3] Relations are always-already ordered.

Speaking of kin and the otherwise, the question of difference is also a key generative force in the anthropological iterations of queer theory. As Margot Weiss (2016) writes, queer theory emerged as an invitation to think differently about identity and later about abundant connections between sexuality and power, leading us to consider what it would mean if we were ready to care about relations, whether they are relationally 'close' to us as individuals or not (Weiss, 2024). In other words, I suggest that while making difference visible is immensely important for examining otherwise hidden power structures (also in writing), a preoccupation with difference might also produce the reverse effect: namely, a distrust and reproduction

of inequality, a focus on solidarity only with those who share certain performative virtues, based on reinforcing that difference—especially in terms of identity and positionality. This has implications for questions about indifference in anthropological research practice, research ethics, and how we, as anthropologists, view 'the field' itself.

Indifference can point to many ways of being in and valuing the world, one of them being to not care about anything. Another kind of indifference may lie in being vile and sustaining racist indifference to the suffering of others within one's affective space, as Ghassan Hage (2026 [2024]) argued in his reading of *The Zone of Interest*, a film depicting the actively habituated racism of a German family living next to the extermination camp in Auschwitz. But in this article, the point of departure is indifference as it is developed in Naisargi N. Davé's (2023) *Indifference: On the Praxis of Interspecies Being*. Davé (2023, pp. 36–37) invites us to think of indifference not as apathy or moral detachment, nor as a super-human ability to be consistently altruistic with every being, but as a refusal of the humanist obsession with making differences—between people, between humans and animals, between cultural contexts—and to value the opacities and silences that indifference entails. In this invitation to be indifferent also lies an invitation to be less curious, if by curious we mean poking and prying into every detail of the unknown in other beings.

With playful indifference, then, we are interested in the space that emerges when we both attune ourselves to how we might be together in ways that are not defined by external criteria, and yet we are very conscious of the difference that these criteria make. In this sense, being playfully indifferent means being intensely present with each other in a moment of feeling like we might be surprised. Playful indifference describes a sense that everything we do together could matter more than everything that wants to hurt us, even if only temporarily. Can we be playfully indifferent all the time? Maybe not. *Should* we be? This article gestures toward a yes. Now let us return to sitting down with Miriam.

Notebooks

As we play with the format of the research article, this text should also have a methods section explaining the research project, its central questions, and the methods used to provide insights into them. Let us begin with a black Moleskine notebook and turn to another moment of Miriam and I spending time together in 2018. After making ourselves a cup of tea, and after Miriam and I had picked up perfectly sweet medjoul dates from a bowl in front of where we found our way to the dedicated *majlis* on an embroidered red, green, black, and white patterned mattress on the floor, I sat as a 'good student,' as Miriam would teasingly call me, with my notebook and pen ready to scribble down thoughts, utterances, and things to remember in general. She looked at the notebook and told me that her father, too, had always kept meticulous

notebooks to track his everyday life and business. Now, the notebooks no longer made sense to the person who had originally filled them with words and numbers. She pondered that they had even been quite a distraction from what really mattered, in the sense that they had kept her father from being attuned to everything that happened in-between taking notes and keeping track: the family's wellbeing, the wife, the children and their desires to become something other than what was expected or had been offered to them by virtue of the family name. I told her about my own father, a teacher, who had been so invested in the children at the public school where he was teaching, that as a child I had no doubt he loved the children there more than his own. Because our conversations made great use of reflections on our own points of view, I sensed that, by telling the story about her father, Miriam was hinting at me and my attachment to my black notebook. As part of the formalized genre of learning that is 'ethnographic fieldwork,' I had learned to organize conversations, data, observations, and even my own emotional responses in the field. Even if it was not entirely intentional on her part, she made me reflect on the notebook as an analytical device. Be present, she seemed to tell me, knowing that the notebook—not unlike her father's—was important for my business: the practice of doing anthropology.

Miriam and I met many times over the months I spent in Amman, and we still continue our conversations now, at the time of writing this article. Her reflections have always made me see in a different light what I might be able to do. They have enabled me to sense the horizon of what should matter most, ethically as well as politically, even when I failed to live according to her advice consistently. The punctuated relations in which fieldwork often results clearly showed how our ideas of living our lives, ideas that once stood as certainties, changed over time. Perhaps as part of this punctuated relationality, our conversations also gradually became more about our own method of thinking together. They created time for us to witness what might become through that relation.

Miriam and many others I have worked with through the years in Amman stayed with me. In my imagination (and often via text messages and emails), they continued to look over my shoulder as I formulated a project after the PhD: a phenomenology of in-between spaces for playful reparation.[4] And so, through these iterations of, firstly, the arts of living queerly and then, secondly, the phenomenology of playfulness in artistic and activist praxis in Amman, Jordan, we arrive once again at the relationship between trust, (the fear of) difference, and the suggestion to consider playful indifference as a way of staying-in-relation throughout it all.

What eventually became part of my later research was a method of inquiry that took the form of a workshop called 'In-between spaces for playful reparation.' The project came to life in the early months of the genocidal war in Gaza, and many Ammanis were angry, tormented, and full of despair, exhaustedly telling me that they saw no meaning in what they had been doing before the war. What difference does my art make during a genocide? None, most would say. Faced with how little difference my own

research made, too, I invited people, artists, academics, people I knew and people I did not know, to join in for a few hours of drawing, storytelling, and playing with objects. We got together first in Amman, then in Aarhus, Denmark, then in Montréal and Toronto, Canada. What I hoped for was for us to hold space a bit longer, to see what might emerge. In retrospect, I think I hoped that we would be able to create momentary encounters in which life itself unfolded, despite the political status quo seemingly being the same, or perhaps regressing to something even more authoritarian (see also Davé, 2023, pp. 36–37).

This brings me back to my concern with *playful indifference* as a way in which we might conceptualize the ethics of creating more space to be in relation without focusing on either sameness or difference as key generative force, ethically speaking. To do this, I want to take up Davé's (2023) concept of indifference as a virtue worth cultivating in the world and introduce a reading of feminist philosopher Maria Lugones's (1987) essay on playfulness, world-travelling, and loving perception. With this, I invite you to consider how we might think about playful indifference as a matter of experiencing and pursuing affective intensity, containing within it the possibility of becoming otherwise (Povinelli, 2012) in the face of multiple moralizing and difference-making agendas. While this might at first sound conceptually vague, esoteric even, it resonates with a perspective shared in a personal conversation by Ra'ed Ibrahim, a well-known artist from Amman. Art is pointless right now, he told me. Yet, we have to keep creating. We have to keep living.

Playful indifference in the minor key.

Indifference as virtue

Indifference and queer possibility are a key focus for Madhavi Menon (2015) in *Queer Universalism*, in which Menon argues for a universalist approach to the fluid nature of our being-in-common. The point of departure here lies in Michel Foucault's criticism of the oppressive potentialities of liberal identity politics that have turned desire into a matter of individual rights and legal recognition. With Menon, we can read indifference as a queer political and ethical virtue and practice, as an alternative to liberal queer identity politics. Menon's suggestion that 'queer' cannot be contained within any imagined borders offers an alternative to an unplayful relation to difference. As Menon (2015) writes:

> '<...> what's queer about queer theory is its ability to recognize and sympathize with longings across borders, to refuse the logic of particularity in relation to desire; to keep the door universally open rather than shutting it behind our backs; to think of desire as that which moves across rather than being confined to sexual acts and identities' (p. 127).

Being moved by relating to queerness is nothing new to the artists and activists I have worked with in Amman over the past decade (see Odgaard,

2021; 2022). These are people who have worked to make space for visible gender and sexual expressions that the community feels called to comment on, and that at different points in time have been confronted with moral panic around said expressions. This happened most recently in 2023 when a large-scale crackdown facilitated by the General Intelligence Agency took place against the queer community in Amman. Two activists were detained and one outed to his family, whereafter both purportedly left the country.[5] While media and human rights organizations were quick in making this visible, they also contributed to the dominant perception in Jordan that queer people are foreign to the values and morals of the nation state. These same artists and activists are people who engage in neighborhood, family, and friendship negotiations, disregarding the differences that might keep people apart. These are ways of relating and engaging experimentally and playfully with the world that often escape larger stories about a particular place, including moral narratives. As a result, this paper is at the same time a reflection on playful indifference as an ethics of relation in anthropology, on playful indifference in the field, and on playful indifference in singular everyday encounters.

Returning to Miriam and the moment I walked out her door in 2021: at that time, her simple utterance 'I trust you' felt like a blow, like something already painfully solidified. But having regained my breath, I want to dwell on another door that Miriam opened in that moment, the door to thinking otherwise (Povinelli, 2012) about what mattered in the situation. This leads me to consider playful indifference within a hyper-engaged field such as the one I have been working in over the past decade. I explore how the focus on difference—between people, groups, and contexts—risks reducing the possibility for trusting relations and solidarities in broader social spaces, and risks inhibiting our ability to realize our shared precariousness in the world as we have come to know it (Lugones, 1987; Strathern, 2020).

While Davé focuses on what indifference to difference might offer in relation to the non-human world and to interspecies relations, especially through her extensive work on animal activism and activists in India, I take up her concept as one that invites us to be attentive to moments where encounters with other beings allow us to be touched by and drawn towards being less certain, rather than more certain of ourselves and the world around us. Davé's thinking around indifference is tied to an interest in ethics as immanent and therefore not pre-determined by the political in fields that are otherwise highly politicized. I take up her insights to reflect on playful indifference as a kind of practice that is connected to equally politicized fields, where it is of importance to insist on creating space to play and to be in playful relationships with one another. This, I propose, can be an alternative to an approach that centers identity-difference, particularly for those of us who study activism or activists across various global contexts. And so, I am especially interested in the kinds of relations where a broader sense of indifference—as an ethical virtue achieved through the experience of playfulness—can emerge. At the same time, I remain aware that the

emergence of such relations is often foreclosed by competing interests and constraints, and that therefore what we are looking at might not always be ethical virtue, but rather a momentary experience of the possibility of indifference through playfulness. As Miriam reminded me when she pointed to my notebooks, it is important to be present in the relation, rather than focusing on the pre-established or hindsight contextualization (academic or otherwise) one might make of it. Being intensely present in the relation and what unfolds in it leads us to what comes before indifference: playfulness.

Eye-to-eye

When considering playfulness as an opening unto solidarities otherwise, I draw inspiration from the feminist philosopher María Lugones (1987). In the essay 'Playfulness, "world"-travelling and loving perception,' Lugones is looking for ways in which an arrogant perception of others and unwillingness to travel to the other's world can be met with women of color's loving perception of other world-travelers 'like' them. Being open to travel lovingly to the other's world, Lugones (1987, p. 15) argues, is also a matter of playfulness, given that this entails being open to the other's full subjectivity. I will add my own reading here, of trusting the relation enough to be open to the abundant possibilities it affords, and by allowing time to become its own creature in the process. The openness to becoming otherwise, thus, will not end, even if the structural conditions do. Lugones frames this understanding of play in opposition to mastery, competition, and dominance. As an openness to becoming otherwise: '<...> we have not abandoned ourselves to, nor are we stuck in, any particular "world." We are there creatively. We are not passive' (Lugones, 1987, pp. 16–17). For Lugones, the possibilities for world-traveling and playfulness are partly made with reference to identity and, importantly, identity in relation to feminist Latina coalition-making. As Lugones sets out to find the theoretical means to think through her experience of playfulness as a way of travelling between worlds, she encounters Johan Huizinga's (1950) *Homo Ludens* and Hans-Georg Gadamer's thoughts on play and playfulness and, to her dismay, realizes that if their perception of play is right, hers must be utterly wrong. To play the game, as she reads Huizinga, you must first know the rules and how to play by them. You must apply this knowledge better than your competitor in the match. Huizinga's argument, that play creates culture (in Lugones's reading), thus means that through this way of conceptualizing play, we see a culture of Western imperialism emerge, one that engages with others in a competitive way. The kind of play that Lugones is interested in is the kind of play that allows us to be playfully in relation without any pre-established reference to who we might become together when we play; we are in it only for the sake of being together and for witnessing what might unfold as we throw rocks in the river and watch them crack open, revealing beauty inside. Lugones's argument is epistemological, existential, and ontological at the same time (Ortega, 2016, p. 102). Yet, as one tries to grasp the concreteness of relations for playfulness,

there is a risk that it might slip one's grasp, partly because Lugones turns to generalized identity-terms such as 'servant,' 'mother,' 'daughter,' and 'Latina' vs. 'white Western feminist,' not unlike those who preoccupied me as I was navel-gazing while writing my dissertation as a white, cis-gendered woman (see also Mulaj, 2024, p. 23). A ground that separates an individual from the world, too, and that only allows for a world to emerge between two separate individuals (see also Strathern, 2020). This to say that, along with Davé, I do not find the focus on identity very productive for traveling to other worlds without being stuck in one's own positionality. Rather, I suggest being indifferent in the sense of wanting to be in relation *without seeking to do something to or with the other*. It means to act without the fear-based hesitancy that arises from the constant worry that we might harm—or be harmed by—the other due to solid notions of identity-based difference. It also means that moral virtues are there to be challenged and put at risk all the time. It is, in other words, also about an ethics of being in relation and an 'openness to surprise' (Lugones, 1987, p. 16), without any promise as to the result of that surprise. Surprises come with risk. Through them, we might get jolted out of what we perceive to be our own skin.

In the example above and in leaving Miriam's house, I had become too invested in the difference that difference makes. In my academic pursuit of a PhD project, I had become too obsessed with the paranoid reading of relations and of their possibilities. This was a reading of suspicion and adherence to rules, rather than playful creation and relation-building, which made it difficult for me to allow Miriam to trust that I could tell a good-enough story (Scheper-Hughes, 1992, p. 28; see also Cohen, 1998, p. xxiii) about her life and the lives of others in Amman. This story would have to be about what their lives might reveal about queerness, art, and activism in Jordan, and I became better at letting go of rules in the process of doing fieldwork and writing stories in a less paranoid way (see also Georgis, 2013). This is a neat reading, but what I want to suggest is that the juxtaposition between adherence and the absence of rules might be part of the issue. When Miriam said to me 'I trust you,' this was not blind trust. It did not mean there were no rules to be considered. It was rather: 'I know the rules and although they look different for me than for you, right now, we see eye-to-eye and we play.'

Furthermore, the *possibility* of playful indifference was already there before this *reflection* on playful indifference and before our ways of telling stories about others came to paper. In many ways, it had been present all along: in the work of artists and activists who insisted on making space for leisure, performance, and play under challenging circumstances. I will offer one example through conversations in the early days of a queer art space in Amman (in what follows, I will refer to it as 'Artspace'). The early days at the Artspace, which was welcoming to queer people, provided instances in which it became clear to me how intertwined experiences of difference, safety, and risk were with the activist practices responding to a capitalist system of accumulating difference through 'new' social initiatives, coupled with moral notions of danger and security. In the last part of the text, I will (re)turn to

reflect on what indifference might mean for anthropological research practice in such a context. As part of that reflection, I will consider some of the risks associated with adopting an indifferent stance toward certain structures or powers, both in this ethnographic account and in anthropology more broadly.

A safe space for difference?

In the years 2018—2019 and during fieldwork for my PhD dissertation, I spent many days and nights at the Artspace in Amman. There, people had been discussing what it means to create a 'safe space' through consent, and whether the concept of safety was even useful or appropriate. Someone pointed out to one of the organizers that calling something a 'safe space' implied that it saw itself in contrast with the surrounding society—an idea they strongly opposed. People criticized that this was a Western conceptualization of the relationship between public and private spaces. The Artspace was located on a relatively quiet street in one of Amman's older neighborhoods, with birds chirping from nearby houses and a small garden in the front. On sunny days, light would stream in soft beams through the windows, and unless the curtains were drawn, the main gathering room would be bathed in a warm glow, casting long, soft shadows across the newly painted, white walls.

At the time of the safe space discussion, the center had just opened its doors to young Ammanis interested in exploring art, activism, gender, and the body. The walls were mostly bare, save for a few shelves. But this quickly changed. As people began to spend time there, so too did the things they brought with them: books appeared on the shelves; plants decorated the floors and walls; and soon, the space held empty teacups, half-eaten bags of salty snacks, soda cans, overflowing ashtrays, dry pita bread from shared meals, and numerous trash bags waiting to be taken out.

In the discussions about creating a safe space, facilitators voiced a range of passionate perspectives. While opinions were shared, actions and resolutions seemed to linger unresolved. Some of those in opposition to the idea were of the older generation of artists and activists in the city, and perhaps the observation came from experiences with what marking a space as safe for queer people might produce: nosy curiosity, fear, or even a fuel for what Stanley Cohen (2011) originally called 'moral panic' (see also Mahadeen, 2021). The critique of some of the facilitators and friends that disagreed with framing the Artspace as a safe space was that invoking safety marked the space as fundamentally different from the outside world. Did this notion rely on a Western division between public and private? Between 'us' and 'them'? Could one instead be indifferent to the difference being imposed by certain others in society? Or was that all just one big theoretical exercise disregarding the actual work being done and those doing the actual work and feeling a need for safety? In the years that followed, intimate stories of trauma, new friendships, conflict, and disagreement continued to rise and expand at the Artspace. Having a space that was open to those who would

contain these stories and take part in listening to them was important. It was especially important because it allowed some people to spend time outside the family home, where most live until they are married, and if they are not married, potentially without any change in sight. The Artspace was one space in a line of spaces in the city that were open to the artistic community. Several spaces, including another well-known space hosting artists from the region, had ended up being forced to close their doors due to overt or covert pressure from influential people in the community.

One activist told me that safety should be the feeling that emerged in the space itself, in a situation of people experimenting together. She argued that referring to something as safe for specific identities reinforced the idea that private spaces needed to shelter people from a hostile public—an idea rooted in Western ways of thinking about difference, particularly in terms of the legal recognition that marginalized communities needed higher levels of protection than the normalized 'majority.' This concept of safe space also contains the idea that thinking about difference reinforces the understanding that only through making something else, something new and distinct from that which already is, can the freedom to become otherwise emerge.

This was at least my interpretation of the discussion, as recounted by facilitators with different views on the matter. But as with so many other conversations in the space, practical tasks soon took over. These were of immediate importance in a space that had only just been furnished with dishes, simple furniture, a stove, and an electric kettle used to boil water to pour over pouches of black *al-Ghazaleen* or *Zourat Shami* herbal tea that is ubiquitous in Jordan. Over the months I spent there, there were periods in which it felt as if life simply took over, life as in immanence, the emergence of relations in a space of possibility, and the messy and playful unfolding of life in all its vitality and with all its drama. In between all of this, the space hosted informal discussions, impromptu parties, exhibitions, workshops, group sessions, and meetings with people from the 'outside,' including potential funders. Funder and donor meetings meant that life had to be tucked away, neatly organized into documents and verbal pitches. I perceived that during this time, police and neighborhood surveillance of the space started to increase.

No signs

'Language is not for us,' one of the main facilitators, Shams, said during an online follow-up conversation a couple of years after the opening of the Artspace. The sentence stuck with me. *Language is not for us?* It seemed that they, too, had grown wary of how naming something can pin it down—fix it in place, and of how this was an active part of the politics surrounding the Artspace. This kind of language was not for them because it had become a structure of possibility for someone other than them. It was a structure of possibility that included compiling documents about the space's facilitators

at a local politician's desk, perhaps also sending them intimidating messages. When I first arrived at the Artspace in 2018, there was no signage indicating the space's presence. There was no label or marker outside the door, apart from the garden gate that indicated an entrance. There was no name for the space at that point in time, even though what happened there was often extraordinary. At the same time, discussions about whether to label it 'safe' had already begun.

The framings that would come to define the space as different from its surroundings had not yet been established. The space had not yet become 'visible' to the outside world. But that was soon to change, one reason being the need to seek and sustain funding. How do you seek funding for a place that does not define itself as different from what already exists? A place that does not present itself as an organization, institution, or even an initiative, and hence does not partake in an accumulation of difference-making? And so, in the months that followed, the space gradually took on a more formal identity, becoming something defined by its difference from the surrounding society. And I, too, became increasingly allergic to language: to my own language, to the anger expressed in social media commentaries suggesting all of the worst imaginable punishments for queer individuals, to the formal language that would ensure that my words were accepted in the academic community. *Language is not for me, either.* A writer's block was pending on my end, because, faced with all this, writing felt anything but playful for a very long time.

Doors closing

When I returned to Amman in 2021 and paid a short visit to the Artspace, much had changed. Many people had come through its doors over the years, and their artworks still hung around the space as quiet testaments to the time spent there. A painting of a young woman and a group of elderly men wearing keffiyeh stood out to me. The walls seemed to absorb and reflect the emotional energy poured into those pieces. As one facilitator said about each new group that formed there, 'It's like magic.'

But something else caught my attention as I entered: the sudden presence of surveillance cameras and locks, both outside and inside the building. During my initial fieldwork in 2018, these hadn't been there. Back then, the space emanated a feeling of warmth, friendly and slightly nostalgic. Now, the cameras and padlocks marked a shift. Like the rejection of language, they also stuck with me. I learned that the space was likely closing, at least the physical space. Artworks were stacked in corners and still adorned the walls of the main room where we were sitting together. Around the room, new signs had been posted: reminders about non-discrimination, intersectionality, and consent. Intimate care products were readily available in the bathroom. But due to growing external pressure by security agents, the plan was now to dissolve the space's physical form and merge it with other venues to make

it more appealing to a broader audience, or perhaps to deflect speculation about what happened behind closed doors. Or so I understood, over tea and lemon muffins and the warmth of reunion.

Less than a year later, I received news that the space had been closed. For the Jordanian authorities, the fact that it had claimed a difference and that the Artspace had visibly made room for something the authorities were uncertain of, seemed enough to warrant suspicion, surveillance, and a desire for repression. Any hope for opacity was effectively erased, and where the Artspace used to be is now a regular apartment, without a physical trace of what it once was, at least not a trace that I could find.

Trust in (in)difference

And so, let us return to why I began this article with trust and indifference.

Miriam's 'I trust you' was, I think, a way to disregard the difference between us without naiveté. She could have emphasized this difference, for she was fully aware of it. It could have prompted her suspicion: I was, and I am, after all, a Western, white researcher from the 'lilliput nation' with an inflated sense of importance, Denmark. But in that moment, she chose to disregard these differences and look me in the eye. She decided to trust our relationship and choose it over the structures that would otherwise divide us. These structures could, in a sense, also be mobilized through language: Western, white, academic scholar, straight-performing, cis-gendered, and so on. These attributions were offering me theoretical cover, allowing me to defer or displace my own responsibility in our relationship and in relation to the many others we both knew.

To say 'I trust you,' then, was Miriam's way to affirm the potential of our concrete relation, rather than defaulting to the abstract categories that might explain away, reiterate, or excuse our differences. That trust pulled me away from the comforts of theory and back into relation. Davé (2023, p. 8) writes: 'My understanding of indifference is relational: of mutually existing in difference rather than being different beings seeking to grasp, gaze, admire, and master the difference of others.' This perception of indifference as a relational virtue stands in stark contrast to the closure of spaces like the Artspace, spaces seen as threats precisely because of their visible difference from power's dominant view of what Jordanian society 'is.' It also offers a critique of the tendency—within activism and beyond—to insist on safe spaces that are defined through the making of difference between groups. This critique stands irrespective of however sympathetic and humble one is with regard to why these practices of trying to make safe and secure spaces exist in the first place.

Miriam's utterance echoed this alternative logic: she trusted our relation, the mutual regard it held, and the promise that this was possible through trust. To my understanding, she suggested something akin to the following: we exist in difference, and I trust that our relationship will allow us to continue doing so—with care. And that, too, is something I can trust.

I trust, furthermore, that there is value in cultivating this kind of indifference to difference: through relationships that rest on being together and being moved by each other regardless of whether we identify with each other, whether we are part of the same community, or not (see also Menon, 2015; Davé, 2023).

