Playing: Inefficiently mapping human and inhuman play in urban commonplaces

by Linda M. Knight

I am interested in play, and specifically, play in urban spaces. My use of the term *urban* refers to the cities, towns, and neighborhoods of the world, across climates, demographies, geographies, and affluences. My use of the term *play* is also diverse: I think about play as an enactment/response/communication/exchange/performance by humans, nonhuman animals, and inhuman matter. My work is concerned with theorizing play to form new conceptualizations about urban citizenships: Who/what/how is an urban citizen? I also use feminist, posthuman theorizations to consider play and the ethics of urban demarcations and planning. My lively story focuses on drawn mappings of play that I create in my investigations. The maps are purposefully inefficient, enacting a postqualitative methodologic practice that plays with what counts as a researching method as I take notice of play in urban spaces in Australia.

**Concepts of play**

The literature on the benefits of play to children is significant\(^1\), especially in early childhood. Early childhood play literature can focus on particular issues, including the benefits of play to aid social development and physical and mental well-being\(^2\), the problematics of gendered play\(^3\), and how play helps build relationships with place and nature\(^4\). Advocacy for urban play provision can hinge on futures discourses about urban population statistics\(^5\) and pathologizing discourses of children disconnected from physical activity and face-to-face social interaction\(^6\). Humanist
play research may have differing contexts and be interpreted through different paradigms, but the consensus is that play is innate and vital for us.

Play is not only a human capacity: Ethological studies help extend humanist notions of play to examine how nonhuman animal play in its various forms offers a distraction for pets in the domestic sphere as well as animals living in capture. Animals living in the wild are also seen to possess the capacities for generating and experiencing play, creativity, and pleasure. Ethological research is presented as providing a window into the play capacities and habits of nonhuman animals, although the preference for behaviorist/positivist readings tends toward notions that animal play is akin to, or a version of, the acts and motivations for human play.

Existing literature recognizes the need to advance and extend our limited understandings of how and why play occurs. Paying attention to play helps enrich conceptions about relationalities and expressions in humans and animals that extend beyond a hierarchical reading of human/animal binaries. Critical thinking about play beyond a humanist focus helps to expand concepts and ideas about nonhuman animal play as “much more complex” than it being a mirror or facsimile of, or for the same purposes as, human play.

How is play described? Humanist, ethological, posthuman, and multispecies contextual analyses offer different articulations that emerge from a range of paradigms. Ethological behaviorist studies see animal play as purposefully intentioned, “not fully functional as it is incomplete, exaggerated or somehow modified.” Animals are seen to make cognizant decisions to play and differentiate it from other behaviors. By contrast, Donna Haraway’s speculative multispecies encounters are a playing full of “unexpected conjunctions and coordinations of
creatively moving partners”\textsuperscript{13} that “[break] rules to make something happen”\textsuperscript{14}. Play occurs spontaneously and contingently in a tangle of energies and movements within the milieu. Humanist readings of play often attend to the affective, honing in on its “opposition to seriousness, morality, and productive work”\textsuperscript{15} that “escapes focused attention, reasoned argument, and political debate”\textsuperscript{16}. Although play is generally understood as being essential to human thriving\textsuperscript{17}, human play is often negatively implied: a break from the regular way of being in the world, a temporary escape/return to immaturity and silliness.

Karen Barad’s posthuman readings of quantum physics\textsuperscript{18} reconceptualize inhuman matter. Barad views “things” less as discrete bodies than as clusters of forces, what she calls “transmaterialities”\textsuperscript{19}: energy fields of particles moving in times and patterns with lively edges that move back and forth. Barad’s research into theoretical physics and lightning strikes exposed how even seemingly familiar matter (the electrical charge) is not mechanistic but consists of particles busily playing with possibilities and futures.\textsuperscript{20} The highly advanced research equipment she used recorded how lightning bolts send out tracers that play with different route options before selecting the preferred route to the earth. Similarly, Julia Yeomans suggests that “advances in nanotechnology and imaging techniques”\textsuperscript{21} have led to “surprises that are challenging theories of non-equilibrium statistical physics.”\textsuperscript{22} Yeomans notes the unexpected behaviors of “inanimate systems . . . [that] operate out of equilibrium and may be considered active”\textsuperscript{23} when stimulated by external energy pulses. The energy source should make the fluids active in particular ways, and yet unexpected activations are observed. Technological
advancements allow physicists to see how matter also can behave unexpectedly and “[break] rules to make something happen.” Matter’s vibrancy and vitality is a form of inhuman play.

In this chapter I consider the behaviors and interactions that are interpreted as play in human and nonhuman contexts to speculate on inhuman play. Specifically, I wonder how the idea of play in urban commonplaces might shift from thinking about play in nonhuman and/or human terms and expand to include the inhuman as independently playful. In thinking about the inhuman, how might the lively doing of playing in urban places acknowledge the agentic play of the inhuman? My big research question, then, is not “Does play matter?” but “Does matter play?”

