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Cassie J. Brownell

“Look out! I’m the coronavirus and I’m going to kill you!” exclaimed a second-grade boy as classmates rounded the final staircase banister. His hands raised high, curled in monster-like claws, the 7-year-old roared as his feet picked up pace and he chased his peers from the school stairway into the warm outdoor air that mid-March afternoon in 2020. His peers shrieked in delight and took off running in all directions across the primary school’s outdoor play yard in Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

The following evening, I recounted this moment of play to the students enrolled in the graduate course I taught on elementary literacy. Most of the students were classroom teachers. While some laughed in surprise, others shared that “Corona Tag” had become a popular game in the weeks leading up to school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Soon, our graduate classroom was abuzz with stories about the play of kindergarten children related to COVID-19 alongside descriptions of intermediate learners’ curiosities about the virus.

Our conversation that evening—the last face-to-face meeting of our term—bridged many of the readings and discussions we shared in previous weeks about children’s play (Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Wohlwend, 2011) and the ethical imperative of tending to children as individuals who live lives beyond school walls (Boldt, 2009; Campano, 2006). Included in this was an understanding that children, like adults, live lives fraught with uncertainty, loss, and trauma (Dutro, 2019; Farley, 2018) and that teachers must make space for discussing these issues with them (Vasquez, 2004).

We read several accounts from early childhood researchers and teachers that discussed critical literacy and offered concrete examples of young children who were not only interested in reading the world with a critical eye, but capable of doing so. Across these readings, children used play as a tool to “devise narratives that help them sort through their experiences” (Silin, 2013, p. 20). We understood play as representative of children’s perception of the world and, in many ways, as an invitation for others—child peers and adults—to be a part of their world-making (Buchholz, 2019; Yoon, forthcoming).

The importance of play for children’s sense-making was something I had first felt in my bones as an early childhood educator in post-Katrina New Orleans, Louisiana, United States. As a first-year teacher in August 2008, I remember watching two young girls playing at dismissal. Their pencils (or, at that moment, “people”) moved in wave-like motions as they were “washed away” by the invisible waters of an impending storm—Hurricane Gustav, the first major storm to threaten the city since Hurricane Katrina. Gustav’s approach coincided with the three-year anniversary of Katrina ravaging the city and it was expected to make landfall just two short weeks into the 2008 school year. Although none of the children in my class had yet mentioned the approaching storm during formal class time, the girls’ play demonstrated that the threat presented by Gustav was forefront in their minds. The following day, I did my best to feel out how my students were dealing with the new storm while assessing their experience...
and the emotional impact Hurricane Katrina had had on each of them. Much of our class time in the rest of the week was spent commemorating Katrina and discussing how the community was preparing for Gustav.

As a teacher, I understood I had the task to “help children make sense of their experience” (Silin, 2005, p. 89), but I felt hesitant to do so as a new teacher. As a newcomer to New Orleans that year, the children had far more expertise when it came to hurricanes and to the kinds of loss associated with them than I did. Many of the second-grade children in front of me had been displaced due to Hurricane Katrina when they were just 4 years old. Some shared with the class that they had only recently moved out of the hotel where they had been living, and a handful of others said they were living in Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) trailers. The children had experienced firsthand the impact of “the storm” (as it was known by locals) on their schooling, families, and daily life in a way I would never fully be able to wrap my head around.

In late August 2008, as local and national news outlets offered predictions about how New Orleans would fare in the impending storm without safety provisions like fully repaired levees, I worried about whether the children in my class would evacuate and if any or all of them would return in the time after Gustav made landfall. In the days leading up to the mandatory evacuation for Gustav issued by city leaders, children’s sharing of their expertise quickly turned to questions about their safety and goodbyes. After sending off the last of the young learners in my class, I hugged my colleagues—the only people I knew in the city at the time—and we offered each other wishes to “be well” and “stay safe.” Shortly after, I left the community I had only just been welcomed into for the safety of an acquaintance’s home in Alabama.