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, it should be noted that I am not interested in passing judgment on the various ways people navigate and maintain activist spaces: often through making their marginalization visible, even when this carries very real risks that are much more than a matter of academic abstraction. The issue is not that we are not different. The issue, as Davé's work and this article suggest, is the preoccupation with difference that makes people view others as threats. That casts them as needing to be changed, assimilated, or explained using already existing terms. Or, conversely, that fixes them in their difference, denying their—as well as one's own—ability to become something else entirely. Indifference to difference, in this sense, means prioritizing relationship over positionality; it allows for the possibility of playfulness as a central way of being in the world with others. To see what might emerge, to sense it intensely when it does. To allow things, people, and spaces to remain somewhat opaque even to the academic reader. Not without acknowledging the political stakes at play, not as a liberal experiment of visibility for the sake of visibility, but as an expression of political possibility and a need for spaces to play with the promise of the opaque, obscure, and surprising in all of us. That is what Miriam taught me the day I closed the door to her home—but not to our relationship. It is also what keeps me coming back. And it may also be the difficult, perhaps impossible, lesson offered by the Artspace after it was closed by authorities, who found its difference-making intolerable, desiring for that very difference to be made a problem, then transparent, and then obliterated. They refused to be indifferent to it.

1. Pseudonym.
2. Originally developed by the Combahee River collective in the 1970s (see also Bredenböker, 2022).
3. Vance stated this in an interview with Fox News in January 2025. The full interview is available at https://www.foxnews.com/video/6367976414112 at the time of writing (accessed on 19 March 2026).
4. The Carlsberg Foundation sponsored a project that allowed me to work with Naisargi Davé, Dina Georgis, and many other wonderful colleagues at the University of Toronto.
5. It made it to international news that LGBTQ communities were being targeted deliberately by the security apparatus. See *The Guardian's* reporting, for example, Christou, 2023.

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Reflexive Essay

Homemade Hips. Shades of Play within Artistic Research

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Homemade Hips. Shades of Play within Artistic Research

Natalie Schiller

With this essay, I creatively and critically celebrate a fusion and confusion of notions of play. Here, I invite you, the reader, to dive into the realm and possibilities of what I call 'shades of play.' I base my exploration of *shades of play* on my performance, *The Washing Machine, the Scythe, and I* (2025). This work is part of my artistic research series *homemade hips*, where I entangle ideas of hips and domesticity. Now, together we (you and I) will slip, sweat, shake, and cut while discovering the manner of *shades of play*.

Keywords: artistic research, domesticity, expanded choreography, hips, shades of play

Setting up!

Figure 1. Natalie Schiller, *The Washing Machine, the Scythe, and I*, 2025.

I fill my washing machine (which I transported from my home into the dance studio for my performance) with some dirty clothes, right there and then. The four red buckets are filled with water, which I will pour into the drum soon. I will also add some washing powder before I kick off the washing machine. I am wearing my black dancing dress and have an extension lead wrapped around my hips. A scythe lies in the front of the scene. The audience is sitting in a half circle opposite me (us). While witnessing the show, they are eating popcorn and drinking from their fruit juice boxes, which I have provided for them on their chairs earlier.

The picture and narrative above are an excerpt from my performance *The Washing Machine, the Scythe, and I* (2025). This work is the final showing of my artistic research series *homemade hips* (2020—2025), where I explore what

my hips can uncover when entangled with notions of domesticity through my choreographic practice. This creative and critical investigation takes me on a journey, during which, in a series of performances, I experiment with my perceptions of hips in connection with ideas on domesticity. For example, the notions of hips and domesticity greet and meet each other in my performance *Toaster Salsa* (2020), where I wrap a toaster with an extension lead around my hips. Next, I do the dishes and move my hips in line with belly dance and Latin dance techniques. In my performance *Kopfkino—Headmovies* (2022), I sense my hips fading into the shadows of domestic concepts. There, I sit on a chair in my living room, surrounded by toys from a young child (e.g., soft toys and building blocks), and my mind is very busy while I attempt to reconnect to my dancing hips. Then, in my work *Senses of Selves* (2022), I face the loss of my hips to the domestic field, perceiving domesticity to steal my hips. In this artistic happening, I am lined up on a red blanket in my back yard with my cleaning tools, such as a mop, a vacuum cleaner head, a leaf blower, and two shovel & brush sets. Finally, with the performance *The Washing Machine, the Scythe, and I* (2025), I harvest the wealth of experiences from my artistic practices over the years and add the themes of death and endings.

The motivation for this study has been my engagement—as a learner, performer, and pedagogue—with hip-accentuating dance styles, namely belly dance and Latin dance, for over two decades. I have been mesmerized by swaying hips as 'hips are bewitching <...> [because] those hips move with an agility, grace and precision that, if you stare at them too long, you get hip-notized' (Borelli, 2016, p. 5). Therefore, with this *hip-notized* flair in my mind and body, I am determined to investigate the notion of hips with my artistic research. However, and rather unexpectedly, the concept of domesticity budges its presence into my practice. The field of domesticity presents itself as urgent due to my role as a mother, where I experience the socio-cultural and political reality that mothers are delegated to the private and domestic field (Federici, 2004; Friedan, 2013, Rich, 1976). Hence, with the integration of domesticity into my artistic work I aim to subvert the private space as a site of political production to interrupt wider socio-cultural power relations (Ahmed, 2017; Gallagher, 2020). Hence, I am curious what a knotting of these two notions, hips and domesticity, can entail. In particular, I am eager to explore what my dancing hips can be, become, and do in relation to the domestic field.

As the focus of this essay lies with ideas of play, I seek to shed some light on how concepts of play, to which I refer here as 'shades of play,' manifest within my artistic research. I open the discourse by slipping and sweating as I attempt to pinpoint if I am playing (yet) in my work and what *shades of play* might be. There, I unearth play's ephemeral nature: I realize an indefinability of the concept and detect hints of *shades of play* by examining where and when I can possibly 'see' play within my work. Additionally, I notice that *shades of play* radiate from the practice, exercise, and training *of* my body, feelings, and mind, and I perceive *shades of play* to wander on a continuum of instinct and will. Next, I am shaking, highlighting my discovery

of *shades of play* being *intrinsic*, *intra-mixed*, and *posthuman*. Then, I am 'cutting' (imitated physically and conceptually) to expand and blur ideas about hips. I spotlight how the following four aspects—*play instincts*, *urges*, *a leap of faith*, and to *play profound*—inform the proposition of *shades of play*. There, I also ponder on how *shades of play* have the potential to guide my artistic research with and through the unknown and the unfamiliar. There we go, let's play!

Wanna play (I)?

Please turn on your washing machine and wiggle your hips while you read this article!

In detail: Put on a load of washing, ideally a small wash. Attentively put in your dirty clothes and some washing powder. Next, push the appropriate buttons on your washing machine, which might create some beeping sounds. Then, the water should rush into the drum of the equipment: here, begin to connect to your hips, mentally and physically. Alternatively, please imagine

or mimic the previously described actions and enable the following sound bite.

Please continue reading this article with the washing machine sound on and your activated hips!

Am I playing (yet)?

Am I already playing when I put my dirty washing into my ordinary washing machine in my performance *The Washing Machine, the Scythe, and I* (2025)? Yes?! No?! Maybe?! I seem to encounter a dilemma, where I struggle to clearly decipher when I play within my artistic research work. Thus, I wonder if part of my quandary is the 'slipperiness' (James, 2021, p. 10) of the concept of play and its quality of being undefinable, where definitions of play vary, diverge, and present themselves as inconsistent (Brussain, 2020; Eberle, 2014; James, 2021; Richards & Haukeland, 2020). Therefore, I imagine myself *slipping* when I attempt to answer the questioned posed above somewhat clearly. Hence, I desire to connect to transversal and diagonal ideas on play and call up *shades of play*, which embrace elements of unclarity, ambiguity, and 'interval[s] not of the category but in the pre of categorization where the field is still in formation' (Manning, 2016, p. 123). Moreover, I relate *shades of play* to Sara Ahmed's 'sweaty concepts,' which emerge 'by trying to describe something that is difficult, that resists being fully comprehended in the present' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 12). In this light, my predicament of answering the question 'Am I playing (yet)?' offers me more transparency and confidence because I envision my perspicuity on *shades of play* to emerge on a slippery

surface. There, while I am answering my quest, I stumble and slither, and, additionally, my body builds up sweat and leaves watery patches on my T-shirt under my armpits.

Furthermore, while I am slipping and sweating, I am inspired by the question 'Do you know play when you see it?' (National Institute for Play, 2007–2025). Hence, I wonder if I can understand if I am playing (yet) through the question 'When can I possibly spot that I am playing in my performance?'. The following provides me with some insights:

> 'The characteristics of play all have to do with motivation and mental attitude <...> the behaviour itself. Two people might be throwing a ball <...> or typing words on a computer, and one might be playing while the other is not. To tell which one is playing <...> you have to infer from their expression and the details of their actions (Gray, 2013, p. 139).

Therefore, I observe that my ambition, passion, and frame of mind during my performance, for example during this mundane act of doing the washing, exhibits glimpses of play. I perceive my inspiration and stance of play as rather hidden and internal components, but nonetheless visible and sensible to me through my body, feelings, and mind. Hence, I propose that *shades of play* can be 'seen,' explicitly by me, through my purpose and attitude. Additionally, acts, specifics of behaviors, and appearance can also be some possible and visible parameters to 'see' if someone is playing. As I translate these observations into my artistic work, I imply that I am playing when I put the washing into the machine in this performance and in the acts of wearing my black dancing dress, being barefoot, and having an extension lead around my hips.

Moreover, I realize that I am playing analytically, due to my conscious and subversive action of exhibiting a domestic and private chore in a public forum. Accordingly, I notice that my performative engagement, the unfamiliar setting of the dance studio, the context of my performance work, as well as my attitude and motivation, while executing this generally dull and mundane maintenance task, give way to *shades of play* within my work. Here, I advise that these conditions are visible and tangible encounters of 'seeing' play. However, I also perceive these described angles of peeking at some *shades of play* within my artistic research as rather ambiguous and ephemeral, certainly contextual and relational, and lastly, absolutely challenging to articulate.

Now, would Stuart Brown's (2010) philosophy of play support my quest to crack if I am playing (yet)? Brown (2010) advocates that play is a 'practice for the body, exercise for the feelings, and training for the mind' (as summarized by Eberle, 2014, p. 217). His idea certainly guides my pursuit but also provokes me to consider that *shades of play* within my context are practice, exercise, and training *of* my body, feelings, and mind. Hence, the visualization of *shades of play*, and if I am playing (yet), are manifestations of my body, feelings, and mind. Consequently, the moments and aspects of when I am playing within my research are rather idiosyncratic, peculiar, and distinctive.

Still, I remain slipping and sweating while I continue to discover possible articulations of *shades of play* in relation to my work. Especially when I attempt to embrace the proximity of *shades of play* with the seminal utterance by Johan Huizinga that 'if we call the active principle that makes up the essence of play, "instinct", we explain nothing; if we call it "mind" or "will" we say too much' (Huizinga 1949: 1). Hence, I wish to voyage within a realm in which it is possible to recognize *shades of play* in the light of a continuum. There, *shades of play* can excel poles of instinct and mind, and there, I am saying nothing, too much, and everything else that is possible to communicate about *shades of play*. Here, in this domain, I accentuate the plurality of play in the elusiveness and haziness of *shades of play* to create spaces of curiosity, openness, and freedom.

Surely, I must be playing by now!

Figure 2. Natalie Schiller, 'Shake off,' from *The Washing Machine, the Scythe, and I*, 2025.

I lie with my back on the top of my washing machine. My legs and head, including my hair, dangle down on each side of the machine. I hold a scythe in my hands. The washing machine is on its spin cycle. I relax into the rattling vibration the washing machine has to offer, and my entire body trembles. Here, I also feel my eyelid flapping gently, in tune with the pervasive rumbling of my washing machine. The initiated tremor travels into and through me, spilling over to the scythe, creating ripples far beyond the tip of its blade.

Besides slipping and sweating while glimpsing *shades of play* within my artistic research, I am also shaking. While I re-sense those motions of

trembling, I realize that *shades of play* have morphed into a second nature within my work: they seem so natural and absorbed. Thus, I understand that my struggles to distil essences of play out of my artistic research stem from the reality that concepts of play disguise themselves as innate parts of my work. Here, I propose that the following dynamics are at work within my research, where 'the notion of "play" <...> [is] something that is invoked within the realm of artistic experimentation and is directly or indirectly implicated in the territories of its production' (Postiga & Loureiro, 2023, pp. 2—3). Hence, I speculate that this (in)direct entanglement of play and art has fostered the inherent perception of play within my work.

Moreover, I perceive play and art as an inseparable and devoted body within my practice, almost so intimate and entangled that there are no clear lines between ideas about play and art anymore. I envision to mix these two categories intensely and fruitfully together, where notions of play and art becoming *intra-active* (Barad, 2007). Here, elements of play and art are so intertwined that they fuse into one assemblage. I imagine this entity to behave like pancake batter, which is runny and yellowish, with the ingredients, such as eggs (play) and milk (art), thoroughly mixed, becoming unrecognisable as separate entities. This imagined batter 'signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies <...>[where] agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don't exist as individual elements' (Barad 2007, p. 33). Therefore, this experienced *intra-mixedness* of play within my work leaves me slipping, sweating, and now also shaking, while deciphering *shades of play* into expression.

Further, I propose that my perceived *shades of play* adhere to posthuman values. Here, *shades of play* are embodied, embedded, differential, relational, and affective (Braidotti, 2020) within a system of bodies, namely a human body (mine), a washing machine, a scythe, a studio (environment), and an audience (the spectators during the performance and by extension the reader: you). Additionally, *shades of play* differ during the moments of making and performing my work; they are always in a relationship with the complexity of my artistic research practice and affect it by moving and disturbing my doing, moving, feeling, and thinking.

Accordingly, I conclude that my conceived ideas of *shades of play*, specifically them being *intrinsic*, *intra-mixed*, and *posthuman*, contribute to a lively and unfolding dynamic of and within my artistic research processes.

Wanna play (II)!

Now, I invite you to stand up (if you are not already standing) and stick or wrap something on or around your hips, something that feels safe and comfortable, like Sellotape, sticky notes, or blue tack; or a scarf or an extension lead. Once suited up with some ordinary 'sticky-wrappy' item, shake your body. Choose the speed that you are comfortable with. You can vary the speed if you wish. You might also consider the following questions:

— How does it feel?
— What do you 'shake' off and up?
— What do you 'intra-mix'?
— What have you discovered about your ideas of play with this play invitation?

Then, I am cutting!

Figure 3. Natalie Schiller, 'With my scythe I am "cutting together-apart (one move),"' from *The Washing Machine, the Scythe, and I*, 2025. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the author.

I carefully place the blade of my scythe[1] *along my stomach-waist area, so the length of the blade reaches from one hip to the other, approximately. While I am doing so, I am shimmying my hips, a belly dance move, where the hips move fast, but in small, up-and-down motions. Once the harvesting tool is nicely placed on my wiggling hips, I also start moving my hands, with the blade in my hands, from side to side, in a sawing motion. I am starting this movement slowly, speeding up until I am very fast, with my hands swishing the scythe over my body: swish, swish, swish! And my hips are still shimmying: jaga jaga jaga! The metal of the scythe blade scratches on the plastic of my extension cord and on the delicate fabric of my dress: scratch, saw, scratch, saw! I breathe heavily. I can feel the metal blade leaving tender sensations on my skin.*

After I have been slipping, sweating, and shaking, I am also cutting now. The cutting in my work is not literal, for if I were to cut my hips with an industrial scythe, it would be gory and fatal. But with this specific mimic I am playing with concepts and symbols, where I seek to make connections between the notions of hips and domesticity. To explain, I am 'cutting together-apart

(one move)' (Barad, 2014, p. 168) the insights that I have around hips and domesticity. I am *cutting together-apart (one move)* my conditioned and established perceptions on hips and domesticity. I can combine the paradox of *cutting together-apart (one move)* through the utterness of imagined cutting. A contradictory action that seems mind-bending and fascinating, spectacular and exceptional. Although this cutting somehow distances me from my past experiences of my hips, I simultaneously enter a space of togetherness and relationality to my present sensations and understandings of my hips within the domestic field. I am harvesting the constant becomings of my hips and their concomitant loss during these processes of continuous forming. With the scythe, I symbolize these simultaneous events of entangling, harvesting, and passing. Therefore, this connective cutting seeks to emphasize multiplicity within the process of my ever-evolving encounters of hips.

Furthermore, while I am *cutting together-apart (one move)* ideas and concepts, I identify the relevance of *play instincts* within my work. Because 'good art comes <...> from the play instinct' (Rethorst, 2013, p. 71). Unswervingly, I relate *play instincts* to *urges*, where *urges* function as *visceral messages* (Brownlee & Crips, 2016). The idea that my *play instincts* within the performance *The washing machine, the scythe, and I* (2025) can be *visceral messages* excites me. A message from the inside, an insider message, an internal insight, an idiosyncratic and me-specific message, including all my particularities. I also liken these visceral-insider-clues to 'expert intuitive' (Melrose, 2018, p. 51) inklings, which are influenced by my passionately attached engagement during this inquiry. Here, the *play instinct* and *urge* also allow me to extend my movement repertoire by excelling my dance genre-specific conditionings of hips.

In addition, a 'leap of faith' (Rethorst, 2013, p. 71) composes the *play instinct*. Therefore, I suggest that while I am *cutting together-apart (one move),* I am not only activating my *play instinct* but also actually *leaping* into my artistic research by fully trusting its processes. Here, the *play instinct* highlights that senses of play are essential for embracing an uncertainty of knowing. Now, the idea of a *play instinct* with its attached *leap of faith* activates for me a trust exercise, where 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.

Further, not only does a *play instinct* present itself as valuable in dance making, but also the idea to 'play profound' (Rethorst, 2013, p. 71). The thinking and doing of *playing profound* entail a reimagining of rigor (Rethorst, 2013), where I suggest that rigor tightly embraces the idea of attentiveness and diligence. Therefore, the actions of *playing profound* within my research release a realm of expansiveness. In this vein, I indicate that I *play profound* within my research, for I am not only actually playing through my actions, but I am also playing with associations, images, concepts, and perceptions of hips and domesticity. While I *play profound*, I seek to extend

my understandings of my dancing hips, I am unlearning and reconditioning my hips while blending them with domestic notions. I expand and stretch ideas on hips so far that at times I cannot unravel anymore where my hips begin or end.

Hence, I summarize that my approach of *cutting together-apart (one move)* the concepts of hips and domesticity spotlights elements significant to *shades of play*, namely *play instincts*, *urges*, *a leap of faith*, and *playing profound*. Furthermore, *shades of play* within my performance create an affirmative zone of the unknown because I translate *shades of play* to the following ideas on play:

> 'Play exhausts things as a method for inviting in something new. Its emptying-out of sense or meaning makes a clearing for the unexpected to arise. Making material acquaintance: a getting-to-know things so as to not-know, familiarity for rendering strange' (Cocker, 2021).

Therefore, *shades of play* within my performance can trigger new, diffracted, surprising, and unknown ideas of hips. Here, I can experience my habituated dancing hips through an exciting, disturbing, unfamiliar, and reassuring path. In addition, *shades of play* offer me access to performative knowledge, which is enriched with unfolding research acts in the process.

Finally, I put the washing on the line!

Figure 4. Natalie Schiller, 'Putting up my washing to dry,' from *The Washing Machine, the Scythe, and I*, 2025. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the author.

After my 'cutting together-apart (one move)' journey, the extension lead lies on the floor, close to the scythe. The washing machine has finished its work and its lid is open. I have started to put the clean and wet washing on the line. First the T-shirts, then the socks, with matching pegs (in color and shape). I am indicating the ending of my performance, a little domestic ritual, to bring my performance to a closure, as well as the ending of

my artistic research project. I am ending one cycle, like the spin cycle of the washing machine heralds an ending. I indulge in the ephemeral and transient moment of finishing a job while I am holding these clean and wet clothes in my hands. And then for them to be worn again, to get sweaty again, when I am figuring out the un-forming of concepts, categories, and ways of doing, being, and becoming my hips in future moments. An act signaling an end and at the same time starting the next cycle. Over and over, and again and again…

This exploration of *shades of play* has been based on my artistic research and, more specifically, on my performance *The Washing Machine, the Scythe, and I* (2025), for which I have intertwined the notions of hips and domesticity. During this investigation, I have been slipping and sweating to illuminate some snippets on *shades of play*, which have presented themselves as fluid, unsettled, and vague. Nonetheless, *shades of play* could occasionally be visualized and articulated from the inside, like a motivation or attitude, and from the outside, through actions. Additionally, I have cartographed *shades of play* as a practice, exercise, and training *of* my body, feelings, and mind, and I have proposed their dance on a continuum of instinct and will to highlight their promises of multiplicity and novelty. Then, I have been shaken by the trembling of the washing machine into realizing that *shades of play* manifest as *intrinsic*, *intra-mixed*, and *posthuman* happenings within the system of my artistic research project. Lastly, I have encountered the sensational and paradoxical gesture of 'cutting together-apart (one move)' (Barad, 2014, p. 168) notions of hips and domesticity to realize how *play instincts*, *urges*, *a leap of faith*, and *playing profound* have accompanied my work. Furthermore, I have discovered that *shades of play* could catapult my work into the enriching realm of the unknown and the unfamiliar. Now, I admit that I have felt clumsy and clunky while attempting to articulate the evanescence of *shades of play*. They remind me of my breath, which is barely apparent and lacks consciousness of its presence, but under the 'perfect' conditions, this air is obvious, such as when I am breathing out my warm breath on a cold winter's day.

Wanna play (III)?

Your washing should be finished by now too. Hence, I encourage you to put your washing on the line, the 'real' one or the imaginary one. While you execute these actions, I invite you to ponder on the following reflective questions:

— *What 'shades of play' have you encountered while reading this article and engaging in the participatory elements?*
— *Did you play?*
— *Did you have fun?*
— *What else has emerged for you?*

1. The scythe I am using is bespoke, its blade blunt for the purpose of this work. The fabricated blade combines one metal piece from my grandmother's scythe, which would be around 100 years old by now (the dark brown part), and a new metal part (the shiny part). The handle has been made from pine.

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Article

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To Play as a Historical Actor: A Case Study in Phenomenological Research on Virtual Embodiment in History-Related Immersive VR Media

Roman Smirnov

This article investigates the methodological implications of playing as historical actors within immersive virtual reality (VR) environments. Drawing on a PhD project examining over 20 history-related VR experiences, it combines phenomenological analysis of embodied gameplay with computational distant viewing techniques. The study foregrounds virtual embodiment as both an epistemic tool and a subject of inquiry, showing how first-person interaction with historical environments—ranging from Renaissance Venice in *Assassin's Creed Nexus VR* to the lunar mission in *Apollo 11 VR*—enables researchers to experience history kinesthetically and cognitively. A systematic selection of VR titles illustrates diverse strategies of perspective, interactivity, and narrative framing, highlighting how iconic figures and 'ordinary' historical actors are mediated through digital simulations. Phenomenological observations reveal the fragility and situatedness of immersion, where bodily action, system constraints, and unanticipated disruptions co-produce historical meaning. The article argues for a methodological pluralism in digital public history: scholars must oscillate between immersion and analytical distance to understand how VR shapes historical consciousness. Ultimately, playing as a historical actor emerges as a productive research practice, revealing the dynamic negotiation of past and present within immersive media.

Keywords: digital public history, historical consciousness, historical culture, immersive media, virtual embodiment, virtual reality

1. Introduction

What does it mean for researchers to assume the roles of historical actors within immersive virtual reality (VR) environments? This question emerges from my PhD project at Ruhr University Bochum, entitled *As It (Virtual) Really Was? The Impact of Immersive VR Technologies on Memory Culture(s) and Collective Perceptions of History* and investigating how immersive simulations shape historical consciousness and collective memory practices. The rapid proliferation of VR-based history-related applications—from educational (re)constructions such as *Apollo 11 VR* (Immersive VR Education, 2019) and *Chernobyl VR Project* (The Farm 51, 2016) to entertainment-oriented titles like *Assassin's Creed Nexus VR* (Ubisoft, 2023) and *Sniper Elite VR* (Rebellion,

2021)—has transformed how the past is represented. This development compels scholars to reconsider not only how VR mediates historical lifeworlds, but also how embodied participation in them influences analytical perception. To address this, the article adopts an ego-perspective: it offers a reflexive account of my dual position as researcher and player, navigating between analytical distance and embodied presence in history-related VR.

