Playing to Transgress: The Black Girls' Playdate as a Liberatory Praxis

Sonya Donaldson
Colby College

In much of the discourse on childhood, Black girls have historically been rendered invisible, except in the ways that they have been constructed as willful, if not pathological, subjects. When they *are* recognized, they are made hypervisible and their images enlarged. Scholars such as Wilma King, Monique Morris, Ruth Nicole Brown, and Nazera Wright have outlined the ways Black girls have been constructed outside of childhood: as "prematurely knowing" and thus subjected to adultification.[1] As students, they are often visible through surveillance and "overzealous policing" of hair, "attitude," and "dress," as well as zero-tolerance policies that lead to suspensions, criminalization, confinement, and silencing.[2] Morris writes, "Some of the most egregious applications of punitive school discipline in this country have criminalized Black girls as young as six or seven years old."[3] Further, Black girls are now among the fastest-growing demographic of students facing "zero-tolerance" school policies, punitive discipline that places them at higher risk for direct contact with police—and the school-to-prison pipeline.[4]

By far, harmful stereotypes, or what sociologist Patricia Hill Collins calls "controlling images," have defined Black girlhood in the public sphere, much as they have created a limited frame of movement for Black women through a constellation of tropes—mammy, jezebel, welfare mother, and so on.[5] Rarely do we hear the expressions from Black girls about their own experiences and how they see themselves. Despite the violence that surrounds their education, Black girls have managed to access academic success through a variety of strategies. These strategies often center their relationship to family and community and to a collective, affirmative Black identity. Black girls have rich and complex interior lives. How they play—and the games they play—allow us a glimpse of that richness. Further, Black girls' play is a form of cultural work that offers liberatory possibilities in the Black Studies classroom—and beyond. It reminds them of a shared history, a deep connection to community, and an affirmation of one's humanity. Despite it all.

bell hooks notes in *Teaching to Transgress*, "The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy."[6] For hooks, education is a practice of freedom. And that practice is explicitly political. As a young girl growing up in the apartheid American South, hooks' life as a young learner was profoundly shifted by integration. She describes the turn in political terms: While the classroom was *always* (and remains) political, she identifies the change in the *kinds* of politics enacted under integration—the move from all-Black to predominantly white schools and the lost

connections with Black teachers, white teachers who reinforced racist stereotypes, and most importantly, she writes, "the classroom was no longer a place of pleasure or ecstasy."[7] hooks's investment in the notion of pleasure in the classroom informs my development of the critical playdate as a praxis of liberation. This notion of pleasure—even fun—challenges the idea that learning requires an orientation to "seriousness" as the only demonstration of the value we place on the subject matter or materials. Pleasure is integral to the process of learning—for both the student and the teacher.

In *Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double Dutch to Hip Hop* (2007), scholar Kyra Gaunt argues that Black girls' praxis of play "embod[ies] the ideals of black music-making in the games they play."[8] These forms of playing—hand games, chants, Double-Dutch, and so on—elucidate how play informs the broader culture and reveals the social memory of Black communal life. Gaunt draws on Cornel West's notion of "kinetic orality," which is the "concrete, everyday response to institutionalized terrorism" that Black Americans face.[9] "Kinetic orality is a response to the recurring nature of systemic racism in that it thrives on both repetition and improvisation," Lesley Jenike writes.[10] Children hear their parents' experiences with racial violence and trauma and translate those experiences into chants—sonic and embodied acts of play that hold memory and history.

Games and songs allow girls to improvise, to invent, to particularize the chants. They are a core part of Black culture as Black girls grow up to become Black women—who have developed these skills early on, through play. And they pass these skills on to granddaughters, daughters, cousins, and nieces. Games such as "Miss Mary Mack," "Slide," "Mexico," "Boom Tap," and "Down, Down Baby" (and their many instantiations) also appear in popular culture in musical forms such as hip hop, as Gaunt notes. She cites Nelly's "Country Grammar," as just one example of the numerous ways that hip hop has borrowed from Black girls' play.

A Praxis of Liberation

In this essay, I discuss Black Girls' Playdate: A Praxis, a two-week workshop I developed with students in African American Girlhood, a 300-level course at Colby College. Working with theater practitioner and educator Ashley Nicole Baptiste, Associate Artistic Director of the Jersey City Theater Center, we constructed a two-week program of creation, collaboration, research, and praxis.

Students in African American Girlhood, a group of young women and men in the Spring 2024 class, spent the early weeks of the semester teasing out the ways that Black girls—from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to the contemporary—engage with the richness of sound and movement to reflect, resist, create, to assert a politics of and in play. Whether it is examining Phillis Wheatley Peters's "On Being Brought From Africa to America" or Janae Johnson's "Ode to My Ripped Pants" or SOLHOT[1112] narratives by Black girls, works that explore the breadth and depth of Black girlhood

move us out of limiting frames into new territories. In this classroom, joy, humor, love, and play inform student-centered pedagogical practices of critical learning, reflection, self-acceptance, and community building.

An orientation to pleasure in learning means that students are active participants in the creation of knowledge, are taken seriously as critics and interlocutors, and are empowered to bring their full selves to the building of community in the classroom. They are not customers or consumers but are partners in their own education and liberation. In addition to theoretical works, poetry, and novels, we also engage with popular cultural representations of Black girlhood, focusing on the multiple ways that play operates in shaping Black girls' lives and the broader cultural landscape.