In preparing this essay, I returned to reflections I wrote during those days; it was a period filled with much uncertainty. In part, this was because after Gustav made landfall on the Louisiana coast, a second hurricane, Ike, loomed just behind it in the Gulf of Mexico. As I wrote in my journal in early September 2008, I had a mix of feelings as I encountered the first hurricanes of my life:

*I do not know the condition of my school following the storm and I do not know when exactly I will be able to return to New Orleans and to work. Life feels utterly conditional on the weather and the kindness of people I barely know. I want to get back to work. I want to see my students. I want to help them to understand what has happened in their city and in their own lives.*

Thinking back on the time now—over a decade later—my heart rate escalates and I can clearly recall watching television and witnessing newscasters wading in high waters across wind-blown streets in New Orleans. I had only been in New Orleans for a month before evacuating, but the city had already started to feel like home. In large part, this was due to the hospitality provided by my new colleagues—a group of seasoned Black educators of and from, not only the city of New Orleans, but the neighborhood around the school.

Although the school was small (one teacher/one class per grade), the whole of the faculty took no time to welcome new teachers. They immediately went to work in helping us to set up our classrooms and to understand the various school traditions. This same group of individuals assisted me in understanding the language used to discuss hurricanes and how I might best prepare myself and the children in my class for the approaching storm. As survivors of Hurricane Katrina, they knew no subject was too taboo for discussion with the children and that, ultimately, children’s talk and play related to the storm offered “generative possibilities embedded in moments of disorienting loss” (Silin, 2013, p. 16).
When we returned to school following Hurricanes Gustav and Ike, the tensions the children felt played out in different ways. Many children were worried about the economic stress their families faced after some had spent a month’s rent on the costs of leaving the city. These children often snuck snacks left behind by others into their pockets. Throughout the year, these storms, especially Hurricane Katrina, resurfaced in varying ways. On days of heavy rain, for instance, I would meet children’s worried eyes as they asked if Katrina was coming again. On a field trip that included a ferry ride across the Mississippi River, children talked about how the river once carried dead bodies.

Amid some of the most exciting moments we shared as a class, the ongoing grief children experienced following Hurricane Katrina continued to linger. These experiences in my first year of teaching made clear the need for a critical pedagogical approach. Following Vossoughi and Gutiérrez (2016), I understood this approach as one wherein I, as a teacher and community member, consistently analyzed “the relationship between education and oppression in order to help bring about social transformation” (p. 142). As my colleagues taught me, children must be understood as what Freire (1970) describes as social actors, or more simply, as active co-constructors of our shared knowledge and learning. This meant I needed to create space for children to share their hi/stories of the storm in every aspect of my teaching. Ultimately, it was from this cadre of seasoned educators that I learned to do so with deep care for the complexities of children’s subjectivities.

In later years, as I cultivated my skills as an educational researcher, I came to understand that the role of play in my classroom was not an uncommon phenomenon. Many scholars, especially in early childhood education, have documented instances wherein children use the freedom associated with unstructured play to “imagine the world otherwise” (Silin, 2018, p. 99) and to make sense of socially produced traumas. Many have documented how children’s play occurs as embodied acts of the fantastical (Paley, 2005; Wohlwend, 2011; Wargo & Alvarado, 2020). Scholars have also found playful acts integrated into children’s schooled writing (Brownell, 2018; Boldt, 2009)—from imagined birthday celebrations and superheroes (Dyson, 1997, 2013) to fictional encounters with horror icons (Yoon, forthcoming).

In the heavily standardized, physically distanced, and even virtual classrooms of today, the potential for young children to engage in play perhaps looks different than it once did, particularly as mathematics and “literacy takes precedence over life” (Silin, 2003, p. 260). Over the last two decades, the arts, physical education, science, social studies, and even recess have become activities relegated to whatever minutes remain after children have completed their “work” (Boldt, 2009; Wohlwend, 2011, 2018). As adults responsible for ensuring there is “no child left behind” in the ever-persistent “race to the top,” how can educators even dream of allowing children to play during the school day? When pundits discussing school reopening plans for Fall 2020 focused only on “fixing” the extended “gaps” in learning due to Spring 2020 school closures, how would play be possible? My own answer is simply that whether or not children’s social worlds or play are given devoted time and space in the curriculum, their play is important and it will happen.