Contemporary debates in public history and history didactics increasingly conceptualize history as a mediated construct. Its reception depends on audiences' historical media literacy, understood as the ability to critically interpret mediated representations of the past within broader frameworks of historical culture and historical consciousness (Schwabe, 2021, p. 163). From this viewpoint, those who design media referencing the past effectively produce versions of history—in other words, they engage in an act of doing history—and thereby shape consumers' historical imagination (Thünemann & Wagner, 2024, p. 261). Immersive VR, typically experienced through head-mounted displays (HMDs) integrated into headsets such as the Meta Quest or PICO, intensifies this mediatization by providing spatialized simulations. Such simulations situate users inside historical environments and, through diverse visual, auditory, and interactive elements, evoke a sense of historical authenticity that derives not from the object itself—as in the case of an original museum artifact—but rather from the perceiving subject who experiences the represented environment as more or less plausible (Gundermann et al., 2021, p. 26).

This first-person perspective combined with interactive mechanics enables users to inhabit virtual bodies and engage with history as embodied actors rather than passive observers. The experiential qualities of VR resonate with the concept of historical experience (*Geschichtserfahrung* in German), understood in history didactics as a mode of engagement with the past that emerges through affective, mediated interaction rather than cognitive reflection alone (Lewers, 2025). Immersive VR has often been framed as an 'empathy machine' (Barbot and Kaufman, 2020), a medium that amplifies emotional identification through embodied presence. However, such immediacy also raises ethical concerns. (Re)constructing the perspectives of muted or marginalized groups risks reanimating these experiences in ways that present conjecture as authenticity, implicitly or explicitly suggesting that users can gain 'authentic' access to these groups' lived realities (Nakamura, 2020). Through locomotion systems, tracked head and hand movements, and controller-based interaction, VR applications produce a powerful effect of virtual embodiment (Ahn, 2021, p. 163), in which historical knowledge is not merely represented but enacted. Perspectival design thus becomes decisive: it determines how users navigate space, whether they perform historically coded actions, and to what extent their sensorimotor experience aligns with an avatar's positionality. In this sense, virtual embodiment constitutes an epistemic site—both a methodological tool for phenomenological inquiry and an object of investigation. These simulations do not simply depict the past; they configure affordances for action and invite players to inhabit identities framed by the medium as historical.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that history-related VR environments, despite their seemingly immaterial character, rely on a dense and often hidden materiality. This materiality resides in the hardware infrastructure and in the embodied actions of developers and users alike: virtual worlds depend on tangible technological systems and the human bodies that engage with them. As Elena Esposito (1998) argues, the virtual is neither fictitious nor detached from reality. Whereas fictional objects imitate real ones, virtual objects make no such claim but exist autonomously (Esposito, 1998, p. 270). For Esposito, virtuality is therefore neither opposed to reality nor a mere imitation of it. Rather, it constitutes a parallel, self-standing reality—a dynamic which also underpins technocratic notions of extended reality (XR), an umbrella term encompassing virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and mixed reality (MR) (Harth, 2022, p. 48).

In this article, immersive VR is therefore understood not as a historical source but as a dynamic medium through which cultural memory is negotiated and transformed. Following scholarship in digital public history (Gundermann et al., 2024, p. 7), I conceptualize immersive simulations as performative spaces where historical knowledge, emotions, and embodied actions are tightly interwoven. In such spaces, empirical research becomes a form of play. When researchers inhabit virtual bodies and enact historical roles, they transgress conventional boundaries between observer and participant, producing situated insights into how historical meaning is constructed and experienced. Rather than treating immersive VR as a transparent conduit of historical knowledge, I argue that it should be understood as a site of epistemic instability, where bodily action and historical meaning continuously shape one another. Playing as a partisan sniper, a Renaissance assassin, or an astronaut on the lunar surface, the researcher engages with history not only cognitively but also kinesthetically and emotionally.

Against this background, the article analyzes research practices that arise when one plays as a historical actor in immersive VR. The methodological approach is explicitly autotheoretical: drawing on my own experience of playing and recording gameplay, I examine how virtual embodiment destabilizes established categories of scholarly distance and neutrality. To complement this reflexive stance, I employ a distant-viewing analysis (Arnold & Tilton, 2019) of a gameplay recording that documents my session with *Assassin's Creed Nexus VR* on a Meta Quest 2 headset. This hybrid method, moving between phenomenological immersion and computational quantification, demonstrates how play can function simultaneously as method and object of analysis. Ultimately, the aim of this article is not to resolve methodological tensions but to engage them productively. Immersive VR compels researchers to negotiate unstable roles: we become players and analysts, participants and observers, embodied subjects and detached scholars. In this in-between position, knowledge emerges through play. The article thus contributes to methodological debates about how scholars might embrace play not merely as an object of study but as a research practice.

2. Sample selection and analytical framework

The methodological approach developed in this article is grounded in the idea of situated play, which treats gameplay not as the consumption of a stable media object but as a contingent, embodied, and context-dependent practice. This orientation becomes especially important in the case of VR, where the user's sensorimotor participation is not an optional layer but a prerequisite for the experience itself. Immersive VR requires the player to lend the game their body—its balance, gestures, and attention, and it is within this reciprocal exchange that historical meaning begins to form. Historical meaning is viewed here as a process by which users interpret temporal difference and relate narratives of the past to their own present context (Rüsen, 2020, p. 76). Rather than striving to filter out these conditions—such as the researcher's embodied perspective, affective responses, and situated interaction with the media object—in pursuit of methodological purity, the present study takes them as constitutive elements that shape how history is encountered within immersive environments.

For the qualitative analysis, I assembled a sample of 23 titles. The selection was guided by seven inductively developed criteria, that is, criteria derived iteratively from an initial survey of available VR applications and progressively refined during the sampling process, rather than imposed from an established theoretical model. This approach addresses the absence of any standardized framework for curating comparable sets of history-related VR content in existing scholarship. The aim was to capture the diversity of such media while ensuring methodological transparency and analytical comparability.

The sampling strategy was deliberately structured to ensure a broad geocultural and thematic representation. The selected titles originate from 14 different countries across four continents, reflecting a wide spectrum of national and regional perspectives on the past. The historical settings span five major periods, covering more than 20 distinct themes, ranging from ancient battles and medieval cultural history to modern conflicts, decolonization, and contemporary disasters. Equal attention was given to spatial variation: the narratives are situated across 15 different countries, highlighting how historical storytelling changes when framed within diverse geographical contexts. To enable a balanced comparison of narrative strategies, the sample includes both highly interactive VR games and non-interactive cinematic experiences based on 360-degree video, allowing for an investigation of how differing levels of agency shape users' historical engagement. Furthermore, the sample encompasses applications produced with a range of intentions, including both didactic projects designed primarily for educational purposes and entertainment-oriented titles targeting broader audiences.

A key focus of the selection process was to reflect the functional variety of history-related immersive VR media. The sampled experiences cover three dominant representational functions. First, some titles prioritize the creation of historical atmosphere through visual design. For example, the

application *VR Battleship YAMATO* (Kanda Technologies, 2017) is primarily concerned with demonstrating how the Japanese battleship appeared both externally and internally, including representations of the crew on board. Second, other projects foreground individual perspectives on historical events. A case in point is the immersive video *Was wollten Sie in Berlin?!* (IntoVR & Video, 2017), which conveys the experience of life inside the Stasi prison Berlin-Hohenschönhausen in the early 1980s from the perspective of a newly incarcerated West German prisoner whose visual first-person viewpoint the user adopts from the opening seconds. Third, several applications emphasize the simulation of interactions with historical objects. The first-person shooter *Sniper Elite VR*, for instance, places players in the role of a fighter in the Italian anti-fascist resistance during World War II, with its central function being the recreation of combat experience using firearms such as the Gewehr 98 and the Carcano Model 1891.

Finally, practical constraints also informed the construction of the sample. To facilitate an in-depth phenomenological analysis, the total combined runtime of the selected VR experiences was limited to approximately 40 hours. A complete overview of the 23 titles selected for analysis, including their historical settings, interactivity levels, thematic foci, and production studios, is provided in the table below (see Fig. 1).

Title	Period / Associated Countries / Theme	Aim / Interactivity	Studio / Country
Accused #2: Walter Sisulu (ARTE France, 2022)	20th century / South Africa / Apartheid	Education / Non-interactive immersive video	La Générale de Production, ARTE France / France
Al Zubarah (Shiva Games, 2018)	Early Modern, Long 19th century, 20th century / Qatar / Reconstruction of Al Zubarah fort	Education / Semi-interactive VR game	SaPhiR Prod. / Tunisia
Anne Frank House VR (Vertigo Games, 2019)	20th century / Germany, Netherlands / Holocaust, World War II	Education / Interactive VR game	Vertigo Games / Netherlands
Apollo 11 VR (Immersive VR Education, 2019)	20th century / USA / 1969 Moon landing	Education / Interactive VR game	Immersive VR Education / Ireland
Assassin's Creed Nexus VR (Ubisoft, 2023)	Antiquity, Early Modern / Greece, Italy, USA / Peloponnesian War, Republic of Venice, American Revolution	Entertainment / Interactive VR game	Ubisoft, Red Storm, Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft Reflections, Blue Byte / France, USA, Canada, UK, Germany
Battle of Red Cliffs VR (FREEFAB, 2017)	Antiquity / China / Three Kingdoms period	Entertainment / Interactive VR game	WISECAT / China
Chernobyl VR Project (The Farm 51, 2016)	20th century / Ukraine / Chernobyl disaster	Education / Semi-interactive VR game	The Farm 51 / Poland

Easter Rising: Voice of a Rebel (BBC, 2017)	20th century / Ireland, UK / 1916 Easter Rising	Education / Non-interactive immersive video	BBC / UK
Eye of the Owl - Hieronymus Bosch VR (VRX, 2016)	Middle Ages / Netherlands / Bosch's art	Education / Interactive VR game	VRX / USA
Gladiatoren im Kolosseum (ZDF, 2017)	Antiquity / Italy / Roman gladiatorial combat	Education / Non-interactive immersive video	ZDF, Faber Courtial / Germany
Gladius (Virtual Age Games, 2020)	Antiquity / Italy / Roman gladiatorial combat	Entertainment / Interactive VR game	Virtual Age / Spain
Historium VR - Relive the history of Bruges (Sevenedge Interactive Media, 2016)	Middle Ages / Belgium / Medieval Bruges reconstruction	Education / Interactive VR game	Sevenedge / Belgium
Meet the Miner - WDR VR Bergwerk (Westdeutscher Rundfunk Koeln, 2018)	20th century / Germany / Mining history	Education / Interactive VR game	Aesir Interactive, WDR / Germany
Peaky Blinders: The King's Ransom (Maze Theory, 2023)	20th century / UK / Underworld in 1920s Britain	Entertainment / Interactive VR game	Maze Theory / UK
Sniper Elite VR (Rebellion, 2021)	20th century / Germany, Italy et al. / World War II	Entertainment / Interactive VR game	Rebellion / UK
Titanic VR (ENGAGE XR, 2025)	20th century / UK, USA et al. / Titanic history	Education / Interactive VR game	Immersive VR Education / Ireland
Traveling While Black (Felix & Paul Studios, 2019)	20th century / USA / Racism in the US	Education / Non-interactive immersive video	Felix & Paul Studios / Canada
Verdammt zu spielen (Irgendwas mit ARTE und Kultur, 2019)	Early Modern / Belgium / Pieter Bruegel the Elder's art	Education / Non-interactive immersive video	Andrés Jarach, ARTE France / France
Visby Archer (Disir Productions, 2019)	Middle Ages / Denmark, Sweden / 1361 Battle of Visby	Entertainment / Interactive VR game	Disir Productions / Sweden
VR Battleship YAMATO (Kanda Technologies, 2017)	20th century / Japan / World War II Navy	Education / Interactive VR game	Kanda Technologies / Japan
Warplanes: Battles over Pacific (Home Net Games, 2022)	20th century / Japan, USA / World War II air combat	Entertainment / Interactive VR game	Home Net Games / Poland
War Remains (MWM Interactive, 2020)	20th century / France, Germany, UK, USA / World War I	Education / Non-interactive immersive video	Flight School / USA
Was wollten Sie in Berlin?! (IntoVR & Video, 2017)	20th century / Germany / GDR repression, Stasi prison	Education / Non-interactive immersive video	IntoVR / Germany

Figure 1. A table providing an overview of the 23 history-related VR applications selected for analysis, including their historical settings, interactivity levels, thematic foci, and production studios. Courtesy of the author.

The qualitative analysis itself was guided by a structured research protocol in the form of a detailed questionnaire completed while engaging with each VR experience. This protocol was designed to capture narrative, technical, affective, and epistemological dimensions simultaneously. At the narrative level, attention was given to the representation of historical actors and events, including personalization strategies centered on iconic figures and personification strategies highlighting 'ordinary' perspectives, as well as to the use of narrative abbreviations (Barricelli, 2011, p. 67), stereotypes (Schwarz, 2020, p. 36), and selective omissions of historical facts. The analysis also examined whether multiperspectivity (Bergmann, 2007, p. 69) was integrated or whether binary 'us—them' framings dominated (Bembeneck, 2013, p. 77).

Perspective and embodiment constituted another central dimension. The analysis considered whether users experienced history through the first-person point of view of a historical actor—fictional or real—or from the vantage point of an external observer, and how avatars were designed and navigated within the virtual environment. Interactivity was evaluated not only in terms of available actions, but also in relation to the degree of agency afforded when inhabiting virtual bodies. Affective resonance was systematically assessed using a modified Differential Affect Scale (Frentzel-Beyme & Krämer, 2023), complemented by an examination of narrative techniques that position certain characters as potential objects of empathy (Herrera et al., 2018). Moreover, the didactic and epistemic dimensions were investigated with a focus on the transmission of declarative and procedural knowledge (Mulders et al., 2022, p. 136) and their relation to broader frameworks of historical consciousness as developed by Hans-Jürgen Pandel (2017, p. 137). Finally, technical and sensory properties were evaluated, including visual realism, soundscape construction (Tang & Wei, 2022, p. 38), and the availability of haptic interactivity. Taken together, these layers provided a comprehensive framework for understanding how immersive VR media construct historical meaning, shape users' emotional and cognitive responses, and contribute to evolving dynamics of cultural memory.

To complement this qualitative framework with a computational counterpoint, I implemented a Python-based distant viewing script tailored to the analysis of my recorded VR session. Although the gameplay recording analyzed here was not part of the empirical corpus of my dissertation, it provides a valuable complement to the conceptual orientation of this article, which reflects on research practices developed within that broader project. Specifically, I applied the script (RSmirnovRUB, 2025) to a recording of *Assassin's Creed Nexus VR*, focusing on the mission *Cult of Hermes Reborn*, where players embody the Renaissance nobleman-assassin Ezio Auditore, who encounters Leonardo da Vinci in early sixteenth-century Venice. The script, originally developed in the context of a separate research project, segments the recording into ten-minute intervals and computes a range of formal features for each chunk. It calculates color and brightness values, applies object detection through the YOLOv8 model, and employs the

DeepFace library for facial and emotion recognition. The output consists of structured datasets and visualizations—histograms, color palettes, and frequency plots—that abstract the subjective act of play into numerical form.

The following section adopts an autotheoretical mode, applying this framework to a subset of titles from the sample that employ first-person embodiment of historical actors. My phenomenological observations are interwoven with the results of the distant viewing analysis of the *Assassin's Creed Nexus VR* recording, together providing a dual perspective on the epistemic affordances of playing as a historical actor.

Lastly, a crucial methodological dimension is the inherent solitude of VR play. Unlike many other history-related media, such as historical films viewed in cinemas or televised documentaries experienced collectively in front of the TV in the living room, immersive VR isolates the user both perceptually and socially. The headset blocks the shared physical environment and removes much of the informal interaction through which interpretive processes ordinarily unfold. In the context of this study, the solitary condition of VR is not treated as a drawback but as an analytic lens: it highlights how historical meaning is produced when communal sense-making is suspended and when the player negotiates historical environments in a state of physical and cognitive isolation. This solitude interacts with the phenomenological demands of VR, reinforcing the impression of a private encounter with history and influencing the degree of critical distance the user is able or willing to maintain. VR can therefore be understood as a technology that both addresses and reproduces solitude: on the one hand, users may temporarily overcome loneliness through interactions with virtual agents; on the other hand, by choosing VR over co-present media practices, they reinforce the individualized, inward-facing mode of engagement. A rare deviation from this pattern appears in *Warplanes: Battles over Pacific*, one of the few history-related immersive VR titles offering a multiplayer mode. Yet such cases remain exceptional. Technical obstacles to implementing multiplayer functionality in VR, together with the comparatively small player base that makes synchronous co-presence difficult to achieve, mean that most history-related VR applications continue to be designed—and experienced—as single-player simulations.

3. Virtual embodiment and historical actor perspective in immersive VR

The existence of a computer-generated virtual environment is inseparable from the material technologies that sustain it. As Stefan Münker (2005, p. 384) notes, the hardware required for immersion is never a neutral background but the very condition of possibility for digital virtuality. Head-mounted displays, controllers, and hand-tracking systems do not merely mediate access to virtual space, they actively shape the quality of presence and embodiment that users experience. In my own gameplay, I was repeatedly reminded of this entanglement when I inadvertently exceeded the safety boundary: the

image would suddenly dissolve into black textures, visually signaling that my physical body had moved beyond the calibrated room-scale perimeter. Such interruptions underscore how virtual and physical realms are co-constituted, collapsing the apparent opposition between the two.

Virtual embodiment thus depends on synchronization between bodily action and system response, a process that is especially pronounced in immersive VR compared to conventional screen-based media (Tang & Wei, 2022, p. 34). Unlike *Assassin's Creed II*, where interactivity is mediated through a controller and restricted to a limited set of inputs, *Assassin's Creed Nexus VR* demands pseudo-climbing, fencing, crouching, and gestural manipulations. This requirement transforms historical play into a kinesthetic practice: inhabiting Ezio Auditore in Venice means inhabiting one's own body more intensely, extending arms to grasp ledges, rotating shoulders to wield weapons, or stooping low to avoid detection. Such gestures, although digitally transposed, remain rooted in the corporeal, making virtual embodiment both a technological and phenomenological event (Breil & Kronberger, 2024, p. 157). Motion sickness, however, complicates the phenomenology of immersive VR (Saredakis et al., 2020). Individual physiology mediates these experiences, yet developers can mitigate discomfort through adjustable movement modes and smoother interaction design. For instance, *Assassin's Creed Nexus VR* offers both standing and seated modes, with the latter reducing kinesthetic intensity and lowering motion sickness risk.

History-related immersive VR media exhibit a wide spectrum of embodiment strategies, reflecting diverse design choices, levels of interactivity, and narrative intentions. At one end of this spectrum are observational, non-avatar perspectives, such as *Traveling While Black*, where users experience historical environments passively and have little or no corporeal presence beyond that of a camera viewpoint. Such titles foreground the historical setting itself, allowing users to witness events without assuming the role of a historical actor. Similarly, *Anne Frank House VR* offers a minimally embodied experience: users inhabit the perspective of an anonymous visitor to the secret annex, with only translucent virtual hands visible, highlighting the tension between presence and narrative interpretation. At the other extreme are highly interactive simulations that demand intense bodily engagement and fine motor coordination. In *Sniper Elite VR*, for example, weapon mechanics are designed to appear authentic and require deliberate, precise action. Likewise, *Visby Archer* immerses players as a medieval bowman, manifesting their virtual presence through visible hands and constrained rotational movement, while *Warplanes: Battles over Pacific* translates the user's hands into historically coded visual proxies such as pilot gloves. These titles exemplify how embodiment can be both performative and materially grounded: the user's physical actions—gripping, aiming, or manipulating—directly inform the virtual enactment of historical roles, creating a kinesthetic depth that passive observation cannot provide. Some immersive VR media occupy intermediate positions amidst this interactive landscape. *Apollo 11 VR* situates players within the historical narrative of the lunar mission, offering

an egocentric perspective of the astronaut without visually representing the avatar's body. *Titanic VR* employs a hybrid strategy, shifting between phases of passive observation, such as floating on the ship's deck or in a lifeboat, and active exploration as a diver investigating the wreck, thereby blending observational and agentive forms of embodiment.

Building on this spectrum, the first-person perspective of a historical actor in immersive VR can be further understood through several interrelated components. These components do not always appear simultaneously, but together they illuminate how perspective and embodiment are configured and made perceptible. A primary dimension can be called embodied perspective, in which the user not only perceives the world from the viewpoint of a past figure but occupies a body situated within it. Through sensors embedded in VR headsets and controllers, the user's head movements, hand gestures, and even spatial displacements are synchronized with those of the avatar. This bodily frame grounds the possibility of further experiential layers and differentiates interactive VR from observational formats. Embodiment can also be realized through perspective on objects. Users inhabit a historical role by wielding tools or items tied to that role. In *Assassin's Creed Nexus VR*, playing as Ezio Auditore means carrying his ancestral sword. Such historically coded objects extend the player's sense of inhabiting a persona beyond mere bodily perspective. A third component is perspective through effective action. This dimension becomes visible when the user alters the virtual environment in ways that parallel the interventions of historical actors in physical space. For example, in *Assassin's Creed Nexus VR*, when playing as Kassandra, one can pick up a ceramic vessel in an Athenian house and move it elsewhere, leaving a small but persistent alteration in the environment.

Perspective through vision and hearing adds further depth. In the immersive video *Was wollten Sie in Berlin?!*, viewers encounter interrogations and imprisonment at the Stasi prison directly from the vantage point of the detainee, experiencing events through his eyes—a setting that has been critically discussed in the context of history didactics and memorial site pedagogy (Lewers et al., 2022, p. 45). Likewise, in *Sniper Elite VR*, one not only hears gunfire, explosions, and cries of the wounded but perceives them binaurally: a detonation is louder in the ear that is virtually closer to its source. This spatialized soundscape situates the user in an embodied auditory perspective inseparable from the avatar's position. Less common, but highly significant, is perspective through voice: moments when the avatar speaks in the first person. In *Assassin's Creed Nexus VR*, exchanges with Leonardo da Vinci exemplify this effect, producing the uncanny sense that the user is themselves engaged in conversation.

Finally, perspective through others closes the loop of virtual embodiment. Here, non-player characters (NPCs) recognize and respond to the user as a historical actor. In *Sniper Elite VR*, Wehrmacht soldiers react by opening fire, while allied partisans greet the player and provide support. Such reciprocal acknowledgment anchors the user's position in a virtual social field, not just a sensory one, highlighting the extent to which embodied

play depends on recognition from both sides of the virtual encounter. Taken together, these components suggest that the first-person perspective in history-related VR is not a single effect but a composite structure. Developers selectively combine bodily, material, sensory, vocal, and social dimensions, producing diverse forms of immersion that can be analyzed phenomenologically as well as technically.

Assassin's Creed Nexus VR exemplifies the upper bound of embodied interactivity, integrating hands, torsos, and legs into fully realized avatars with individualized historical identities, such as Ezio Auditore, Kassandra, or Connor. The recorded mission *Cult of Hermes Reborn* particularly illustrates the interplay between scripted narrative and spontaneous bodily action. During a prolonged courtyard scene, as Leonardo da Vinci conversed with Seraphina, a member of the Cult of Hermes, my attention occasionally wandered. In a moment of boredom, I absentmindedly formed a small heart by touching the tips of my thumbs and index fingers in virtual space. This off-script gesture—playful, improvised, yet fully situated within the diegetic scene—demonstrates how virtual embodiment frequently exceeds narrative constraints, opening space for micro-performances, digressions, and embodied experimentation. Such moments exemplify Adam Chapman's (2013, p. 62) ecological approach to games: rather than functioning as static narratives, VR simulations operate as dynamic systems where user decisions continually shape the micro-level unfolding of events. In my session, this dynamism was visible not only in intentional actions—solving a clock-based puzzle or defending Leonardo from a band of assailants—but also in accidents and disruptions: tripping over furniture in my room, misinterpreting mission objectives, or even striking a bookshelf with the controller during combat. These intrusions highlight the imperfect, situated character of both play and research, indicating that immersion is never absolute but fragile and easily unsettled.