**Urban play spaces**

Contemporary playgrounds are a familiar sight, appearing in urban spaces and parks in cities across the globe. Playground equipment often has a design conventionality that is easily recognizable through the inclusion of modules such as climbing frames, swings, and slides. Playgrounds are understood as obvious play spaces, a particular type of pedagogic site for children to build social relationships, play, and undertake physical activity. Dislocating from a humanist vision of play, a posthuman reading of play in urban commonplaces takes notice of the energies and activities occurring in all manner of spaces beyond a simple interaction between child and play equipment. Factors such as surfaces, light, time, animals, birds, sounds, gestures, shade, and rain are seen to possess playful agency. Playing becomes clusters of choreographic, pedagogic intra-actions, bringing about a rethinking and rearticulation of “lively playing” as a complex series of entangled movements, affects, and sensations across vast scale and durational

differences. Feminist theoretical reconceptualizations around matter help to critique taken-for-granted notions of how space, structures, and forms can be allocated particular purposes and how play can be privy to regulating expectations. In thinking critically about play, the playground dissipates and becomes a series of moving, traveling, multibodied events, shifting locations in unpredictable ways through urban commonplaces across the urban location, contesting the humanist approach to urban residential planning that demarcate sites of play via strictly regulated play structures. It is important to critically theorize on urban play because even urban green spaces are curated and regulated. The popular “natural” wooden play equipment in early childhood play areas, and green spaces such as small woodlands, canals and river ways, and flood plains are seen as beneficial sites for urban human and domestic nonhuman animal citizens to experience a taste of nature. The socioeconomic and political agendas of local councils that direct government investment toward maintaining select green spaces highlight the ethics of allocating urban spaces for particular purposes and for specific users: humans and permissible nonhuman animals. Other types of animals and inhuman players cannot be kept out, but are not always welcomed in.

**Inefficient mapping**

In my research-creation work, I make “inefficient” drawn mappings of lively playing. Trying to capture lively playings in their entirety is impossible and futile, but partial recordings, or what Dennis Wood terms the “inefficient map”—maps that do not attempt to include everything on a single sheet but focus on aspects—can record playing through such things as affects and the diverse pedagogical happenings that take place through the interactions and interactivities of
matter. Mapping, rather than other forms of recording (such as a running record or a videorecording), can be a way to enter into the milieu, to notice some of what goes on without claiming to represent some kind of truthful or whole account of the time-place. The graphic orientation of the inefficient mappings allows for visual notation of schizo play activity: overlapping, simultaneous, multiple movements, forms, light, and time.

Figure 1. Mapping. Pencil on tracing film. 2016. Artist: Linda Knight.

Figure 1 is a mapping of a popular reserve. There is a reservoir, running tracks, small woody hills, and bush vegetation. The area is really busy with activity at all times of the day and night, variously by humans, domestic dogs, and wildlife. It is also popular with air currents,
sunlight, moistures, light flashes, pollens, and other small particles. During this mapping I made sporadic and partial recordings of light and shade and how they play with topologies and surfaces, depths and planes, especially during movements through the structures and in negotiation with other human, nonhuman animal, and inhuman visitors. The flickerings and pulses generated by the playing, and the resulting disorientation, made the mapping difficult and frenzied.

Figure 2. Mapping. Pencil on tracing film. 2016. Artist: Linda Knight.

Figure 2 inefficiently maps the bruising and blustering force of air currents when it shifts from being air and becomes wind. Gusts pushed through an urban creek and altered what was
before. Not everything moved at the same scale and pace. I recorded snatches of tiny whorlings and huge blasts, exhales, and pauses. Imprints of these forces showed in arranged flattenings and jagged tearings and in minute vibrations of grasses, trees, webs, grass seeds, pollen motes, insects. Movements were everywhere, overlapping and intercepting the space, pushing the mapping materials in all directions.

As a postqualitative methodologic practice, the mappings closely examine and comment on the ethics of urban planning. They visually mark / mark playful “multisensory encounters that entangle residents of diverse cultural backgrounds, nonhumans, and material things”32. The mappings might be partial, but they home in on what conventionally can be regarded as unimportant, unsightly, or a problem: things about a place that “spoil” the neighborhood. The mappings linger in urban spaces demarcated for particular activities or ignored as a space with no development/financial potential. My mappings are driven by affect and are “attentive to the experience of place”33 but within the faulty capacities of my ability to turn, to look, to see, to mark and accurately record. I am aware that I do hardly any justice to capturing all the play that occurs around me, but that is the ethics of it. I am only a tiny part of the “playful events that entangle humans, more-than-human forms of life, and material things”34. My presence is not crucial or even remotely relevant. I am just one small being in a vast crowd of urban citizens ethically moving and playing together.

My insignificance is, conversely, important to declare. My presence in a space, and my holey mapping is not intended to authorize a place: It is a modest witnessing35 of community

participation. Although inefficient, the mappings take notice of and produce commentary on social cohesion and environmental ethics as matters of concern and matters of care.

Notes

9 Roach O’Keefe et al., “Introduction.”
10 Donna J. Haraway, When Species Meet (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Jørgensen and Wirman, “Multispecies Methods.”
11 Jørgensen and Wirman, “Multispecies Methods,” 42.

Ibid.


14 Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 238.


19 Barad, “TransMaterialities.”

20 Ibid.


22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 238.


28 Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*; Barad, “TransMaterialities.”


30 Knight, “Playgrounds as Sites of Radical Encounters.”


32 Lobo, “Co-inhabiting Public Spaces,” 164.


34 Lobo, “Co-inhabiting Public Spaces,” 172


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