Play and Critical Reflection

Q: Professor, how did we look when we were playing?
A: You looked beautiful. You looked…free.[13]

On March 17, 2024, students in African American Girlhood and guests from the campus community gathered in Page Commons on the Campus of Colby College in Maine to enact a workshop, Black Girls' Playdate: A Praxis. Weeks of intensive reading, research, writing, community building, and practice culminated in an afternoon of serious play.

This two-week workshop included poetry, performance, reflection, and writing in Week 1, and the Playdate in Week 2. For the first week, students participated in a virtual poetry workshop with Ashley Nicole Baptiste, who conducted a poetry and performance session with students. In addition to her theater work (actor, producer, and director), Baptiste is also a teacher and is currently an Artist in Residence at Middlebury College. She is also the creator of the *Black Space* series, a digital archive of interviews with artists from around the world.

Students wrote poetry, addressing a wide range of topics such as being a Black girl, family relationships, friendships, observations about how Black girls experience the world, Black girlhood in diaspora, and more. In the workshop, each student was led through a series of questions about the piece they had created; they recited their poems and received feedback and coaching from Baptiste, which would enable them to perform their poems at the playdate, if they chose. Because of the personal and sensitive nature of some of the poems, students were not required to perform their work in public.

In the second week, Baptiste traveled to the Colby campus; we opened up the classroom to campus guests (students, faculty, staff) who wanted to participate in the Playdate. Ahead of the event, working in pairs, students learned about hand games and their histories and of Black girls' play, selected one hand game to learn as a team, rehearsed, and taught each other. At the playdate, students and guests could move from one set of games to another—teaching and learning collaboratively.

Students arrived to class a bit unsure and tentative; but they quickly became fully engaged after theater-based warm-up exercises with Baptiste. In theory, the initial plan was to set up fixed "stations" at which students would teach each visitor a hand game, then engage them in play. Each visitor would then move on to another station. But very quickly, the activity became dynamic; participants—students and guests—began to move collectively, learning together at each station, then moving to the next station, and so on. At the end of the activity, every person went *through* and *with* each station, creating a giant ball of kinetic energy. As one student noted, "Professor, I was locked in."

Baptiste also provided additional coaching to students who had opted to read or perform their poem; this, too, became a collaborative act. Listeners offered support, cheered, finger-snapped, and provided insights into the poems and performances. Their engagement went from nervous anticipation to excitement. For some, it was a relief to finally have a space to create and reflect in community.

After the playdate, the students wrote research papers in which they also reflected on their experiences and developed their own praxes of play. As a teacher, I wanted to understand their orientation to the work that "play" does in the classroom, what they learned, what they might enact in their own lives, and how they might teach others. The work they produced was thoughtful and incisive. The playdate allowed them to understand their positionality and to reflect on how they approached learning. It allowed for testimony, memory, rememory, and awakening.[14] It was a process of learning and understanding Black girlhood as a site of self-construction and historical and cultural meaning-making. They reflected on Black girlhood as a stage of life as well as a set of experiences that profoundly impact Black life and culture—and the nation.

Students' writing about the Playdate addressed themes of community building, empowerment, cultivating joy in learning, the power of play to "shift the status quo," mindfulness, and much more. One student wrote, "I found the concept of intentionality particularly impactful—consciously deciding what I wanted to achieve through the playdate or how I wanted to be present in each moment. I hope to integrate this practice into my daily life, taking brief moments to reflect on the type of experiences I wish to have, and allowing that reflection to guide my interactions and engagements." Another student noted, "I soon realized that this intimate environment allowed for vulnerability and full immersion in the event….Reflecting on the experience later, I found myself feeling nostalgic and even shared it with my family members…. Interestingly, it was my aunt who had taught me most of the childhood hand games we revisited during the playdate."

The latter statement, I think, reflects the importance of play as a mode of rememory and as an important stage in the development of students as learners and teachers. Black girls and women share a deep understanding of the connection between education and institutional violence. But they also demonstrate, through their joyful embodied practices, the possibilities for freedom. "All of us in the academy and in the culture as a

whole," hooks writes, "are called to renew our minds if we are to transform educational institutions—and society."[15]

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[1] Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998) and *African American Childhoods: Historical Perspectives from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Nazera Sadiq Wright, *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2016); Ruth Nicole Brown, *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013); and Monique Morris, *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2018).

[2] Morris, *Pushout*, 1.

[3] Morris, *Pushout*, 4.

[4] Morris, *Pushout*, 9–10.

[5] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008).

[6] bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 12.

[7] hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 2.

[8] Kyra Gaunt, *The Games Black Girls Play* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2006), 2.

[9] Gaunt, *The Games Black Girls Play*, 5; citing Cornel West, "Black Culture and Postmodernism," in Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani, eds., *Remaking History* (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1989), 93.

[10] Lesley Jenike, "Kinetic Orality in 1919," *Ploughshares*, July 13, 2020, accessed March 14, 2024, https://pshares.org/blog/kinetic-orality-in-1919/.

[11] Saving Our Lives, Hear Out Truths (SOLHOT) is a volunteer collective created by Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown in central Illinois in 2006 (https://www.solhot.com/what-is-solhot).

[12] Ruth Nicole Brown defines SOLHOT as both "a space to envision Black girlhood critically among and with Black girls, who…are often the people least guaranteed to be centered as valuable in collective work and social movements; and as a "methodology of creating spaces to practice and enact a visionary Black girlhood," *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood*, 1.

[13] Students in the course, African American Girlhood, Spring 2004, Colby College.

[14] Here, I am thinking of Toni Morrison's notion of rememory as a site of memory and co-creation. Rememory is counter discursive, centering sites of Black memory and experiences rather than institutional History, which traffics in "facts" that might not reflect the truth of Black life.

[15] hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 43.