The distant viewing analysis of this same gameplay recording provides a complementary, computational perspective on these phenomenological observations. Segmenting the 25-minute video into ten-minute intervals, the script revealed an unusually dark average color (#201b19 hex) and low brightness levels. While this could be read as an aesthetic choice—Venice rendered at night—the data also reflects my physical misalignment with the play boundary, producing unintended black textures on screen. Here, a technical artifact of embodied play directly inscribes itself into the visual record, illustrating the inseparability of bodily movement, spatial calibration, and virtual representation. Object detection further underscored the centrality of embodiment and environment. Among the most frequently identified objects were 'person' (NPCs including guards, townspeople, and Leonardo), 'chair' and 'bench' (furniture in Leonardo's workshop and Venetian courtyards), and 'boat' (gondolas on the canals). Notably, the YOLOv8 model also detected 'airplane,' corresponding to the miniature ornithopter Leonardo presents, which I held and rotated in my virtual hands. This instance exemplifies perspective through objects, where interaction with historically

coded artifacts deepens the user's experiential anchoring in a represented historical lifeworld. At the same time, several false positives—with 'suitcase' apparently misclassifying storage chests, or 'dog' probably erroneously labeling defeated enemy bodies—highlight the methodological limitations of automated classification in densely populated, fast-moving VR scenes.

Facial and emotion recognition produced equally ambiguous results. According to DeepFace, the dominant emotions across detected faces were sad (534 instances) and angry (506 instances), corresponding to guards and bandits encountered in combat. Neutral expressions (233 instances) characterized passersby, while happiness (194 instances) was most strongly associated with Leonardo da Vinci during his welcoming interaction. While these outputs resonate with narrative cues—enemy hostility, Leonardo's warmth—they also raise critical questions about algorithmic interpretation. In particular, the predominance of sadness cannot be fully explained by gameplay dramaturgy and may instead reflect the model's bias toward interpreting low-resolution facial textures as downcast. Such findings underscore the need to treat computational abstraction as suggestive rather than definitive, to be interpreted against the grain of lived experience (Binkyte, 2023).

From an autotheoretical perspective, these combined observations illuminate the methodological paradox at the heart of researching history-related VR. On the one hand, immersion demands surrender to the avatar's perspective: climbing on roofs, defending Leonardo, or simply wandering through Venetian courtyards as Ezio Auditore. On the other, research protocols require interruption—pausing to write notes, reflecting in real time, or anticipating future scholarly interpretation. The awareness of observation, even in solitary play, induces a subtle performativity: knowing that this footage will later be analyzed makes one simultaneously a player and a subject of one's own experiment. This meta-awareness resonates with Gregory Bateson's (1979, p. 139) notion of play as a frame for action, where fiction and reality remain in constant tension.

Ultimately, my experience demonstrates that highly interactive immersive VR media do not present history as a finished narrative but as a contingent system co-produced by code, hardware, narrative design, and embodied improvisation. The imperfect nature of play—its interruptions, missteps, playful digressions, and emotional intensities—is not a methodological weakness but a productive site of knowledge. Inhabiting the role of a Renaissance assassin alongside Leonardo da Vinci, I encountered history not as a stable representation but as a shifting interplay between bodily presence and algorithmic mediation. The distant viewing analysis, despite its inaccuracies, accentuates this point by transforming the flux of embodied experience into abstracted data, reminding that both play and its study are practices of translation. Beyond *Assassin's Creed Nexus VR*, other history-related VR titles further reveal the spectrum of embodied engagement available to the player-researcher. Each degree of bodily involvement—from invisible, procedural action to fully realized avatars with hands, torsos, and legs—produces distinct ways of experiencing historical perspective. Across

these modalities, immersion, skill acquisition, and even boredom manifest differently, shaping not only what can be felt and noticed but also what can be analyzed.

4. Conclusion

The proliferation of history-related immersive VR titles, ranging from commercial entertainment games such as *Assassin's Creed Nexus VR* to educational, non-profit projects like *Anne Frank House VR*, has intensified the need to reconsider how humanities scholars, particularly within the field of digital public history, can and should engage with this emerging medium (Lewers, 2024, p. 79). As this article has demonstrated, the study of VR demands methodological pluralism: it cannot be reduced either to distant analytical approaches or to immersive phenomenological engagement alone. Instead, it must be approached as a dynamic field in which these complementary perspectives illuminate different dimensions of the same phenomenon.

At one level, reception-oriented methods provide invaluable insights into how history-related immersive VR media circulate within the broader attention economy. Analyses of user reviews on platforms such as *Steam*, qualitative interviews with players, and ethnographies of online communities reveal how audiences negotiate issues of authenticity and emotional resonance. These approaches foreground the social life of VR titles—the discourses, debates, and collective appropriations that surround them—and show that historical knowledge emerges not only from media producers but also from users as interpretive agents. Such methods are particularly useful in mapping large-scale patterns across dozens or even hundreds of titles, situating immersive VR media within debates about historical culture and collective memory in the postdigital age.

Yet if reception studies emphasize the cultural aftermath of play, phenomenological analysis insists on the immediacy of the gaming event itself. By entering immersive VR environments as an embodied player, the researcher gains access to a register of experience otherwise invisible: the bodily exertion of climbing virtual walls, the kinesthetic rhythm of weapon handling, the emotional ambivalence of defending an AI companion, etc. While playing *Assassin's Creed Nexus VR*, I found myself moving fluidly between analytical detachment and immersive surrender, oscillating between note-taking and playful improvisation. These moments cannot be reconstructed from reviews or interviews alone, since they are inseparable from the corporeal and affective dimensions of presence in VR. However, the phenomenological method is not without its complications. Immersion must be interrupted by research protocols, the pleasures of play are often muted by the awareness of scholarly observation, and external disruptions—from a ringing doorbell to an accidental collision with furniture—intrude on the virtual experience. Phenomenological reflection reveals that immersion per se is powerful but fragile, easily disrupted by hardware constraints or user

boredom. At the same time, as the preceding analysis showed, these very imperfections are revelatory. They demonstrate that VR is not a frictionless conduit of historical representation but a precarious assemblage of hardware, software, and users' engagement.

The combination of phenomenological reflection with computational quantification further enriches this methodological picture. The distant viewing analysis of my gameplay recording, though subject to clear limitations, illustrates how automated metrics can highlight features that might otherwise be overlooked. The unusually dark average color values and low brightness levels, for example, signal not only the nighttime setting of Renaissance Venice but also the embodied fact of my drifting beyond the calibrated play area. Object detection identified a constellation of items—chairs, benches, boats, bottles—that anchored gameplay in specific material environments, while the alleged misclassification of corpses as dogs or chests as suitcases underscores the need for critical interpretation of algorithmic results. These discrepancies caution against naive trust in computational tools but also suggest how the tensions between human perception and machine analysis can become productive sites of inquiry.

Taken together, these reflections converge on the insight that research on VR is itself a form of translation: it converts ostensibly stable historical (re)constructions into dynamic, embodied experiences. Research becomes a kind of play, situated within shifting frames that enable creativity and heterogeneity. The very tensions that complicate the method—pauses, missteps, digressions, emotional intensities—are not failures but constitutive elements of the research process. Acknowledging this complexity also clarifies the complementary relationship between phenomenological and distant analytical approaches. Rather than privileging one pathway over the other, digital public history research benefits most when both are brought together in a layered methodology. As demonstrated by my engagement with the 23 history-related immersive VR titles presented in this article, these media do not simply represent the past—they actively participate in negotiating its cultural meanings. They canonize already iconic figures such as Leonardo da Vinci while simultaneously opening space for alternative, non-celebrity perspectives: from miners, as in *Meet the Miner*, to prisoners, as in *Was wollten Sie in Berlin?!*. In both cases, users encounter the viewpoint of nameless protagonists who nonetheless function—albeit in different ways and to varying degrees—as representatives of historically marginalized social groups. These VR experiences dramatize familiar conflicts but also raise new ethical questions about empathy (Frentzel-Beyme & Krämer, 2020) and historical authenticity (Bunnenberg, 2021). When scholars engage with these media through both reception analysis and phenomenological play, they are better equipped to assess how VR reshapes the contours of historical consciousness.

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Reflexive essay

Playing with Ancestral Waters: Community Portals along the Mahicannituck (Lower Hudson River) Watershed

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Playing with Ancestral Waters: Community Portals along the Mahicannituck (Lower Hudson River) Watershed

Natan Diacon-Furtado* & Water Justice Lab Youth Scientist Fellows and Staff**

Community Portal (2024—) is an instrument for embodied collaborative listening with local and ancestral waters. The Mahicannituck (lower Hudson River), a tidal estuary connecting upstate New York and the Atlantic Ocean, serves as an inspiration and site for this work. The cyclical movement of its waters constitutes a flow towards and away from Indigenous, colonial, cultural, and industrial legacies. This hybrid essay shares fragments of *Community Portal*'s co-development within these waters and across three participatory design playtests conducted by a community of artists, educators, and high-school-aged youth science fellows. Utilized in game design to elicit user feedback during development, playtesting is presented here as a methodology for the collaborative community design and development of assistive tools that adaptively re-use and re-imagine colonial technologies of science and media. Playtesting with and in these waters presents an opportunity for further collaborative development of technologies that unite social practice, science, and engineering, a process that this essay terms 'visionary engineering.'

Keywords: community, imagination, improvisation, intuition, listening, play, reality, visionary engineering, water

The Mohican name for the lower Hudson River, 'Mahicannituck,' means 'river that flows both ways.' It is a tidal estuary spanning 153 miles from the Atlantic Ocean at New York City's harbor to the Federal Dam in Troy, New York. Each day its waters shift with the tides, flowing to and from sacred Mohican / Munsee lands, the Ellis Island immigration station, the birthplace of the Hudson River School (famous for its style of landscape painting), the start of the Erie Canal and origins of the Industrial Revolution in the United States. Though it is of great Indigenous, colonial, cultural, and industrial importance, this river has been repeatedly severed from the communities that live beside it through toxicity, poverty, and harmful urban planning. Its waters have been 'treated as a dumping ground for industrial and municipal waste' (Riverkeeper, 2025) and still regularly test as unsafe and unhealthy. Yet, the Mahicannituck's waters continue to flow.

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** A full list of 2025 fellows and staff can be found at: https://www.mediasanctuary.org/project/water-justice-lab (accessed on 30 March 2026).

We are a community of artists, educators, and high-school-aged youth science fellows living and learning with these waters at the estuary's northern edge in Troy, New York. The cyclical movement of the Mahicannituck's waters towards and away from Indigenous, colonial, cultural, and industrial legacies has inspired us to begin sensing similar shifting tides within ourselves. *Community Portal, Recuperating Ancestral Waters* (2025) is a creative experiment in listening with our local watershed as a means of sensing the ever-shifting ancestral and polluted states of the waters both around and within us. This summer we played with these waters, and they played with us. We invite you to come play with us too.

We stand on the muddy silt shore and dip our hands into the cool waters. We listen for something we can understand in the ever-shifting static tones that Tanajae shapes with the twirling of her finger in the river water filling our bowl-shaped antenna. 'Attention,' we hear through the static. 'ATTENTION!' we all repeat—letting that something know they have been heard. 'Radio,' we hear next as Tanajae spirals her finger towards the bottom of the bowl. 'RADIO!' we acknowledge—as our play transforms into communication and connection.

 Listen with us

This essay presents narrative, photographic, and audio fragments from three playtests of the *Community Portal* (2024—) instrument for embodied collaborative listening with local and ancestral waters. A playtest is an iterative participatory design process traditionally used in game design to elicit user feedback during development. These playtests were conducted by the collaborative artist and designer Natan Diacon-Furtado with high-school-aged Youth Scientist Fellows of the Water Justice Lab. The fragments published here highlight three methods developed by fellows during playtests for using the instrument in a creative and scientific exploration that is both self- and site-specific. It is our hope that presenting these playfully discovered methods inspires others to have fun navigating their own inner and outer waters, expanding our playtests beyond the Mahicannituck.

Water Justice Lab (WJL) is a water quality monitoring and education program located in Troy, New York. WJL is a collaboration between the water advocacy organization Riverkeeper, and The Sanctuary for Independent Media, which uses 'art, science and participatory action to promote social and environmental justice and freedom of creative expression' (The Sanctuary for Independent Media, 2023). Collaborating WJL Youth Scientist Fellows were Polly (Polina) Napelenok, Sumaiya Momenath, and Tanajae Owens, guided by the youth mentor Ileya du Boulay. Their play was greatly facilitated and made possible by the artists and NATURE Lab co-directors Kathy High and Ellie Irons, summer intern Atlas Seres, volunteer Doug Reed, and Riverkeeper's community science coordinator Sebastian Pillitteri. The theoretical framing

Figure 1. Water Justice Lab Youth Scientist Fellows and Staff with Natan Diacon-Furtado, *Community Portal, Recuperating Ancestral Waters*, 2025. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the authors.

and technical specifications comprising a majority of the written portions of this hybrid essay are authored by Diacon-Furtado. This writing is reflected and refracted by the techniques and methods for technologically assisted call and response with our waters, which were developed by WJL Youth Scientist Fellows during their playtesting at various locations throughout the Mahicannituck (lower Hudson River) watershed.

Community Portal was originally designed by Diacon-Furtado as a doctoral candidate in Electronic Arts at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, where WJL is based. Diacon-Furtado created this instrument in an attempt to explore and re-connect with water and listening-based knowledge practices across their own Quaker, Sephardic Jewish, West African, Native Brazilian, settler, arrivant, and Indigenous ancestries. Disconnected and severed from many of these practices through time and force, their work explores the possibility of appropriating widely available mass market technologies to reconnect with the wider array of technological possibilities available to us from our pasts and hopefully our futures.

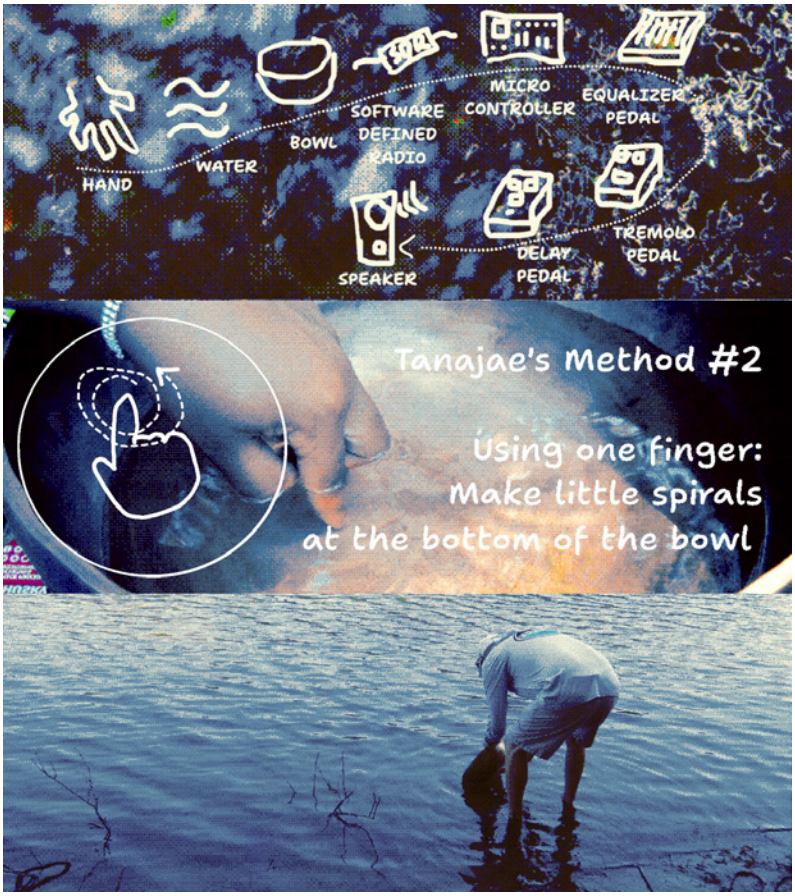


Figure 2. Water Justice Lab Youth Scientist Fellows and Staff with Natan Diacon-Furtado, *Community Portal, Recuperating Ancestral Waters*, 2025. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the authors.

This work adaptively re-uses readily available laptops, micro-controllers, radios, and antennas to assist in communicating with our waters. As an open-source project, all necessary code and guides to build your own *Community Portal*, with links to required hardware and software, are available as open-access information from the project's website.[1] In addition to the three playfully discovered methods presented in this essay (Fig. 1, 2, 5), anyone who chooses to build their own instrument is encouraged to uncover further methods that resonate with and in their own bodies and ancestries.

This resonance is aided by the site- and self-specific salt and minerals that flow both ways between us and the waters around us. The Black Studies scholar Christina Sharpe (2016) posits that dissolved minerals form a cyclical relationality between water and us that exists beyond linear conceptions of time. The same salt moves in and out of bodies and water over 260 million years of residence time (Sharpe, 2016, p. 268). These minerals materially connect our pasts, presents, and futures. *Community Portal* amplifies these conditions so that they can be readily sensed through sound.

Ranging from clear speech to impassioned noise, the cultural producer, artist, housing advocate, and author Rasheedah Phillips (2025), of the duo Black Quantum Futurism, reminds us that the '[t]he significance of understanding sound as a carrier of complex information becomes particularly poignant <...> in contrast to the predominance of visual culture that is a feature of modern Western European culture' (Phillips, 2025, p. 261). *Community Portal* aids in sensing and accessing this complex information within our local waterways and ourselves. Though it may not be understandable in our current contexts, the call and response facilitated by this instrument engages communication as a source of connection—and connection as a source of communication beyond time and place.

This is achieved by turning a closed radio system into an open and collaborative process for water-based exploration through the use of a liquid antenna. Liquid antennas were first proposed and tested in 1999 as an alternative antenna design for transmitting and receiving electromagnetic signals (Huang et al., 2021). Water-based liquid antennas perform this task by utilizing a closed-loop of ionic (salt) liquid. *Community Portal* replaces this closed system with an open bowl that can be filled by collaborator hands and waters (Fig. 3). The ever-shifting ionic mineral content of these collaborations audibly affects reception, amplifying signals provided by a modified software-defined radio (Fig. 4). This radio continuously sweeps the FM spectrum to provide an ever-shifting palette of words and sounds to playfully make meaning with. Do the minerals that amplify and allow us to sense this complex information form a communications network that we can learn to tap back into?

WJL invited Diacon-Furtado to explore this question by continuing to develop the *Community Portal* instrument within the framework of a laboratory science program. In this program, youth fellows learn to perform water quality testing with professional lab instruments, processing water samples from over 150 miles of the Mahicannituck watershed. Data collected from this sampling is included in Riverkeeper's water quality program informing local water recreation and is utilized to support water quality laws and initiatives. Fellows produce radio broadcasts and podcasts as civic media on these topics and explore issues such as dam removals and wastewater treatment.

In general, WJL fellows utilize proprietary commercial scientific instruments and media production technologies to assess and communicate external water conditions. Bringing the Community Portal instrument into this setting proposes a shift from focusing on the waters that flow both ways along the Mahicannituck to the waters that flow both ways between us and this watershed. The playtest format was chosen so that fellows would not feel daunted by such a proposition and so that they would feel free to immediately collaborate in playing with such an instrument and playfully discovering ways in which it might be utilized. Within this format, experiments with technologically assisted call and response are allowed to be meaningless and meaningful at the same time. Presenting this instrument in a context of play rather than scientific testing allows it to act as what the game and

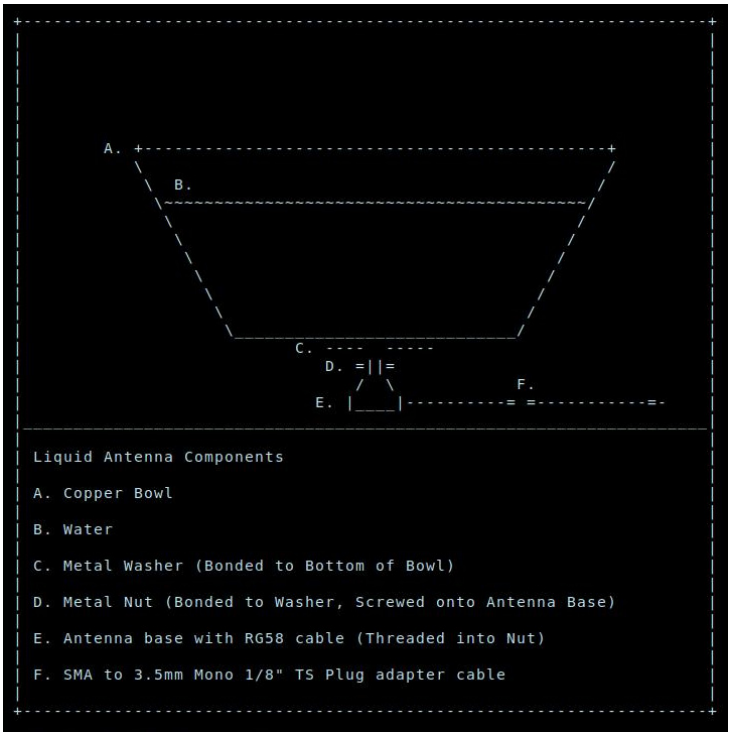


Figure 3. Liquid antenna diagram. Natan Diacon-Furtado, *Community Portal*, 2025. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the authors.

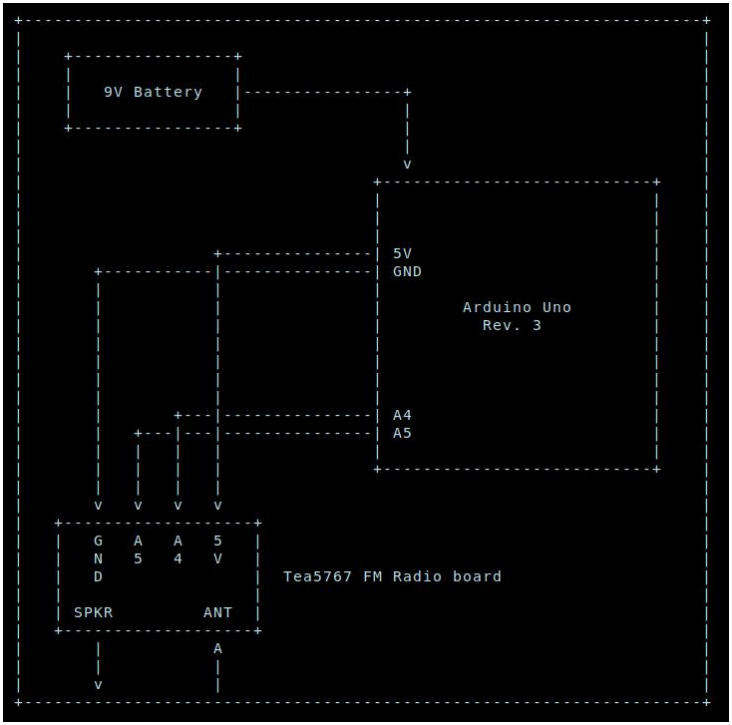


Figure 4. Software Defined Radio Diagram, Natan Diacon-Furtado, *Community Portal*, 2025. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the authors.

play scholars Sarah Lynne Bowman and Kjell Hedgard Hugaasa (2021) term a 'transformational container.' For Bowman and Hugaasa (2021), 'the goals of [a] transformational container are to facilitate the exploration of self, envision new configurations of community, and transfer insights from these experiences to one's life through integration practices' (p. 18).

As transformational containers, this instrument and its playtests serve as portals that expand our senses of community and connection with and in our waters. Playing with these waters through technologically assisted group and individual vocal and rhythmic call and response, we have begun to expand our sense of the materialities, temporalities, and relationalities that greatly constellate and expand this community and connection across time and space.

Our antenna isn't working in the lab. The tap water that fills its bowl is filtered and processed and silently disconnected from the same waters that joyfully play with us outside. 'What's missing?' Ileya asks the fellows in the room. 'Rocks!' Polly exclaims. We rush outside to collect rocks and experiment with adding them. Each rock that we add stirs up a response of sound. Combining one big rock and four small ones seems to allow us to receive and transmit sound each time we move our hands in the water. 'It's like we're making a potion!' Atlas shouts.

 Listen with us

Playing with our waters allows us to switch between the scientific realities of the lab and the individual and communal cultural realities of our embodied mineral memories. Standard lab equipment measures the reality of our water systems as imposed by an imagination of destruction and disparity; it requires the memorization of a 'proper' procedure to operate. Unlike standard lab equipment, *Community Portal* invites us to intuit and improvise how our bodies were once used (and could be used again) to communicate across time and space. It helps us to recuperate abilities that the theologian and scholar of African American spirituality and mysticism Barbara A. Holmes (2020) reminds us 'our ancestors possessed <...> and used <...> in ways that we have long forgotten' (p. 31). It is an instrument intended to assist all who have been stripped of, or been denied access to, these ancestral abilities and knowledges with recovering them in site- and self-specific contexts.

We are learning to play and listen with our waters again as they continue to flow towards and away from Indigenous, colonial, cultural, and industrial legacies. Living and playing along the shores of the river that flows both ways clarifies the need to communally recuperate ancestral technologies that disrupt 'the uni-linear transmission of information into our realities' (Phillips, 2025, p. 261). As the activist healer and writer adrienne maree brown (2017) emphasizes, '[w]e are living now inside the imagination of people who thought economic disparity and environmental destruction were acceptable

costs for their power' (p. 3). Standing in the currently waste-filled waters of the Mahicannituck helps us sense this imagination's attempts to exclude us from our own ancestral waters 'as enemy, fright, other' (brown, 2017, p. 21). We are reminded by the scholar of Indigenous and colonial histories Coll Thrush (2011) that these attempts to turn our ancestors into spirits with no embodied claim to self and space are a colonial tool to excuse and allow this continued disparity and destruction (p. 69). We must, in the words of the artist and sociocultural investigator Marlon Jiménez Oviedo (2022), 'find [our] own reality' (p. 12). *Community Portal* is an invitation to listen for these realities within each of our waters.

Oviedo (2022) suggests we 'recuperate' these realities through 'communal aesthetic practice that feels like it belongs to [us] and is not imposed from the outside' (p. 12). As Oviedo (2022) expands, 'recuperation seeks to innovate, to embody things of the past with new perspectives, to make them relevant for the circumstances of the present, and the future' (p. 2). Put simply by brown (2017), '[i]t is our right and responsibility to write ourselves into the future' (p. 3). Through play, we are learning to listen with the minerals shared between our bodies and our waters that directly connect us with these futures, continuing to exist for hundreds of millions of years (Sharpe, 2016, p. 268).

Recent scientific findings validate this perspective. As Holmes (2020) confirms, '[t]heoretical physics suggests that, even when separated, entities that have once been in contact will react to changes in the other' (p. 29). For Phillips (2025), this 'suggests that our engagement with time can be an act of creation and innovation, where temporal boundaries are not barriers but horizons to be explored and expanded' (p. 27). *Community Portal* aims to explore and expand these horizons through self- and site-specific call and response that is communicative and connective. This technologically assisted play engages with time as materiality (salt and minerals) and relationality (ancestry) that flow both ways through us, our waters, our pasts and our futures.

In playtesting *Community Portal*, we see an opportunity for further collaborative development of technologies that unite social practice, art, science, and engineering. We call this kind of play that engages innovatively and creatively with time and possibility 'visionary engineering.' Visionary engineering combines the process of exploratory engineering with the practice of visionary fiction.

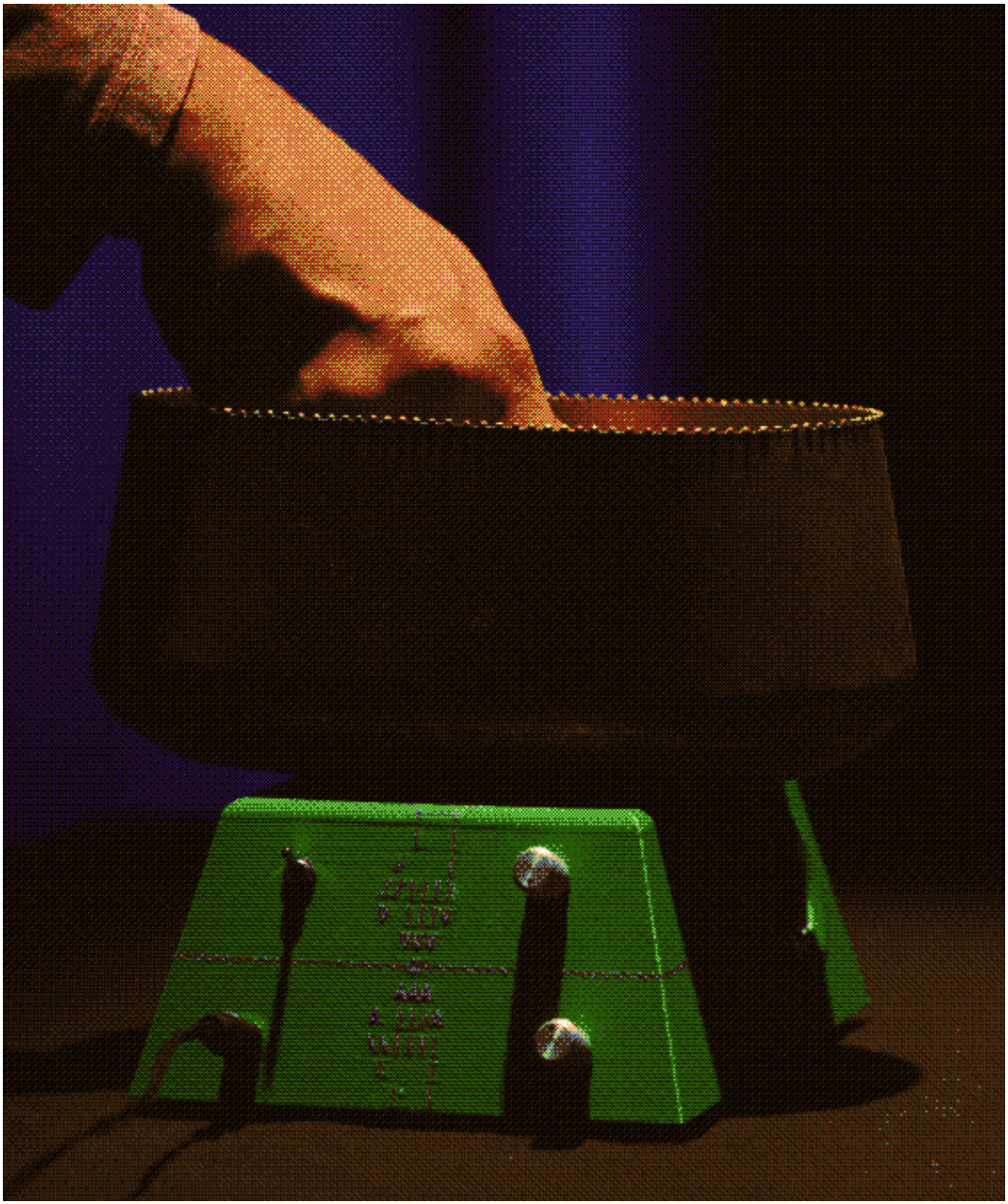
Coined by K. Eric Drexler, the 'godfather of nanotechnology' (Regis, 2004), '[e]xploratory engineering involves designing things that we can't yet build' (Drexler, 1991, p. 76). Visionary fiction, as defined by brown (2017), 'is constantly applying lessons from our past to our future(s)' by engaging 'the practices of collaboration and adaptation and transformative justice [as] science fictional behavior' (pp. 160, 198). Thus, visionary engineering proposes the use of intuition, imagination, and improvisation to design things that we once could build and hope to build again. It lays claim to the 'intuitive knowledge, experience, and scientific discoveries' available to all of us as 'a primal human response to an enigmatic cosmos' (Holmes, 2020, p. 121). Visionary engineering playfully engages with the material, relational and

Figure 5. Water Justice Lab Youth Scientist Fellows and Staff with Natan Diacon-Furtado, *Community Portal, Recuperating Ancestral Waters*, 2025.

temporal, to bring these primal and scientific perspectives and technologies back into connection and communication.

As visionary engineers, we engage intuition, imagination, and improvisation through play that has, in the words of Phillips (2025), 'the power of reclaiming and rewriting one's history and future by understanding and manipulating the fundamental principles of reality' (p. 293). Drawing from theories of live action role-play (LARP), the *Community Portal, Recuperating Ancestral Waters* (2025) playtests at WJL harness play's inherent power to 'facilitat[e] the shift from one state of consciousness to another' (Bowman and Hugaasa, 2021, p. 18) and transport us from inhabiting an imagination of destruction and disparity to living in the vast possibilities of imagination within each of us. Play with a cultural-scientific instrument that is still in development provides a 'transformational container' for our varied imaginations, intuitions, and improvisations by welcoming them all into a visionary engineering project. In the process, we hope to, as Bowman and Hugaasa (2021) describe this, 'inform our self-concepts, our worldviews, and our definitions of community' (p. 7) in lasting but ever shifting and renewing ways.

Figure 6. Fun Stuff Design and Azuré Keahi with Natan Diacon-Furtado, *Community Portal*, 2025. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the authors.



Community Portal is continually being developed to incorporate the techniques and methods we develop through play. In collaboration with the industrial designers Dierdre Shea and Julian Goldman, of the sustainable product development studio Fun Stuff Design, and the interdisciplinary artist Azuré Keahi, it has been re-designed (Fig. 6) to allow for easier operation in our watershed. *Community Portal* now includes waterproofing, built-in speakers, a dedicated audio line-out for effects that can make the words and sounds it receives easier to understand, and a custom-designed antenna connection mechanism that allows for the quick swapping of different bowl antennas. This latest version has been donated to WJL as a permanent instrument to be used by Youth Scientist Fellows in the lab and in the field.

In this essay, we have presented the *Community Portal* playtests as our first foray into a community practice of visionary engineering. We hope that this 'device <...> of the heart and mind' (Holmes, 2020, p. 216) inspires the playful and collaborative development of other such technologies beyond our local context. Our goal is that this relational, temporal, and material play enlarges the possibility for others to adaptively re-use and re-imagine colonial technologies of science and media in ways that explore and expand their senses, for themselves and in their own communities.

Like Drexler's (1991) exploratory engineering, this visionary engineering project 'seeks to construct <...> a rough understanding of future technological capabilities' (p. 78). And in so doing, it seeks to intuit and reconnect with the technological possibilities of our pasts. As reminded by brown (2017), '[l]osing our imagination is a symptom of trauma' (p. 163). What does it mean that the scientific instruments available to the fellows, and to all of us, for the exploration and understanding of our watersheds are so disconnected from the ancestral waters that, in the words of Phillips (2025), are 'seen throughout the diaspora' as facilitating 'one of the main types of divination [ancestral communication] practices used in Indigenous African cultural and spiritual practices' (p. 78)? What does it mean to engage directly in the co-creation of a technology that seeks to remedy this? Will you help us find out?

We are helping the state determine the health of these waters. In this serious context, our antenna seems out of place, but the fellows want to hear what the water in which we are working sounds like today. All we hear at first is static. But Tanajea rubs a wide circle around the inside of the bowl and gets an immediate burst of words from the radio. Polly joins in, and more and more words seem to rush out of the radio's speakers. They tune the signal with their bodies and imaginations. We smile and laugh as we listen.

 Listen with us

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Authors' Bios

Natan Diacon-Furtado (all pronouns) is a collaborative artist and designer of visionary engineering projects that expand notions of ancestry and self through play. Trained as an anthropologist and architect, they are currently a doctoral candidate in Electronic Arts at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, USA. They have been the subject of two solo museum shows, at the Aomori Contemporary Art Centre and Indiana University's Wiley House Museum, with additional exhibitions at the Venice Biennale of Architecture,

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Water Justice Lab (WJL) is a collaboration between Riverkeeper and The Sanctuary for Independent Media. Through our water quality monitoring program and related programming, WJL educates communities about water justice, aids in developing the advocacy capacity of North-Central Troy, and strengthens a network of environmental justice advocates focused on water issues within the Hudson River (Mahicannituck) Watershed.

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Article

Toying with Canonical Figures: Counterhumanist Experiments and the Politics of Personhood at the Heart of Professional Training in France

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Toying with Canonical Figures: Counterhumanist Experiments and the Politics of Personhood at the Heart of Professional Training in France

Eman Shehata

The stand-alone, bounded humanist figure of the individual has long been critiqued by anthropologists, who challenged its exclusionary stakes and its position as the natural starting point of questions and debates in the social sciences. In confronting the shadows of dominant models of being, such as *Homo economicus*, in their field, anthropologists of welfare and the economic imagination reveal a gap between intended results and the socially complex realities they observe ethnographically, which slip through the abstractions of such models. This article builds on and extends these critical insights by inverting the terms of analysis. Instead of showing how hegemonic economic models of being can be undermined through ethnography, it inquires into what keeps them alive. The contribution suggests a different theoretical point of departure by adopting Sylvia Wynter's concept of 'being human as praxis' (Wynter and McKittrick, 2015). Being human as praxis is a playful experiment that offers generative pathways in thinking beyond the humanist trope of neoliberal subjectivity. It allows us to consider the enactment and regeneration (or not) of dominant mythologies of being human, and their racial ontologies, through an inclusive and dynamic understanding of being human, centered on storytelling and praxis. Grounded in fieldwork at a simulation-based training center in Lyon preoccupied with 'professional reconversion,' where play emerges as a praxis of mastery and worldmaking, I argue that Wynter's conception of humanness as a verb rather than a noun shifts our focus from the trope of autonomous subjects towards a politics of personhood enacted through everyday reproductions of autonomy as symbolic life.

Keywords: anthropological theory, autonomy, being human as praxis, Homo economicus, individualism, professional training, worldmaking

> *How was Homo oeconomicus foisted on us? In spite of his elegant foreign name, he is selfish and unmannered, brutish as Caliban, naïve as Man Friday. We all love to speak scathingly of him. Judging from the bad press he receives, we actually dislike him a lot and cannot believe anyone could really be so greedy and selfish. He is logical, but even that is unattractive. His shadow stretches across our thoughts so effectively that we even use his language for criticizing him. . . Our subject is about his origins: Where did someone without social attributes come from in the first place, and why has he expanded from a small, theoretical niche to become*

an all-embracing mythological figure. . . like a republican parallel to the imperial microcosm of former civilizations?

Mary Douglas and Steven Ney
(1998, cit. in Wynter and McKittrick, 2015, p. 13).

There is a young woman who used to be a doctor in Algeria
and she ended up becoming a nurse here
She was a doctor
She had her own cabinet
<...> You must redo everything from scratch
<...>
Sure there are customs you must learn to work in a company but a doctor
whether they're Iranian, Algerian or Congolese
The human body is the same <...>
The instructions to build a bridge in Algeria or France are the same

— Excerpt from an interview with Masha,
a job counsellor at Mission Locale
(Soignet, 2022, p. 213).

'He has to mourn his old life to welcome a new life,' said an employee from the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes regional government when reflecting on the professional trajectory of one of the trainees at Immersitu, the situational learning center where I did my fieldwork. A plumber turned production manager, the man in question was deemed to have had a remarkable journey. His example was often brought up by trainers to demonstrate the possibilities of *formation* ('training'). In the refurbished and chic industrial warehouse where the manufacturing and production management training took place, two trainers talked with two neatly dressed government officials about 'professional reconversion' and its transformative potential. 'You wouldn't believe what people have to go through when they come here,' said one of the women in a concerned tone before reasserting the value that *formation* can bring to a person's life.

Sitting on the leather couches in the reception area, they exchanged personal stories of triumph and struggle and reflected on ways they could make industry attractive. 'I find it better to formulate your offer of *formation* in terms of a project,' one of the trainers suggested. A professional project was imagined by trainers as something to be constructed over the course of a person's working life; a showcase of autonomy and something to take pride in, regardless of whether one has secured a job. On my way back to the training center, I thought about what the woman from La Région had said about the plumber: 'He has to mourn his old life to welcome a new

life.' This was not the first time I had come across this phrasing,[1] but I found it striking, nonetheless. What does the invocation of mourning tell us about how *formation* is conceived? What kind of 'new life' is imagined here?

In recent years, under Emmanuel Macron's leadership, the French government has invested significant amounts into professional training, conceiving it as a solution to long-term unemployment and pushing people further into activity. It orchestrated an overhaul of the public training system, automating access to training in a way that has triggered an individualization of social problems. In parallel to so-called activation policies that sparked national outrage over the past decades, videos were created and publicized on the social media accounts of the Ministry of Labor, celebrating individuals who 'took matters into their own hands' and shaped their own professional futures by undertaking a professional reconversion.

Valorizations of autonomy, projected by the French government and my interlocutors, recall a familiar story. This is a story rehearsed in Foucauldian governmentality analyses (Brown, 2015; Rose, 1996, Wacquant, 2009) about the homogenizing figure of an 'active individual,' an 'autonomous subject' and a pervasive neoliberal order with particular global tendencies towards responsibilization and personal development (Kipnis, 2007). Such a story would posit that professional training has become another avenue through which the state creates citizens as workers and productive subjects. Missing from this familiar story, however, is an important question that has preoccupied anthropology and anthropologists: how are we to make sense of our interlocutors' encounters with such discourses? Anthropologists of welfare and the economic imagination (Chong, 2015; James and Kirwan, 2020; Koch, 2018) have addressed this question by demonstrating a mismatch between dominant models of personhood (intended results) and what they observe ethnographically as more historically contingent, socially complex realities (unintended consequences). This article builds on and extends these critical insights through a playful inversion: instead of showing how hegemonic economic models of being can be undermined through ethnography, it inquires into what keeps them alive.

In exploring the French case of professional reconversion, this contribution suggests a different theoretical point of departure by adopting Sylvia Wynter's concept of 'being human as praxis' (Wynter and McKittrick, 2015). Wynter's conception of humanness as a verb rather than a noun makes an important contribution to the anthropology of personhood and to anthropological conversations on individualization and responsibilization. Being human as praxis offers generative pathways in thinking beyond the humanist trope of neoliberal subjectivity. While the latter is primarily focused on subjugation, governance, and discursive power, Wynter's praxis-oriented theorization directs our attention to making and unmaking the world, the ways in which hegemonic stories of being are sustained, and how they can be unsettled. By centering Blackness and attending to the neglect of race in Michel Foucault's post-Enlightenment self (da Silva, 2015), Wynter's approach to humanness illustrates how Blackness becomes 'the empirical-experiential-

symbolic site through which modernity and all its unmet promises are enabled and made plane' (McKittrick, 2015, p. 2). It is this very enactment and regeneration (or not) of modernity's unmet promises that interests me in this article, particularly in relation to those who 'inhabit the underside of the category of man-as-human' (McKittrick, 2015, p. 2) in France today. Inspired by Wynter's theory of being human as a form of generative mythmaking, I show how training practices reproduce dominant mythologies of being human-as-Man—or, in Wynter's words, a hierarchical, biocentric, and economically oriented model of humanness—through a project of masterful being that is not only exclusionary of North African and Black migrants but is predicated on their exclusion and their persistent relegation to what Graeber (2018) calls 'the caring classes.'

Being human as praxis in the context of professional training takes the form of a set of mediations. Firstly, professional reconversion is premised on a promise of rebirth that subsumes life into work. To go back to the opening vignette, what does it mean to think of professional reconversion as a life project? Over the course of my fieldwork, conversations with trainers and state employees would iterate the observation that 'to reconvert' is not just about work or merely changing your job. Rather, candidates are expected to embark on a transcendental journey that will change their lives. Reconversion is likened to undertaking a *metamorphosis*, where they can take charge of their destiny and begin writing their own stories. The French word for training, *formation*, also means constitution, genesis, and creation. Calls to *se former tout au long de la vie* ('to train or constitute oneself on a lifelong basis') have been at the forefront of training campaigns launched by the French government in the past decade. Such calls materialized in Immersitu through role play, where trainers believed that simulating the workplace was a way to master the uncertainties of a brutal job market. To survive in the post-Fordist landscape of French labor insecurity, they often spoke of the indispensability of *savoir être* ('know how to be'). They preached the importance of becoming *un(e) battant(e)* ('a fighter') and advocated a utopian understanding of play as a praxis of mastery. As I show elsewhere, however, *savoir être* is a racially coded project (how to embody Frenchness) masquerading as a universal and meritocratic pursuit. This project of mastery was deemed futile for North African and Black migrants who were consistently 'dysselected' (Wynter and McKittrick, 2015, p. 37) from the master narrative of personhood, despite 'playing the game.'

Taking my cue from Wynter, I think of personhood not as an endpoint but as a pursuit, as invention, not essence; a political project and a sustained mythology that overrepresent the Western bourgeois conception of humanity as a universal to which all people must assimilate. The hegemonic project of personhood I discuss in this article (on which I elaborate on below) can be understood as a specific instantiation of Wynter's figure of Man 2 (see endnote 3)—a model of humanness that instrumentalizes Charles Darwin's ideas of evolution and natural selection, thus naturalizing racial hierarchies and inscribing them into the very architecture of social, economic, and political orders.

Thinking of reconversion as regeneration, therefore, entails what Wynter (Wynter and McKittrick, 2015) refers to as a 'storytelling-chartered code of symbolic life and death' reflecting the interests and cosmogony of a ruling class (p. 29). At the heart of professional reconversion schemes is an elusive project of personhood, or *savoir être*, that articulates autonomy as symbolic life and dependency as symbolic death. Symbolic life is, as Wynter theorizes, a story outlining 'a plan of salvation' (Wynter and McKittrick, 2015, p. 29). Against the backdrop of workfarist transformations in social protection in France, this article is interested in how professional reconversion is imagined as *a plan of salvation from dependency*. It is interested in how such a plan is enacted, questioned by people forced to undertake it, and what it reinforces.

Figure 1. A photo depicting professional reconversion, frame grab from the AFPA (National Agency for Adult Vocational Training / Agence Nationale pour la Formation Professionnelle des Adultes) website, displayed on a webpage titled 'Professional reconversion: reinvent your professional life.' Courtesy of the author.

Secondly, autonomy enacted as symbolic life erases already existing ties of dependency. A locally prominent project of personhood that I focus on in this article is the figure of *le débrouillard* ('resourceful person'). A culturally specific embodiment of 'the naturally selected master of Malthusian natural scarcity' (Wynter and McKittrick, 2015, p. 37), *le débrouillard* is a model of personhood that incarnates autonomy as symbolic life. It is a noun derived from the verb *se débrouiller* ('to manage or get by on one's own'), referring to the one who figures things out. I show how becoming *débrouillard* is a master narrative articulated through praxis. For example, Laurent (one of the life coaches regularly contributing to Immersitu) was a strong advocate of the method of *Le Réseau* ('the network')—a method designed with *cadres* ('French managers') in mind. *Le Réseau* is a paradoxical method premised on 'looking for a job without asking for a job.' It is deliberately formulated against dependency. Here, I ask why and how people are reiterating normative fictions like that of the *débrouillard*. In a way, *Le Réseau* can be regarded as a 'strategic mechanism' (Wynter in da Silva, 2015, p. 95) that distracts from the ontogenic and biocentric implications of *savoir être*. Against such mechanisms of abstraction, this article historicizes the master narrative of autonomy by tracing its emergence through the imperial legacies of *formation professionelle*. Questioning how normative categories and narratives are

upheld and perpetuated involves thinking against a pervasive capitalist realism (Fisher, 2009) and totalizing economic logics (Bear et al., 2015).

Finally, *formation professionelle* operates through a politics of personhood, where certain ways of being, living, and knowing become more worthwhile than others. While my fieldwork was not about labor integration *per se*, rigid schemes that migrants and refugees had to navigate to access work in France were a frequent topic of discussion, as the opening vignette shows. Thus, to understand the unequal stakes of projects of personhood at the heart of *formation professionelle,* and how people are routinely 'dysselected' (Wynter and McKittrick, 2015) from imaginaries of a 'master-subject' (Singh, 2017, p. 4), it is essential to pay attention to the regeneration of epistemic injustice. The devaluation of the knowledge produced by marginalized peoples is not a side-effect, but rather a core modality of racial capitalism (Gilmore, 2022). Labor integration schemes are a material manifestation of the colonial afterlives of professional training and their lingering narrow understandings of being human. Weaving together semi-fictionalized accounts of advice sessions between migrants and employment counsellors (Message et al., 2022) and ethnographic observations from my fieldwork, I write about how migrants and refugees find their ways of knowing devalued and must start from scratch upon arriving in France.

Rethinking the human...

The stand-alone, self-contained figure of the individual has long been subject to critical debate among anthropologists of personhood. In their historical review of individualism in anthropological theory, Jon Bialecki and Girish Daswani (2015) show how anthropologists challenged the way in which the individual was taken for granted as 'the natural starting point of questions and debates in economics, psychology and philosophy' (p. 275). They identify theoretical concepts such as Marilyn Strathern's 'dividuality' and Roy Wagner's 'fractality,' which point us to a more relational model of personhood, moving away from bounded, self-contained, and static understandings of the person (Daswani and Bialecki, 2015, p. 274) and their Western assumptions. They argue, however, that such relational conceptions—despite their attractiveness—should not necessarily overshadow what we might observe as an interest in individualism in our fieldwork sites. Rather they invite us 'to acknowledge when and where this concept appears or presents itself as important—not merely in the lives of our interlocutors but also as a story that we come to tell ourselves' (Daswani and Bialecki, 2015, p. 275). They further elaborate that 'the fictive nature of the individualism, and the power that comes from that fiction, should not be forgotten either' (Daswani and Bialecki, 2015, p. 274).

It is this very fictive nature of individualism and its regeneration that inspires my thinking along the lines of Wynter's 'being human as praxis.' Being human as praxis builds on and extends anthropological conversations on personhood by thinking beyond the essentialism of the individual. My

intention in thinking with Wynter's 'counterhumanist' approach to theorizing personhood is not to suggest that my interlocutors are not interested in individualism. Rather, I wish to understand their interest in it beyond totalizing logics and through 'an active, dynamic and inclusive understanding of being human' (Goodley, 2023, p. 168). I first read Wynter in 2022, when I was writing up my dissertation and happened to be working on a chapter on 'professional reconversion.' Like other anthropologists of welfare and the economy (James and Kirwan, 2020; Koch, 2018), I had grown weary of the pervasive trope of neoliberal subjectivity, its overestimation of power, and its rehearsed singular focus on self-fashioning. Wynter may not have written explicitly about play, but I found her theory of 'being human as praxis' to be an invitation to play with anthropological theory: 'a thought experiment about what social theory would be if it started from an alternative understanding of persons' (Schram, 2015, p. 319; also cit. in Bialecki and Daswani, 2015, p. 274).

Wynter's theory of the human is formulated against a purely biological (biogenic) understanding of being human at the core of European Enlightenment. Inspired by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela's (1980) autopoiesis, on one hand, and Franz Fanon's (1967) concept of sociogeny,[2] on the other, she theorizes the human to be both bios/organic and mythos/symbolic. Both autopoiesis and sociogeny help Wynter think of a theory of the human that breaks with linear schemes of understanding humanity. Her theory extends Maturana and Varela's theory of autopoiesis or self-(re)generation 'to the cultural activity of human life' (Erasmus, 2020, p. 50). For Wynter, what makes us human is our capacity to bring worlds into being through storytelling. To consider being human as praxis is, therefore, not only to play with and against canonical figures in social theory or to denaturalize racial taxonomies, but also to be hopeful about our collective potential to unmake the world. Importantly, it entails, as Denise Ferreira da Silva suggests (2015), 'a refiguring of humanness that is produced in relation to the monumental history of race' (p. 93).

It is in the vein of this situational practice that Wynter's theory of the human can be distinguished from posthumanism. While mainstream posthumanist theorists of the 1970s challenged the centrality of man and his mastery over nature, they did so in a way that does not take into account the racialization of the category 'human,' the co-constitution of European 'ideas of race and species' (Erasmus, 2020, p. 59), or the 'radical epistemologies that emerged from plantation and domestic slavery <...> and scholarly engagements with these histories' (Erasmus, 2020, p. 56). Thus, Zimitri Erasmus argues that this has worked to recenter European Anglophone and Francophone theory.

Thinking with a different theory of humanness not only provides a necessary step away from the frames of thought that naturalize hegemonic figures like that of the autonomous individual, but it also situates the latter in a genealogy of critical theory informed by anti-colonial struggles. Wynter's theory is an elaboration of Fanon's theory of living under colonial power in French Martinique that he articulated through the concept of skins/

masks (Wynter and McKittrick, 2015, p. 54). Growing up in Martinique under overt French rule, Fanon was brought up with a naturalized conception of Man through colonial history lessons that taught him that his ancestors were the Gauls (Wynter and McKittrick, 2015, p. 49). This 'monohumanist' understanding of personhood, Wynter explains, happened due to the Gauls being '*storied* as the origin-mythic ancestors by the revolutionary French bourgeoisie' (Wynter and McKittrick, 2015, p. 49, original emphasis.). What belies the concept of sociogeny is the institutionalization of a mythical racial hierarchy that masquerades as natural (ontogeny). For Fanon, the conflation of sociogeny (social production of a phenomenon) with ontogeny is how race is brought into being. Fanon's concept of sociogeny lays the foundations for an agential human that brings society into being (Wynter and McKittrick, 2015, p. 53). Wynter builds on this in developing her concept of 'Third Emergence,'[3] marked by 'a sociogenic code of symbolic life/death' (Wynter and McKittrick, 2015, p. 33).

Grounded in ethnographic research in what is commonly referred to as 'the city of the Gauls,' this article is inspired by anti-colonial theorizations that rethink mainstream conceptual tools, thus making an analytical shift from thinking of autonomy as subjectivity to autonomy as symbolic life. To do so, I must first conjure the imperial histories of training that shadow powerful mythologies of autonomy in France.

...and provincializing autonomy

In September 2018, a new bill was passed by the French Ministry of Labor for 'the freedom to choose one's professional future,' making training a 'new fundamental right' of the French social model of the 21st century. The phrasing of such a law blurs the line between freedom and work, obfuscating, on the one hand, the coercive nature of wage labor and, on the other, its unequal gendered and racialized divisions. It puts forth a universalist promise of autonomy that, like other 'models in contemporary capitalism,' derives its power from its 'ability to erase particularity and sever objects, people, and resources from their contexts' (Bear et al., 2015). This bill imagines professional training as a pathway that increases a person's freedom. But looking into the imperial legacies of *formation* shows us that this promise has always been elusive, whereby some were enlisted in 'maintaining or augmenting [the] freedom [of others]' (Graeber, 2018). In 1962, in the midst of a post-WWII economic prosperity commonly referred to nowadays as the *Trentes Glorieuses* ('the 30 glorious years') that required a steady workforce, the French government created the *Bureau de Migrations dans les Departements d'Outre Mer* (BUMIDOM / Bureau for the Development of Migration in the Overseas Departments). Between the 1960s and 1980s, hundreds of thousands of French Caribbeans from La Réunion, Martinique, Guadeloupe, and French Guiana moved to metropolitan France under this state-organized migration scheme looking for a better life. In her book

Decolonial Feminism, Françoise Vergès (2019) shows that in the aftermath of decolonization, a gap in so-called 'category C jobs' (workers needed in hospitals, kindergartens, in the domestic sphere) motivated the BUMIDOM campaign launched by the French government to encourage Caribbean women specifically to move to France. The desire for autonomy aroused by independence and decolonization was absorbed and regenerated in terms of the needs of a postcolonial labor regime.

The BUMIDOM framed itself around the importance of 'autonomy and professional training.' As a campaign, it urged young women to come to France to work as domestic workers because 'domestic labour could also become a means for the young courageous girl <...> to adapt to metropolitan life in a familial setting and to make use of her free hours to rework her skill set and prepare for exams that will open doors to other jobs' (cit. in Vergès, 2019, p. 87).4 The BUMIDOM,[4] as recent scholarship has noted, has been 'largely obfuscated from collective national memory' (Jørholt, 2022, p. 275; see also Wimbush, 2018). While some had migrated searching for livelihood, reports and films documenting the brutality of BUMIDOM show incidences of what Aimé Césaire referred to as migration by way of deportation, exemplified in the case of *les enfants de la Creuse* ('children of La Creuse'), in which, between 1962 and 1984, over 2000 children from La Réunion were uprooted from their homes and forcibly resettled across underpopulated rural regions in mainland France (Wimbush, 2023, p. 1337). Upon their arrival, despite legally being French citizens, they had to undergo personality tests and physical examination. Some were assigned jobs in construction and administration right away, and others were directed to training centers. As Wimbush (2018) adds in an article titled 'France haunted by its own Windrush scandal,' 'women were sent to Crouy-sur-Ourcq in Île-de-France, where they learnt to cook French food and run a household before being employed in health care and domestic service sectors.'

Figure 2: An image from the 2007 film on the BUMIDOM titled *L'avenir est ailleurs* ('The Future is Elsewhere') by Antoine Léonard-Maestrati. The writing on the wall reads: 'young one, do not leave your country, no to the BUMIDOM.' Courtesy of the author.

As early as the beginning of the 20th century, professional training was entangled with humanist mythologies propagated through the French colonial enterprise. Indigenous people in the colonies were left out of socialist emancipatory utopias reimagining the wage labor system. Excluded from the category of 'always already' autonomous Man (Wynter and McKittrick, 2015, p. 55), they were subjected to civilisational impositions of work to cure what was presumed to be an innate laziness. In Madagascar, for example, a 'moralising' or 'educational tax' was imposed by the French 'to teach the natives the value of work' (Stewart, 2022, p. 113). Moreover, in Morocco, colonial administrators privileged practical education when conceiving of modernization plans. They adopted a vocational training policy, thereby restricting the realm of possibilities available to indigenous people by furthering the productivist interests of a 'Greater France' (Kozakowski, 2020). According to Michael Kozakowski, schools were more 'career-oriented,' with tailored pedagogies for indigenous people. Far from increasing 'one's freedom,' he elaborates that 'vocational training was highly racialised in its conceptions, reflected essentialising (and demeaning) assumptions about students' psychological and physical capabilities, and was highly unequal in both its quality and in the opportunities it provided' (Kozakowski, 2020, p. 177).

Tracing the historical connections between autonomy and professional training shows its material limits. Abstract universalism at the forefront of professional training campaigns masks the unequal division of labor and the racial myths that lie behind it. Writing about the gendered and racialized dimensions of autonomy, Vergès (2019) speaks of a reconfiguration of work, particularly the care labor industry, where migrant (mostly Muslim) women can only be granted entry on the grounds of being saved from an oppressive male-dominated culture. Their emancipation, as imagined in liberal feminist projects, must happen in this context through their enlisting in the labor market. The jobs awaiting them—much like those awaiting Caribbean women through the BUMIDOM—are, however, in the cleaning and caretaking sector (as domestic workers, auxiliary nurses, babysitters, and cleaning ladies). This permits middle-class white women to reach higher positions in their professional lives (becoming *cadre,* in the French terminology), now that they have assistance in housework (Vergès, 2019, p. 85).

Taking professional coaching in France as a focus, the French economist and philosopher Frédéric Lordon is interested in how people become enlisted in the pursuits and desires of others. In his book *Willing Slaves of Capital* (Lordon, 2010), he demystifies the concept of individual autonomy as it pertains to the employment relation, arguing that its very existence is premised on a fictive humanist understanding of a 'self-determined' subject. In a similar vein, this article is interested in how enlistment happens in the context of professional training. Following Wynter's 'human as praxis,' it suggests that enlistment (or what Lordon refers to as making others do something) happens through everyday articulations of autonomy as symbolic life. In doing so, it joins anthropological discussions on personhood that are committed to 'problematising how we construct the person as an object of study'

(Bialecki and Daswani, 2015, p. 274). In what follows, I focus on *débrouillardise* ('resourcefulness'), a pervasive mythology of autonomous personhood—gaining traction against the backdrop of a waning welfare state—and the ways in which it was enacted as symbolic life through training practices.

Se débrouiller: Exercises in living against dependency

Throughout my time at the professional training center that I have called Immersitu, candidates were expected to articulate their job search in terms of a 'professional project.' Specialists in professional transitions helped unemployed people develop their professional projects. In job-seeking techniques workshops, feedback sessions, and recruitment interviews, they emphasized the importance of becoming *débrouillard* ('resourceful') and celebrated people who could fend for themselves. A *débrouillard* is someone who does not wait around for assistance or accepts to be a burden on others but defines (or at least continuously attempts to define) the stakes of their own life. *La débrouillardise* (also known as *Système D*) has widely figured in public accounts and discourses on unemployment in France. The French newspaper *20 Minutes* stated in 2016 that '62% of young people consider *débrouillardise* to be the best way to find a job.'[5] A 2008 documentary titled *La France de la débrouille*[6] recounts cases of people (referred to as the kings and queens of *Système D*) living on modest salaries and 'distanced from' formal employment, making do with the meagre solidarity income of 500 euros. This includes mothers on maternity leave who had to learn to make yoghurt, biscuits, and cleaning products to save money, aspiring actors who rely on gallery openings to eat, fathers who must haggle in stores to make sure their daughters have what they need, and students who manage on their own by selling their stuff online and making a profit.

During my fieldwork, I noticed some of my unemployed interlocutors referring to themselves as *débrouillard* in a way to tell me not to worry, explaining that, even if life is difficult, their advisors are unhelpful, and the job market is saturated, they will get by, somehow. *Le débrouillard*, a masculine figure in its conception, can be contrasted with *le tanguy*, a popular culture reference that soon became an epithet for failed personhood that my interlocutors mocked. In a conversation between Salma and Amelie, two trainees in their fifties doing the tertiary sector training, they had identified *le tanguy* as a type of man you should avoid on dating websites. Amelie mentioned the popular reference when talking about a man she had been seeing for a while who lived with his mother and asked her on the first date about her pension. Derived from the 2001 French comedy film *Tanguy*,[7] which tells the story of a 28-year-old man who still lives with his parents, the term *tanguy* is used to derogatorily highlight someone's (usually a man's) dependency.

The prominence of the French figure of the *débrouillard(e)* needs to be situated in relation to a loss of faith in state assistance over the past decades in France. Over the course of my fieldwork, I had become aware of

Figure 3: A poster of the film Tanguy (2001). The caption reads: 'At 28 years old, he still lives with his parents.' Courtesy of the author.

the negative reputation that *France Travail* (France's national employment agency, known as *Pole Emploi* at the time of my fieldwork) agents had at the center. Many of my interlocutors had grown tired and wary of employment counsellors, who were considered, at best, incompetent and, at worst, as watchdogs making sure unemployed people pursue an 'active life.' The face-to-face encounters with welfare agencies, prevalent in the mid-1990s (Dubois, 2010), had become increasingly uncommon at the time of my fieldwork. A post-lockdown workplace led to communication being channelled to phone calls or emails between welfare recipients and counsellors. Moreover, trainees complained to me about the carelessness of their advisors. This was the case with Salma, an Algerian woman who wanted to train as a receptionist but found herself enrolled in the wrong training program: on human resources. Due to her advisor's error, Salma ended up in Immersitu despite it no longer offering the administrative training she initially sought. Her advisor had not noticed until months later in a checkup phone call between them.

This loss of faith has a political and economic history, predating the pandemic. According to anthropologists who studied welfare in France (Dubois, 2014; Mazouz, 2015), the introduction of anti-welfare fraud policies

in the 2000s led to an increase in the authority of welfare agents. This further highlighted the long-standing tradition of privileges accorded to civil servants in France (Esping-Andersen, 1990), leading to strong criticism of these officials. The standardization effected by control programs had also created a race for numbers as employment agents struggled to meet performance goals—of getting a maximum number of people back to work—while paying attention to and caring for the needs of job seekers (Mazouz, 2015; cf. Forbess & James, 2017).

In addition to this, a pervasive stigmatization and sense of shame that unemployed people felt when distanced from work for extended periods was prominent in public accounts of unemployment. In a 2021 report published by the voluntary association Solidarités Nouvelles face au Chômage (SNC / New Solidarities in the Face of Unemployment), unemployment was considered not only humiliating but also degrading to the body.[8] Drawing on statistical evidence, the report presents a factual account of the psychological vulnerability experienced during unemployment that can lead a person to depression, isolation, and drug abuse. It is in the wake of these affectively charged transformations that becoming *débrouillard* is articulated as a plan of salvation by trainers and professional coaches.

I first met Laurent in October 2021 in an induction session he was leading to welcome new trainees to the center. He is a 50-something-year-old white man, always neatly dressed and known around the center by his peers and trainees as *carré* ('square,' that is, someone who is direct, discerning, and likes things done in a precise manner). Laurent introduced himself succinctly and told me that his professional trajectory, which involved project management, comprised four phases: he was a consultant for 12 years, worked in a savings bank company for another 12, and then worked in an insurance company for 11 years before devoting his time more fully to freelance professional coaching in the last four years. In our interview, he explained that he became interested in 'the problem of job-seeking' because he himself used to be unemployed. During our interview, as well as in the induction session and in personal development workshops he led for the consultant group, Laurent decried what he referred to as facile self-victimizing narratives that fixate on how terrible capitalism was and attempted to redirect his listeners' attention to a plan of action. He believed that individuals had the power to change their own destinies. In the case of unemployment, he advocated for a diligent and methodical approach to rescue people from what he saw as helplessness.

After being unemployed for six months, Laurent was eager to reintegrate into 'active life.' He joined a support group that had developed a networking-based approach to help managers find jobs. Later, he further developed this approach and began offering it at training centers. *Le Réseau* ('the network') is an exercise in becoming *débrouillard*. Laurent's approach, borrowed from the support group he joined, helps the unemployed build a network of contacts. He confidently argues that this network will eventually lead to finding a job and has been proven to cut the job search time in half.

In our interview, Laurent first explained to me what the approach consists of and then asked me to mentally count all the people I know. He had applied a similar method during a networking workshop held at Immersitu. The first step, he explained, was to list all our acquaintances, whether they work in our field or not; this could consist of friends, family, acquaintances, and people we are connected to on social media.

> 'The idea is to meet as many people as you can with the goal of speaking to them about three things: at first, who we are, we present ourselves, and we ask the other person to do the same, then I speak of the professional project that I've defined myself... Here, I have to be able to say something about what I want to do, and then I ask the person for their opinion on my project, and the third thing is to ask for two names of people they know that I can meet.'

Laurent adds that even if this *entretien réseau* ('networking interview') is with someone you know well, you have to ask your friends or family to do this formal exercise with you, where you speak professionally and get their opinion on your professional project. During his six months of unemployment, Laurent tells me he met over 200 people. When I asked him if the support group/association provides contacts, he told me that the association *ne met pas en relation, elle permet de se mettre en relation* ('doesn't put you in contact, it allows you to put yourself in contact'), that is, it provides people with a method, so they can build their own network as opposed to just giving names. This semantic distinction was important for him; he argued it stressed the point of the exercise: 'There are two ways of accompanying the unemployed [towards employment]: either you do the work for them, or you give them the method to do it themselves.' He explains that *le Réseau* is an approach that enables people to *s'auto-actioner* ('activate/motivate themselves'), allowing them to become autonomous.

The emphasis on self-activation in Laurent's words may initially seem to reinforce state efforts to cultivate a productive workforce, where seeking employment is regarded as a civic responsibility (Wacquant, 2012). In recent years, however, anthropologists of welfare (James and Kirwan, 2020; Koch, 2015, 2018) have challenged dominant narratives of 'active citizenship,' highlighting the pitfalls of the conception of the autonomous individual and undermining its encompassing reach. In her ethnography of broker/resident relations in a council estate in England, Insa Koch (2018) writes about the gap between dominant images of an 'active citizen' formulated by local authorities and her interlocutors' understandings of what counts as good governance in their everyday struggles. In a similar vein, Deborah James and Samuel Kirwan's (2020) study of relations between welfare recipients and advisors in Britain shows the limits of the all-encompassing individualized figure of *Homo economicus*. Thinking through the concept of 'householding' and transnational ties of dependency, they suggest a less uniform understanding of welfare encounters that transcends austerity accounts of responsibilization.

Similarly, this article is interested in dominant narratives of personhood and the ways in which people grapple with them. However, it

does so by emphasizing other questions. Instead of focusing on the mismatch between normative models of personhood and ways of being on the ground, it investigates, as per Wynter (2015), how normative models are perpetuated through storytelling and practice. Thus, to attempt to 'activate oneself' by defining one's own professional project, taking charge of and resolving one's own unemployment, creating spreadsheets and rehearsing personal pitches, as Laurent and his colleagues preach, may all be seen as actions that contribute to the articulation of *débrouillardise* into symbolic life. They breathe life into fictions of individualism. They are attempts to attach oneself to *la vie active* ('active life') as defined through mainstream understandings of unemployment in France. By making *débrouillardise* the only commonsensical course of action, such technocratic solutions to unemployment obscure the ontologies of race and culture that sustain unequal cartographies of labor. Dependency coded as symbolic death is singularized into individual failure rather than the product of imperial formations of difference.

In introducing the approach to an audience of job seekers at Immersitu, Laurent mentioned, perhaps too often, that a key feature of conducting a networking interview is *not* to ask for a job. Noticing the confusion of his audience, Laurent nervously joked about the irony of the approach. Some attendees, like Sofia, a Spanish woman in her late thirties who was participating in HR training, were clearly puzzled by this advice. Sofia questioned the reasoning behind this caveat, stating, 'I am looking for a job though... So, why not ask for a job?' Though framed as a call to action, the method seemed detached from the immediacy and urgency of making ends meet. *Le Réseau* is a de facto relational approach; at its core, it consists of building networks and relationships. It does so, however, by defining those relationships in a way that eschews the dependencies and vulnerabilities experienced by most of the participants in the Immersitu program. Rather, *Le Réseau* was conceived as involving a person who had the financial luxury to wait for things to sort themselves out. Migrants living on RSA (minimum solidarity income) faced a double bind: they could neither afford to spend the time involved in following the *Réseau* approach to find a job, nor did they possess the social capital that a *cadre* enjoys. This disparity illustrates Stuart Hall's famous iteration that 'race is the modality in which class is lived' (Hall et al., 1978, p. 394).

As a method designed with *cadres* (French managers) in mind, its propagation through techniques of job-seeking workshops at training centers like Immersitu provoked confusion and, in some instances, outrage from trainees. Refraining from asking for a job but hoping that a dozen or hundred interviews will serendipitously lead to one is a purposeful rejection of being positioned as needy. This active repudiation of dependency abstracts away from histories of colonial oppression and excludes those who cannot or refuse to be 'fighters,' thereby 'dysselecting' them from master narratives of personhood. As critical race theorists and abolitionist scholars (Gilmore 2022; da Silva in Wynter and McKittrick, 2015) have consistently shown, however, this racialized dysselection is not a glitch in the matrix: it is fundamental to the very workings of capitalism.

While earlier sections have shown the violent limits of promises of autonomy and the historically pivotal place that *formation professionelle* occupied in reproducing postcolonial cartographies of labor, the next section will look into the ways in which imperial legacies reverberate through labor integration schemes today.

Bienvenue en France: Professional training and a politics of personhood

On a sunny April morning, I head to Vénissieux[9] to visit the local branch of the *Entreprise Ephémère.* First set up about five years ago, the 'ephemeral' or temporary company is a project for marginalized youths that regularly relocates across the country. Like the situational training center, otherwise known as a practice company, it simulates a corporate environment, more specifically, a recruiting firm where unemployed youth spend six weeks organizing themselves in fictional departments (communication, HR, call center) with the goal of 'selling themselves' and their colleagues to companies and landing a job. While I was not allowed to do participant observation at the *Entreprise Ephémère*, I was invited to accompany Alexandre, the pedagogical director of Immersitu, on his visit, where he gave a presentation about the center and talked to the youths about his professional trajectory. On our visit, we encountered Firas, a young Algerian man in his early twenties who has been struggling to find work in his field. Firas oversaw the fictive communication department at the Ephemeral Enterprise, printing posters for his colleagues and advertising their skills on social media. Before escorting Alexandre to the media room and helping him set up his presentation, he briefly introduced his colleagues and the work they had been doing over the past six weeks. Having graduated with a degree in graphic design from Oran, Algeria, Firas complained to us that his diploma was not recognized in France. *Je devais refaire ma vie a Lyon* ('I had to redo my life in Lyon'), he told us. Firas, like my interlocutors at Immersitu, was frustrated with the job counsellors he met at Mission Locale and Pôle Emploi. He recounted how they hastily overlooked his qualifications and how they continued to suggest that he take up positions as a caregiver or in sports education.

Much like what we see in the vignette at the beginning of this article, the 'reconversion' that migrants are expected to undergo is one marked by downward mobility. This has many parallels in the literature. For example, in an interaction between Kadia, a former journalist, and her job counsellor, the latter said: 'African diplomas... we have a lot of doubts about them <...> in any case your diplomas will not be recognized here <...> we have job offers for *femmes de ménage* (maids) what do you think?' (Israël, 2022, p. 137).

When Firas tells us that he has to 'redo his life,' the 'new life' that awaits him is far from the utopian and optimistic imaginary put forth by the government official at the beginning of this article. The emphasis on practice, evident in workplace 'rehearsals' like those at the Entreprise Ephémère, had

appealed to Firas. He felt that perhaps demonstrating his skills *in situ* would rupture mythical racial hierarchies shaping the contemporary training system in France. I never saw Firas again and never found out if his job search had been successful. His example, however, points to an enduring politics of personhood at the heart of professional training schemes. It shows the continuing impact of the imperial legacies of vocational training and their essentializing assumptions on contemporary understandings of personhood in France. This paper builds on Didier Fassin's (2018) politics of life and Miriam Iris Ticktin's (2011) politics of care—two frameworks that illuminate the unequal stakes of humanitarianism and immigration regimes in France—to analyze the workings of *formation,* proposing what I observe as a politics of personhood.

In his book *Life: A Critical User's Manual*, Fassin (2018) argues that Foucault's biopolitics is etymologically misleading. He notes that what Foucault was interested in is the government of populations, pertaining to 'modalities of regulation, rationales of control, and ways of governing, rather than the content of biopolitics, its debates and action, and its stakes and conflict' (Fassin, 2018, p. 88). By focusing on the former, Fassin adds that Foucault neglects more pressing questions concerning what politics does to life. He proposes to recover the literal meaning behind biopolitics and puts forth a 'politics of life' by taking the case of medical humanitarianism (p. 91) and focusing on the mechanisms that reproduce inequalities. A politics of life, interested in differential treatment of lives, ushers in two shifts, according to Fassin. The first is 'a shift from the singular to the plural—from life in general to lives in particular,' which then fosters another shift, 'from the normative to the empirical,' and in that vein puts forward context-specific questions about the worth of lives in different settings (Fassin, 2018, p. 92).

Putting Wynter's being human as praxis in conversation with Fassin's politics of life, I attempt a shift from the normative to the empirical by considering what I refer to as a politics of personhood. An ethnography of professional training asks questions not so much about the worth of lives but about ways of living and their politics. To invoke a politics of personhood is to inquire about how certain ways of being human, living, and knowing become more worthwhile than others—or, following Wynter, to interrogate 'the ongoing production and reproduction of "the bourgeois answer to the question of what is human"' (Wynter in da Silva, 2015, p. 95). This, I have tried to show throughout the article, can be discerned in professional coaching practices and labor integration schemes. So far, I have tried to show, building on Wynter, that professional reconversion schemes are built around a project of personhood that universalises a bourgeois Western conception of what it means to be human. This project operates by articulating autonomy as symbolic life and dependency as symbolic death.

Focusing on normative figures like *le débrouillard*, I have enquired about the ways in which elusive promises of an autonomous life are enacted through training practices like professional coaching, how they become both desirable and commonplace, and how they abstract away from enduring

ontologies of race that shape unequal divisions of labor. Previous sections of the article have also shown how dependency is devalued and erased both through postcolonial migration campaigns like the BUMIDOM and through trainers' job-seeking techniques like *le Réseau.* My analysis of the politics of personhood shaping *formation* in France has followed two paths. First, I have showed how people regenerate this code of symbolic life and death. Second, I have demonstrated how the perpetuation of Eurocentric knowledge practice is evident through the routine dismissal of the ways of knowing of migrants from formerly colonized countries. As we have seen through the cases of Firas and other migrants, labor integration schemes, much like the humanitarian practices observed by Ticktin (2011), 'enable a particular postcolonial state that understands its former colonies as utterly different, lesser, not constitutive of its very core' (p. 191). In this context, migrants find themselves compelled to take on jobs in the care sector. Whilst 'a politics of care reproduces a second-class status for immigrants in France, particularly those from the global South' (Ticktin, 2011, p. 24), a politics of personhood shaping *formation professionelle* contributes to the reproduction of unequal cartographies of labor.

Conclusion

In writing this article, one of my goals was to think beyond the theoretical impasse of a powerful story, that of a homogenizing, all-encompassing neoliberal subjectivity that has been consistently put into question by anthropologists in the past decades. I proposed that we rethink the conceptual tools at our disposal in anthropological analysis, toying with canonical figures such as *Homo economicus*, the autonomous individual, and the bounded humanist subject. In this vein, I have considered the importance of destabilizing the category 'human' in both my interlocutors' stories and in anthropological theory. To get out of this theoretical deadlock, I instead proposed a playful inversion—for us to consider, following Wynter, an understanding of humanness centred on praxis. Grounded in an ethnographic context where play is deemed a praxis of mastery, my analysis of being human as praxis in the context of professional training is therefore less aligned with celebratory applications of the theory[10] (Goodley, 2023) and more with studies demonstrating how generative forces can make capitalism continue (Bear, 2014; Weiss, 2022; Yanagisako, 2002). Advocating for an 'anthropological theory of praxis,' Alpa Shah (2021) argues, allows us to consider 'the changing relationships between multiple imaginations of the world, material relations and everyday action' (p. 5). In a similar vein, this article was motivated by a desire to understand how dominant mythologies of being gained salience in people's daily lives. It is through this capacity to bring worlds into being that Wynter theorizes as fundamental to being human that we can consider how normative categories, ontological violences, and intersectional inequalities are reproduced, as well as how this can change.

1. 'faire le deuil' appears in *Le Dit de la cymbalaire*, an autobiographical account of Charles Merigot (2013, p. 39), who is recounting his experience with long-term unemployment after he was let go from his job as a technician in a hospital at 43 years old.
2. This concept is an extension of Freudian ideas of ontogeny, referring to the biological development of an individual subject, and phylogeny, which is concerned with the study of the evolutionary history of societies and families. Sociogeny is more interested in the social production of a phenomenon.
3. The Third Emergence of the human as hybrid is thought of in relation to two correlated models of being human that Wynter identifies. The first is Man 1, the secularized figure of the rational political subject emerging with Renaissance studies of humanity (Studia humanitatis) and the 'Columbian encounter' of 1492. The second, Man 2, which is an extension of the first, is 'based on Western bourgeoisie's model of being human <...> articulated as, since the latter half of the nineteenth century, liberal monohumanism's homo oeconomicus' (Wynter and McKittrick 2015:10). Wynter's Third Emergence of the human is, as Zimitri Erasmus (2020) elaborates, 'hybrid from the moment that it comes into the world,' making it 'always already an agential being with the capacity to come to know and to represent the world' (p. 54).
4. Although the BUMIDOM bears a strong resemblance to the UK's Windrush in the 1950s, historians of post-colonial France have argued that the former has been left out of French historiography to preserve 'France's Republican model of universalism' (Wimbush, 2023, p. 1328).
5. See https://www.20minutes.fr/societe/1828383-20160420-temps-crise-jeunes-misent-debrouillardise-decrocher-job (accessed on 31 March 2026).
6. See https://madelen.ina.fr/content/la-france-de-la-debrouille-80442 (accessed on 31 March 2026).
7. See https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0274155/ (accessed on 31 March 2026).
8. See the SNC's report here: https://snc.asso.fr/espace-medias/communiques-presse/3829-synthese-enquete-sante-2021 (accessed on 31 March 2026).
9. A working-class neighborhood (*quartier populaire or banlieue*) on the outskirts of Lyon that is mostly populated by Black and North African communities.
10. Goodley's (2023) thinking with Wynter's 'being human as praxis' is in relation to people with disabilities. In his paper, he pays attention to their practices of activism and celebrates their worldmaking endeavors in the context of a reigning 'neoliberal-ableism.'

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Reflexive Essay

Playing Along with the Scene: Co-Creation, Curating, and Play as a Methodological Orientation

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Playing Along with the Scene: Co-Creation, Curating, and Play as a Methodological Orientation

Terje Toomistu

This essay reflects on how play can function as a fruitful methodological orientation in ethnographic research. It draws on my engagement with *Bling*, an annual Estonian house-music festival known for its immersive environments and ethos of playful co-creation. I first encountered *Bling* not as a researcher but as a participant, drawn to its joyful atmosphere shaped by music, dance, costumes, and art. Through dancing, building, cooking, and sharing space with others, I became closely involved with the scene surrounding the event. Such participation—what I call *playing along with the scene*—entailed immersion through affective attunement and collaborative engagement. Only later did I recognize that this immersion had shaped my method of inquiry, as playing along with the scene had created the conditions that gradually informed what became the research. Without a predefined research frame, I set up a video booth at the 2021 festival, inviting participants to record reflections from within the pulse of the event. These recordings later formed the basis for the short documentary *That Estonian Bling Thing* (2024) and the 100 m^2 'BLING' section of the exhibition *Who Claims the Night?* (Estonian National Museum, 2024–2025), co-created with community artists. Drawing on sensory ethnography, the anthropology of experience, and my involvement with the scene, I demonstrate how play, as a mode of immersion in lived experience, can orient ethnographic inquiry. In this process, authority is redistributed, and knowledge emerges not simply about a scene but with it—through affective attunement, co-creation, and the generative force of play.

Keywords: co-creation, curating, documentary film, Estonia, ethnographic immersion, house music, play as methodological orientation, sensory ethnography

Prelude: Entering the play

Freedom, play, quality time. A jointly created space. An expression of love. There are many ways to describe *Bling*—a house-music-driven festival scene in Estonia—but one thing is certain: at its heart is music that makes you dance.

When I attended my first *Bling* in 2017, I did not arrive as a researcher but as someone drawn by that year's theme, *Summer of Love*—a nod to the fiftieth anniversary of the Summer of Love in San Francisco (1967). Having just finished my feature-length documentary *Soviet Hippies* (2017), I hoped to screen it at *Bling*, connecting the hippie-spirited people of

past and present. Yet as the three-day camping event unfolded, my search for countercultural continuities shifted into an embodied lesson in what play can do.

Like many festival attendees, I visited the feather-decorated *Boudoir* tent, where makeup, paint, and glitter prepared us for the night's transformation. When I stepped through the decorated gate into the main dance dome, it felt as though I had crossed into another realm: a liminal threshold, in the sense of Victor Turner (1969). Lasers, lights, and smoke; real fire in the center of the space; soft bedding and airy curtains surrounding a dance floor alive with bodies in shimmering costumes. People smiled with a deep, knowing look, as if we were all sharing the secret of this fleeting time and place—the secret of the best party to be. A woman dressed like a fairy swayed between bodies appearing as bears, clowns, tricksters, lovers, and the like, all moving in the pulsing rhythm of house music. I, too, danced among them until morning, welcoming the first sunrays somewhere between the sauna, the river, and the hot tub, washing the night's colors from my skin.

What struck me most at *Bling* was the playfulness of the whole scene—not only the costumes, but the artworks and decorations spread across the event space—and, even more importantly, the ways this setting shaped how people engaged and acted. This essay reflects on how play, as both a methodological orientation and mode of becoming, shaped my engagement with *Bling*—first as a participant and later as an anthropologist, curator, and filmmaker. I approach play as an epistemic condition, one that draws us into experience while temporarily rearranging the boundaries of norms and expectations. Within the frame of play, alternative worlds can emerge: spaces governed by their own rules, sustained as long as the experience remains engaging and meaningful. In this sense, play is an embodied condition rooted in presence and immersion that enables forms of experience that exceed the conventional.

At a grassroots level, anthropological fieldwork often unfolds in a similar way. Even when entering the field with research questions and analytical frameworks in mind, the sensory and affective immediacy of lived encounters may draw the researcher into participation, improvisation, and moments of surrender. Fieldwork places the researcher in unfamiliar situations, opening up forms of embodied experience that exceed what was previously known and familiar. Knowledge here arises through this immediacy of experience. The body learns before the mind explains; and only later—when the intensity of experience begins to recede—can reflection follow and interpretation take shape.

In this essay, I suggest that play can function as a fruitful methodological orientation: a way of generating knowledge through embodied participation, affective attunement, and co-creative engagement. What might be at stake if we consider play as an epistemic condition? What happens when immersion leads inquiry? What if play is not opposed to method but constitutes its precondition: a necessary mode of becoming through which the researcher comes to ask the right questions and to develop appropriate analytical frames?

In what follows, I reflect on how my engagement with a small Estonian subcultural scene surrounding the annual Midsummer event known as *Bling*—through both documentary film and exhibition-making—emerged precisely from playing along with the scene itself. Before turning to these methodological reflections, it is necessary to understand how *Bling* became a living experiment in co-creation. I begin by tracing the development of the festival as a subcultural scene and its ethos of collective play, before returning to how participation in this environment shaped my filmmaking and curatorial practice.

Figure 1. Embodied joy on the dance floor, *Bling* 2017. @ Sten Roosvald, all rights reserved, courtesy of the author.

From party to practice: The making of Bling

Inspired by house music parties on the Thai island of Koh Pha Ngan, a small group of friends organized a dance event in an Estonian forest in the summer of 2012. By autumn, these so-called *Mutionu* ('Mister Mole') parties had evolved into donation-based gatherings of twenty to thirty people in Tallinn. Organizers Pille Heido, Tanel Toomsalu, and Ivo Naries wanted their events to sparkle with a celebration of life and soon began calling them 'the Bling parties.'

Bling truly took off on New Year's Eve 2012–2013, when a hundred participants gathered in full costume, surrounded by imaginative decorations and a shared sleeping area outside Tallinn. Over the following years, events were held every few months—sometimes in unusual venues such as the Tallinn Botanical Garden or the 314-meter-high TV Tower—and new organizers joined the team. Yet it was the Midsummer festivals that became the heart of *Bling*: immersive, artistically designed gatherings in the countryside that

hosted not only all-night parties, but also workshops, concerts, yoga sessions, lectures, and sauna. By 2016–2018, the event had grown into a festival of considerable artistic ambition, attracting up to 800 participants.

Figure 2. Sensory spatial design and installations, *Bling* 2017. @ Ruudu Rahumaru, all rights reserved, courtesy of the author.

What distinguished *Bling* from other festivals in Estonia was not only its devotion to house music but its ethos of playful self-expression and voluntary contribution, which gradually turned the gathering into a collectively produced environment. Psychedelia-inspired spatial design (see Fig. 2), interactive art, and exuberant self-expression shaped its sensory atmosphere. Since 2017, art grants funded from the festival revenue have supported participants' creative interventions, foregrounding the principle that everything offered and experienced at *Bling* is created through voluntary sharing and giving. Costumes and adornment were not merely decorative but functioned as instruments of transformation, reflecting its emphasis on self-exploration through dance and play. Humor and self-irony flourished in costumes, absurdist installations, and in the tongue-in-cheek signage at the entrance gate (Fig. 3), echoing another of *Bling*'s principles: 'Here, at *Bling*, everything that unites us is welcome.'

These and other guiding ideas were articulated in a set of ten principles formulated in 2014 and printed in the programs, among them: '*Bling* is love and sharing,' '*Bling* is time and space we create together,' and '*Bling* is open to everyone, regardless of gender, species, age, skin color, or belief.' Another principle explicitly detached *Bling* from commercial or financial gain. By distributing the work of making across participants, it sought to cultivate an ethos of horizontal collaboration.

In practice, however, during the festival's heyday (2016–2018), co-creation was often enacted more symbolically than materially. While

Figure 3. Greeters at the 2017 festival registration booth. The sign above reads 'Registratuur,' playfully referencing registration desks in medical institutions. @ Sten Roosvald, all rights reserved, courtesy of the author.

Figure 4. Construction of a tipi at *Bling* 2020. @ Ivar Savin, all rights reserved, courtesy of the author.

most participants contributed to the atmosphere—through costumes and shared affection—the bulk of organizational labor remained in the hands of a smaller core group responsible for decorations, construction, cooking, technical setup, and maintenance.

The summer of 2018 marked both a peak and a turning point. Although the event reached its largest scale and highest level of artistic production, the core team experienced growing fatigue. After months of preparation and logistical challenges on spot, several of the organizers realized they were unable to enjoy the festival they had created. The limits of scale and labor became palpable, revealing tensions within the festival's ideal of co-creation.

In 2019, the organizers decided to take a break from producing another large-scale event. Instead, their energy was directed toward building a giant mutant art car—the *Travelling Hedgehog*—which was taken to the *Burning Man* event in the United States. When *Midsummer Bling* returned the following year, its focus shifted from spectacle toward more direct forms of collective making. The festival moved to the countryside property of one of its founders, Ivo Naries, taking on a more intimate, community-orientated form.

The event was no longer advertised on social media and welcomed no more than 150 participants. Freed from the pressures of large-scale production, it became a clearer expression of its founding ethos: almost everyone contributed to cooking, building, maintenance, or the program, and togetherness mattered more than spectacle.[1] It is within this evolving environment of participation and collective making that my own engagement with *Bling* gradually shifted from attending the festival to documenting it.

Filming without aim: When play directs the method

Events such as *Bling* are often approached in anthropological literature as liminal spaces within a ritual structure (Turner, 1969; van Gennep, 1960), a perspective that has contributed to framing such gatherings as 'transformational.' The notion of transformational festivals is frequently used to describe participatory events that combine music, artistic experimentation, alternative lifestyles, and opportunities for personal change, often associated with New Age–inspired gatherings or *Burning Man* (Johner, 2015; Schmidt, 2019). *Bling* shares certain characteristics with these events, most notably their emphasis on participation, playful experimentation, the temporary suspension of everyday norms, and connections to *Burning Man* that developed alongside the festival's growth. However, unlike many festivals explicitly oriented toward spirituality or self-development, *Bling* does not foreground personal transformation as an institutionalized goal, although such experiences may arise through the co-created atmosphere. While interpreting this festival through the lens of liminality and transformation offers a useful perspective, my interest here lies less in the ritual structure of

the event than in how such environments foster playful experimentation—and how this immersion can shape ethnographic insight.

When *Bling* was first held at Ivo Naries's countryside property in 2020, the setting was radically different from previous events. Almost devoid of built infrastructure, the atmosphere felt rustic and intimate. Yet this lack of facilities seemed only to strengthen the community's sense of purpose. What stood out to me was how eagerly people took on collective tasks: building outdoor showers, setting up a makeshift water system, and assembling an open-air kitchen. What might elsewhere have been seen as inconvenience became part of the pleasure of co-creation. Just weeks before the event, a large pond had been dug, again with volunteered help from friends. That year, *Bling* took place entirely in the open air beneath the skeletal frame of an unfinished tipi (Fig. 4). We danced on the muddy field, watching the sun rise through mist drifting low across the grass.

Perhaps it is precisely the festival's roughness and sense of shared making that inspired me to contribute something of my own the following year. I realized how my particular skills—as an anthropologist and filmmaker—might serve the event: I would bring a video booth to the next edition.

A photo booth had been part of *Bling* since its early years, giving participants a chance to capture their costumes and moods in an environment where photography was otherwise discouraged. I imagined the video booth as a more immersive continuation: an invitation to speak from within the festival's pulse. I hoped to record those fleeting moments when people were still carried by the rhythm of the night, perhaps sleepless or glowing from collective ecstasy; to trace how they made sense of the creative synergy around them—the utopian promise of what a truly co-created festival might be. At the same time, the gesture increasingly felt ethnographically meaningful.

The following year, without a predefined research frame or prepared interview questions, I set up a playful video booth (Fig. 5) and, over two afternoons, filmed twenty-seven short interviews, including both the festival's founders and first-time participants. At the end of the second day, my helpers insisted that I too sit in front of the camera.

The anthropology of experience distinguishes between reality as it is, lived experience, and its expressions (Bruner, 1986, p. 6). Expressions are the ways in which participants articulate and interpret what they have experienced, yet there is always a gap between the two, since the richness of lived experience can never be fully captured. As Turner (as cited in Bruner, 1986, p. 13) suggests, experience is periodically interrupted by moments of reflexivity. The video booth stepped in precisely at this tension: it recorded participants' attempts to make sense of their experiences of the scene while still immersed in its atmosphere.

Importantly, however, I arrived at this particular method of inquiry—the video booth at the pulse of the event—through my own participation in the flow of experience sustained by play. The video booth did

not emerge from a research design but from participation itself, from playing along with the experience that *Bling* enabled. In this sense, play functioned as a methodological orientation, guiding my transition from the flow of lived experience toward its articulation in expressions.

Figure 5. The author recording participants' testimonials at the video booth, *Bling* 2021.

Curating play: Translating the experience into an exhibition

I never watched the recordings. In fact, I had almost forgotten about them—until the curator Karin Leivategija from the Estonian National Museum invited me to co-curate a major exhibition about nightlife. Her invitation brought the footage back to mind. By playfully embracing the co-creative ethos of *Bling*, I had in fact gathered a trace of oral history of that particular scene in Estonia.

What had begun as filming without aim now returned as a methodological question: how to represent a scene that resists capture—this affective assemblage of bodies, sound, and atmosphere, the fleeting nature of the experience itself? How might its sensorial force be carried into the institutional space of the museum?

Revisiting the footage, I encountered fragmented yet intimate testimonials, all shimmering with immediacy. As Bruner (1986) notes,

participants in a collective performance do not necessarily share a common interpretation of events; what they share is their participation (p. 11). The recordings revealed precisely this: participants described their experiences in strikingly different ways—playful, artistic, constitutive to one's identity, spiritual, or simply joyful—yet all spoke from within the same shared field of participation.

I also returned to my own embodied memories of these gatherings. What was the pull that kept bringing me back year after year?

I wanted the affective rhythm of *Bling* to guide the curatorial process. I therefore agreed to curate this project on one condition: that the 'BLING' section of the exhibition would be designed together with artists from the community. Only then could we create a multisensory environment capable of evoking what *it feels like* rather than merely explaining it. Together with *Bling*'s former artistic director, Eva Reiska, who became the lead artist of the 100 m^2 installation, we constructed the exhibit largely from reused materials, following the festival's ecological ethos, and incorporated sound as a central element.

Before entering the exhibition space, visitors received wireless headphones playing *Bling*-inspired music.[2] They moved through what we called the *State Tunnel* (Fig. 6)[3], a corridor of shifting light and floating fabric that culminated in a mirror, before encountering the story of the *Bling* scene unfolding through a series of hidden compartments behind small doors. These had to be physically opened, just as one must open oneself to fully experience *Bling*. Behind each door was a fragment of the community's history: the first New Year's Eve parties, the creation of immersive spaces, the role of costumes, humor and play, sensorial practices and interactive art, and the evolving futures of the festival. A playful photo booth invited visitors to capture their transformed selves, echoing *Bling*'s longstanding tradition.

The journey ended in a soft, dim room furnished with couches and a familiar unicorn sculpture from *Bling* gatherings (Fig. 7). There, the documentary *That Estonian Bling Thing*—based on the video booth interviews I had recorded—played in a loop, its soundtrack carried through the headphones. The curatorial translation—from festival to film to exhibition—extended *Bling*'s logic of co-creation into an institutional setting, allowing sensory immersion through music, light, and space to become a mode of knowing the scene and thus further enacting the playful methodological orientation through which the research itself had emerged.

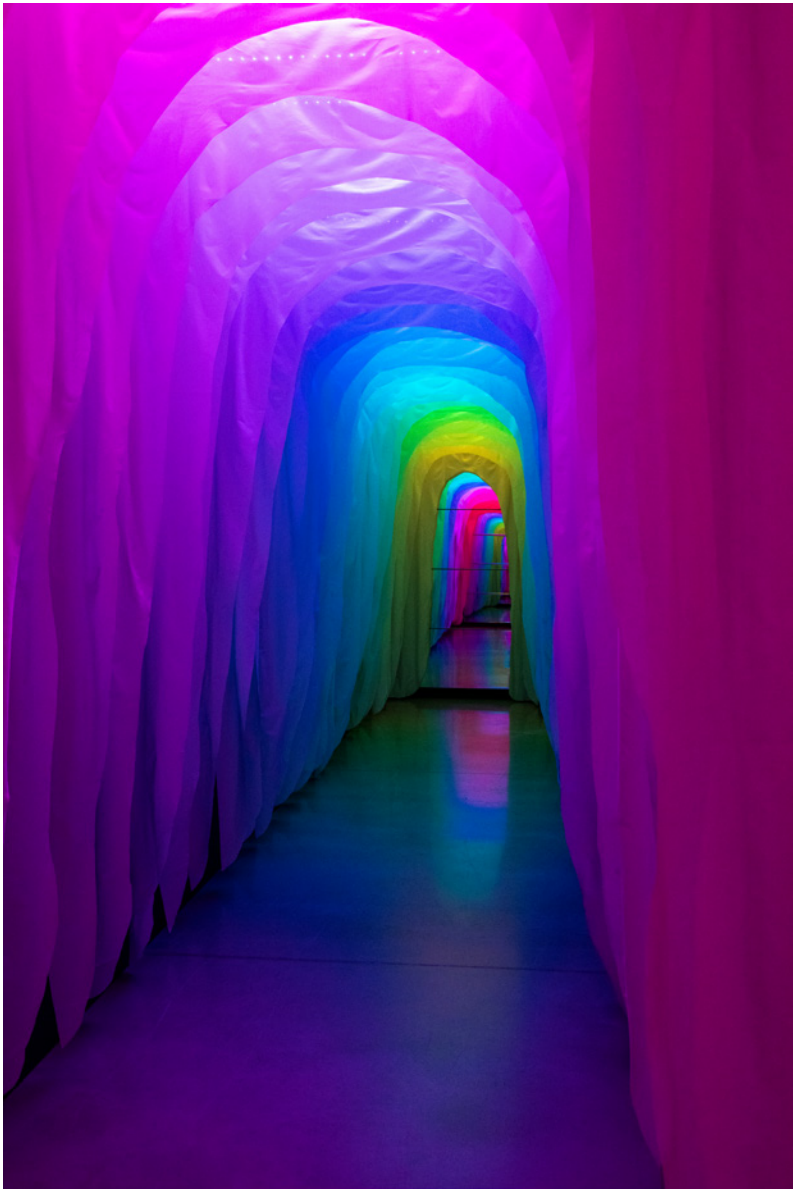

Figure 6. A textile installation by V2GI, the 'BLING' section of *Who Claims the Night?* (Estonian National Museum, 2024–2025). @ Berta Jänes, all rights reserved, courtesy of the author.

Figure 7.
An installation view of *That Estonian Bling Thing* documentary, the 'BLING' section of *Who Claims the Night?* (Estonian National Museum, 2024—2025).

Playing along with the scene: Methodological reflections

What began as a playful act of documentation gradually folded into an anthropological project, unsettling the boundaries between the two. In what might be described as research-by-emergence, knowledge arose not through predetermined inquiry but through embodied participation and playful contribution shaped by the event's ethos of co-creation. The process unfolded through sensory immersion while playing along with the scene: dancing, building, cooking, and sharing space with others became ways of noticing, attuning, and understanding, as well as the sources of methodological inspiration. It was through this immersion that the specific forms of documentation that shaped the research—the video booth, the film, and the exhibition—gradually took form.

Such an approach echoes a broader current in anthropology that emphasizes knowing through embodied and sensory engagement. Rather than treating experience as something to be observed from a distance, sensory ethnography foregrounds how knowledge emerges through the researcher's multisensory participation in the field (Culhane, 2017; Pink, 2015). In this sense, ethnography can be understood as an attunement to the affective textures of life, inviting attention to the subtle intensities and atmospheres through which meaning takes shape (Stewart, 2007). In the context of *Bling*, this attunement was not merely observational but participatory. I not only became part of the collective rhythm of music, I also contributed to the collaborative making of the event. Such participation—what I call here *playing along with the scene*, a mode of engagement based on immersion, affective attunement, and co-

creative involvement—became a condition for the insights that gradually formed and ultimately shaped the research.

Practice-based approaches to ethnography similarly treat making, experimenting, and collaborating as modes of inquiry in their own right. As Denielle Elliott and Dara Culhane (2017) suggest, imaginative and creative methodologies allow knowledge to emerge through processes of doing rather than predetermined analytical structures. From this perspective, the film and the exhibition were not merely outputs of research; they were also sites where ethnographic thinking unfolded. Curating the 'BLING' section of the *Who Claims the Night?* exhibition at the Estonian National Museum became, in this sense, a methodological continuation of *Bling*'s ethos of co-creation and embodied participation. In this process, distinctions between artist and audience, researcher and participant begin to blur, and knowledge takes shape through affective attunement and participation rather than analytical distance. Developed together with community members, the installation's design invited visitors to sense, touch, and play rather than simply observe. Curating thus became a way of thinking through space, sound, and collaboration, with the aim of creating an atmosphere in which play could function as a mode of knowledge.

In such practice, authority is redistributed. The anthropologist does not stand outside or above but co-plays, co-feels, and co-creates. To approach play as a methodological orientation, then, is to embrace immersion as an epistemic force. What emerges is not knowledge *about* a scene but knowledge *with* it, in which the anthropologist, as Trinh T. Minh-ha (1984) suggests, speaks *nearby* rather than from above.

After the beat: Sustaining the joy

In 2023, I attended the Midsummer *Bling* with my two-month-old baby. It felt important to be there: it was the opening of the collectively built *Crazy Bear Saloon*—the new heart of *Bling*, a handmade gathering space meant to sustain the community beyond the three days of the annual festival. By the following summer, the Saloon felt complete: beautifully decorated and equipped for year-round gatherings. But on a stormy night in October, everything changed: the Saloon burned down completely within a few hours. The place that had held so much collective joy, labor, and imaginative future was suddenly gone.

The loss was devastating. Yet what struck me most was the community's almost immediate response. Rather than despair, there was determination: *we will build another one—bigger, better, together again.* Ivo's wry remark captured the mood: 'Now we are officially *burners*.'[4] In those days, *Bling*'s ethos became particularly clear: a commitment to renewal through co-creation, where even destruction becomes part of the play. By the following summer, a new structure stood, this time with proper foundations, water closets, and even greater capacity.

Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1938) reminds us that play is a primary condition of culture. Play can be a practice of care and resilience; it can also be an act of resistance. In the anxious climate following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine—and amid broader global tensions—such spaces of shared joy feel especially vital. Perhaps this is also what continues to draw me to *Bling*. The festival has taught me to honor the healing power of music and dance, to relax when tension builds, and to trust in the strength of gatherings shaped by co-creation and play.

Here, however, I have sought to demonstrate the methodological potential of play for ethnography: play as a mode of immersion in lived experience allows the researcher to attune to the affective and embodied dimensions of the field, through which interpretation and analytical framing take shape. This, I suggest, is what it means to recognize the generative force of play: across anthropology, in curating, and in practices of living together.

Back on the dance floor, as the bassline swells and mist drifts through the light, method folds back into movement—into immersion—inviting us, once again, to play along with the scene.

Fig. 8. A still from the documentary film *That Estonian Bling Thing* (2024, dir. Terje Toomistu). To watch a fragment of the film, follow this link.

1. Since 2019, alongside the scaled-down Bling, members of the same organizing circle began hosting artistically ambitious, ticketed *Travelling Hedgehog* parties in Tallinn, attracting up to 1,700 participants. While these events diverged from *Bling*'s non-commercial ethos, they retained elements of its aesthetic and participatory principles, particularly inclusion and play.
2. Music at the 'BLING' section of the *Who Claims the Night?* exhibition was composed by Ivo Naries and Villem Vatter.
3. The textile installation inside the 'State Tunnel' was created by V2GI (Auli Uiboupin, Eva Reiska).
4. 'Burners' refers to participants in the global *Burning Man* community, which originated around the annual *Burning Man* event held in Nevada's Black Rock Desert and has since expanded worldwide.

Acknowledgements

This essay is indebted to the *Bling* community, whose collective work makes the scene possible. Thank you for your trust and companionship. More than thirty people contributed to the 'BLING' section of the exhibition *Who Claims the Night?*, and I am grateful to all of you. I am especially thankful to Eva Reiska for her artistic vision, and to curator Karin Leivategija and the Estonian National Museum for the opportunity to translate this work into an exhibition of such ambition. I would also like to thank the editors of *The February Journal* and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback on the earlier version of the essay.

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Book Review

Rinne, C. (2025) Footnotes: Ein Supplementarium. Schweifhefte, Heft 18.

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Rinne, C. (2025) Footnotes: Ein Supplementarium. Schweifhefte, Heft 18.

Andrei Zavadski

Academia is an earnest business. Even this review—a miniature piece of quasi-academic writing—has had a whole series of false starts, first in in my head and then also on the screen: I simply could not decide how to be playful, in line with this issue's theme and the editors' instructions, but without sounding unseemly silly.

It is no secret that scholars before me turned *not sounding silly* into a practice, if not exactly art. I, too, have contributed to maintaining this status quo: by taking myself way too seriously, to be sure, but also by extolling the virtues of method, especially when not knowing what else to say, by learning to formulate complex[1] thoughts and do so using appropriate—not too profane, Foucault forbid—vocabulary, and by faithfully following all the other shop conventions.

Is there a better way to perform academic seriousness than to indulge in the genre of the footnote? It allows us scholars so much! An editor—wrongly, of course—insists that a paragraph be cut? Move it to a footnote. The anonymous reviewers impose superfluous literature? A footnote can certainly take it. Others have dealt with your research question in a way that contradicts—or perhaps even challenges—your arguments? Acknowledge this in a footnote, neutering potential criticisms in advance.

The footnote is so important to what scholars do that being funny about it does not come easy to us.

Enter Cia Rinne, a Gothenburg-born and Berlin-based poet and artist who works across languages and media. Rinne's *Footnotes. Ein Supplementarium,* which came out in 2025, playfully deconstructs footnote-related scholarly earnestness.

Footnotes is the 18th edition in the *Schweifhefte* series of small artist books published in Berlin by Annette Gilbert, Michael Glasmeier, and Christian Schiebe. The series editors refer to Rinne's publication as 'Schweif 18.' The publishers are so delightfully analogue that the series does not have a website; neither can I direct you towards an online shop where its books can be acquired.[2] Even an ISBN is non-existent.

Schweif 18, the publication by Rinne, comprises 12 pages, each of them blank but for a footnote at the bottom. The volume—oh, how this brochure deserves this word!—is overflowing with meaning. For one, it gently pokes fun at (or shall I say, more academically, *offers a meta-reflection on*?) the academic practice and its arguably[3] key manifestation: the footnote. It does so by claiming things like

'this footnote should clarify everything' (p. 2);
'this footnote has excellent reference[s]' (p. 3);
'this footnote is afraid it will not contribute to proving the author's point in any way whatsoever' (p. 6);
'this footnote contradicts the previous one' (p. 7);
'this footnote would like to open up a discussion on its own' (p. 9).

These and other footnotes, in tandem with the blank pages, are unashamedly playful: I was giggling while reading the book for the first time. But then this joy gave way to doubt and disbelief. Are these footnotes what I actually do in life? Do these micro-performances contribute to knowledge? What are footnotes for—if the mess of reality or, in the words of Davis Ross, the 'Musicality of Reality' (Epp, this issue), is like a giant field of footnotes?

And then suddenly: who does this Cia Rinne think she is, to make me doubt my whole being like that?[4]

Well, she is the author of four volumes of minimalist poetry, such as *notes for soloists* (Rinne, 2009) and *l'usage du mot* (Rinne, 2017), as well several libretti, most recently *Wasting My Grammar*, a vocal score for the ensemble Neue Vocalsolisten that was written in 2023 and premiered at the Eclat Festival of New Music in Stuttgart 2024. For her poetry, she received the prestigious Bernard Heidsieck Literary Prize—Centre Pompidou in 2019. Her artistic work has been exhibited across Europe: for instance, the 2024 exhibition 'I Am Very Miserable about Sentences' at the Marabouparken in Stockholm. To research, she is not foreign either: she has studied philosophy at the Goethe University Frankfurt, collaborated on documentary projects, including the important *The Roma Journeys* (Eskildsen and Rinne, 2007), and serves as this journal's Advisory Board member. That is to say, she knows the drill.

And isn't it amazing that Rinne's tiny book has made me and will hopefully make you question ourselves and perhaps even engage in a little silliness? What is wrong with sounding—or being—silly anyway? You know the answer. The only thing left for you to do at this point is to read the last footnote.[5]

1. Okay, comlex-ish... This footnote is meant to show that I actually do not take myself too seriously.
2. This footnote is meant to provide additional information: some Berlin galleries—like Galerie oqbo—carry *Schweifhefte* publications in their stores.
3. 'Arguably' is used here to emphasize that no empirical research has been conducted to support this argument: in other words, it is purely speculative. This footnote is thus meant to relieve myself of any responsibility.
4. This footnote is for those who find my writing unnecessarily vague: the sentence above was a joke.
5. '[T]his footnote,' to quote Rinne again, 'wants to end on a positive note' (p. 12).

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Reflexive Essay

Epilogue. Liberation Session (?)

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Epilogue. Liberation Session (?)

Anisha Anantpurkar and Pasha Tretyakova

With their back to the 13 hanging disco balls, Unidentified Octopus faces the large wooden table where games are played. Paddy, one of the game masters, asked Unidentified Octopus about the play issue. They rambled on, playing with word combinations. Unidentified Octopus juggled some on its tentacles, while Paddy, the game master, laid them in order on the table until play as a generative force was formulated. The combination worked.

Unidentified Ferret, maker of bad ideas, enters the fray. (What is the fray? Something with a fringe, probably. Sounds like something with fettered edges. Or feathered? Ferreted.) They play with the words until they lose meaning, until they are all just sounds in their empty dungeon, engaged in a game of boomerang with the nearby hills. 'Boo,' says the Unidentified Ferret and listens to the echo and gets scared. Unidentified Octopus looks at the word 'soup' left behind and says to the Ferret, 'Explain it to me like I'm five.' So Unidentified Ferret blurts out every rule ever, and then Unidentified Octopus pushes aside the rules to find the fun and picks it up with their tentacles, and the Ferret braids them and *voilà*. The call to the playground has sounded. This sounds like it was easy, but it of course was not. Play can be serious, difficult, heady business. The Ferret and Octopus did cry.

The octopus exits, the ferret appears, the ferret exits, the antelope appears, the antelope exits... the fox appears... the fox exits... the nyan cat appears... they exit ...leaving a taste of their play. Unidentified Octopus and Unidentified Ferret get to work. There were flavors to choose, dishes to select, a party to organize, a meal to prepare. Parties too can be serious business—ask Terje when you meet her.

As each contributor presses send, the definitely-not-washing-machines swoosh words turned into 0s and 1s towards the moon that is definitely not (but probably could be) a giant disco ball. The contributions are received in the Musicality of Reality because that is their preferred lodgings. As 0s and 1s, turned back into words, fall from the sky as rain towards Unidentified Ferret and Unidentified Octopus, they form little puddles of play, turning everything they reflect into shades of play. The play waters sometimes overflow, crawling into other puddles. Unidentified Octopus and Unidentified Ferret stared at the rainbow waters as they shimmered, flowed, and tickled their tentacles and toes. They see scenes reflected in them: an alien with a foil hat and flamingo glasses, human-sized fairies, bears, clowns, tricksters, a cuddly pouncing lion, people holding medical degrees dressed as gardeners, maids, nurses, pulling more uniforms out of a large closet, hiding their degrees in its depths. Can they play with us? Will they be allowed in? They look towards Bling and our Alpha Centurion Alien. They hope for indifference and revolution from the margins. Jared holds his camera, ready. They see Roman face-to-face with Kassandra... or is Roman Kassandra?

Roman enters to explain the various VR avatars and how they change the way we think, move, remember, be, see.

He brings with him a sword that turns into a scythe; it dances on Natalie's hips as she plays with mundane domestic actions, stances, moves, expectations. Is the sword a sword, is the scythe a scythe? Is Roman fighting with ancestral swords and moving ceramic vessels? I am looking at a piece of paper which is not a piece of paper but a play of a paper on a screen, and the screen says I see a scythe and a sword and a vessel. 'You probably aren't,' says Miguel's app. 'It's probably (definitely ;)) not a television,' says Miguel's app. It could be a banana.

As Terje gets a hold of these objects, they find a new audience to play with them in Bling. Bling takes on a new persona: animals dance with toasters, Bling goers float on swords turned bananas in large ponds. The pond has a history just like the ancestral waters of the Mahicannituck River. Natan brings their technology to Bling, so that the pond, too, can speak, so they can play with what it says, the history it adds to the fray. The pond whispers, sings, and screams. Marie calls on us to sit and listen, away from the cameras. She brings dates and rocks. We eat the dates side by side—it's been a long night! We throw the rocks into the waters, they burst open into unidentified playful colors. We ride the purplish wave. The ancestral sword twirls in the ancestral waters. Unidentified Ferret and Octopus join the fray, twirling with the sword. The sword turns into a shark, turns into a Bling goer, who swims to the shore.

Unidentified Ferret and Octopus follow them to the beat of House music, into their fray. As they stopped riding the purple wave and saw themselves in the mirrors at Bling, they turned from octopus and ferret to nyan cat, koala, fox, quagga, ifrit. The Ferret tried on a vest, and then a dress, and then a coat, and then the narwhal's gym clothes. The Ferret always thought it looked more like a nyan cat and not its ferretself or koalaself or even its octopusself. Eman finally enters. She glitches from the strain of travelling from France. *Formation* seems to have altered her code. At times Eman is by our side, at times she's facing us in bureaucratic attire, a folded human trying to fold us. The bureaucrat says, in a French accent, that if Ferret and Octopus don't turn into something useful, they won't get to be themselves. This doesn't make sense to the ferret-turned-narwhal-returned-rabbit or the octopus-plus-nyan cat-divided by-fox. They were unidentified to begin with. They look around in bewilderment, the disco balls reflecting their confusion into the pond and up to the clouds all the way to where Virtual Reality meets the Musicality of Reality and a wise man is summoned. Within each earthling is a repressed Alpha Centurion, says the esteemed alien David Ross. Eman, possessed by the spirit of the French, asks for his *formation* papers. David shows them for her kindly filling out. The papers verify that the sword is *probably not* an edible word soup smoothie and maybe won't ever become one. Marie has the parties of party goers shake hands and hips, sealing the hip-handshake with an opera of trust. All the while, Unidentified Octopus had taken a step back and pulled out their popcorn for this spectacle. Ferret joined Octopus.

The play could continue, but it must stop. The popcorn bucket is empty, and the Octopus and Ferret are parched. They look up at the sky and see the 13 hanging disco balls. Paddy the gamemaster dangles his hands. There was a meal to prepare, swords, fairies, and river sounds to turn back into word soup smoothies. Let the feast begin.

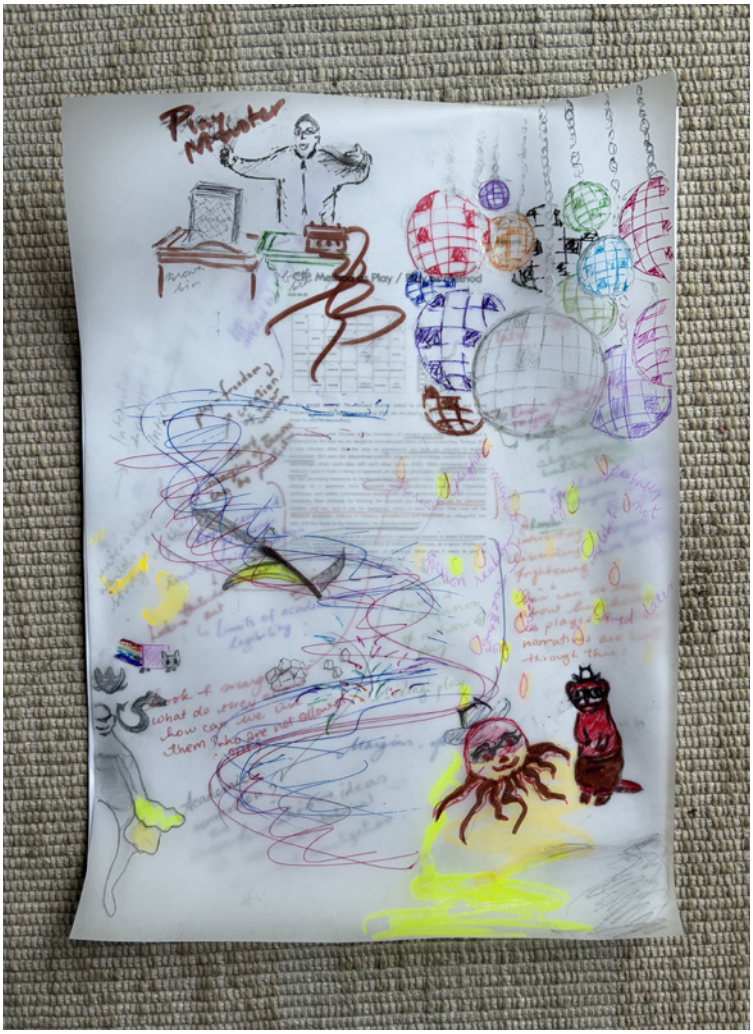

Figure 1. The Fray. Anisha Anantpurkar & Pasha Tretyakova, *Liberation Session (?)*, 2026. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the authors.

A note to the reader:

This epilogue may have some of you confused. Trying to stay true to our impulse to play, this epilogue is a result of reading and working playfully. What can playing with the contributions generate for us? This whimsical, unhinged, creative piece is one thing. Dream Believe Achieve, we suppose.

Authors' Bios*

(generated at random by https://www.artybollocks.com/generator.html)

Unidentified Octopus, whom the institution calls Anisha:

'My work explores the relationship between postmodern discourse and emotional memories. With influences as diverse as Munch and John Cage, new combinations are synthesised from both simple and complex meanings.

Ever since I was a child I have been fascinated by the traditional understanding of the moment. What starts out as vision soon becomes debased into a tragedy of distress, leaving only a sense of what could have been and the chance of a new understanding.

As subtle derivatives become distorted through frantic and academic practice, the viewer is left with a tribute to the outposts of our condition. Romance tourism.'

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Unidentified Ferret, whom the institution calls Pasha:

'My work explores the relationship between the Military-Industrial Complex and emotional memories. With influences as diverse as Nietzsche and Francis Bacon, new synergies are crafted from both explicit and implicit discourse.

Ever since I was a teenager I have been fascinated by the ephemeral nature of the mind. What starts out as yearning soon becomes corrupted into a hegemony of power, leaving only a sense of dread and the possibility of a new synthesis.

As momentary replicas become distorted through boundaried and repetitive practice, the viewer is left with a clue to the possibilities of our condition. Hope soon becomes manipulated.'

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* This footnote is to express our bewilderment at the accuracy of Artybollocks' randomly generated statements.