Researchers, educators, and caretakers who have spent any time observing, listening to, or being in relationships with children know that children’s play knows no bounds. It barrels ahead despite top-down limitations. When necessary, children and teachers alike take their play underground, hidden from the pervasive eye of educational authorities. One of my favorite examples of this finessing is a story Wohlwend (2013) shared from a kindergarten writing workshop. She detailed how a small group of kindergarten boys transformed their teacher-approved electric eels into “illegal” paper lightsabers (e.g., weapons) whenever their teacher turned her back or stepped away.
More recently, some early elementary teachers have incorporated play into their classrooms through makerspaces, wherein children are invited to use makerspace technologies and tools to specifically connect practices of making with literacies (Marsh, Arnseth, & Kumpulainen, 2018; Wohlwend, Buchholz, & Medina, 2018; Wood, 2019). “Mediated by mediums of imaginative play, centered on social activism and produced through community building,” makerspaces offer educators and children a newly sanctioned opportunity for play (Wargo & Alvarado, 2020, p. 14). For instance, in classrooms where I engaged as a researcher in the Midwestern United States, a group of Black third-grade girls in one class used diverse media materials to make sense of contemporary (im)migration policies of Republican Donald J. Trump’s Presidential Administration. The girls fashioned “backpacks” made from boxes and carried the backpacks in their role-play as (im)migrants in a series of child-produced videos (Brownell, 2020b). As a collective, the girls used play as a tool to make sense of the social issue.

Likewise, the girls’ White peer, Ian, designed two tools to ease the burden of access to water and food that many modern-day (im)migrants face as they journey from one country to the next. Specifically, Ian made prototypes of a water filter cup and a fishing tool he anticipated could support families whose lives necessitated such travels (Brownell, 2020a). In both examples, the young children did not need to be protected from seemingly “adult” topics. Instead, they demonstrated that they had the capacity for engaging in what some term “difficult knowledge” as they used their play to promote calls for social action.

In another class I worked in as a researcher, a young White boy, Cory, created a counter-narrative about a tragic house fire. By combining recyclables with craft materials, Cory fashioned a “fire” he could hold in his hands. Because Cory could hold the fire, he could control it and the story associated with the fire. In this way, Cory both shifted his role in relation to the fire, and, through his play, he invited an alternative narrative (Brownell, 2020c).

Similarly, in their research with first-grade children in the Northeastern United States, Wargo & Alvarado (2020) shared the story of Roberto, a child whose family in Puerto Rico was impacted when Hurricane Maria made landfall. Wargo & Alvarado (2020) highlighted how Roberto used clay and LED lights to design a plan not only to bring power back to the island, but to reimagine how his community could have been alerted to the impending storm via a buzzer. Like Cory, Roberto used play with materials in the makerspace to make sense of an unpredictable tragedy and to invite others into his personal experiences.

As Silin (2018) has noted, “for children repair begins in play, in the work of trying to understand difficult life experiences by trying on different roles, by reversing outcomes, and addressing fears and anxieties” (p. 15). Across each of these examples, but especially in the personal stories of Ian, Cory, and Roberto, play was “critical to children becoming socially informed citizens and politically active members of their communities who can participate in creating alternative and more equitable futures” (Semann, Davies, & Silin, 2013, p. 3). Additionally, through their play, children invited adults not only to think about preferable futures but about how to make these futures possible (Dunne & Raby, 2013).

The play of the young children described in this research and that of children I taught in New Orleans reminds me of stories about children’s play in New York City following the 9/11 tragedy. One example I refer to often in my role as a teacher educator is from a kindergarten classroom at the Bank Street School for Children, described by teacher Lisa Edstrom (2003), a prominent early childhood educator. In her
essay, Edstrom (2003) detailed how children in her class used blocks to build their own versions of well-known New York City structures, including the Twin Towers, in the weeks following the tragedy. She outlined how children reimagined safety features to alert individuals to danger—play quite like Roberto’s warning buzzer (Wargo & Alvarado, 2020). Children also offered ideas about how to better prepare for future hardships, such as devising escape routes, reinforcing beams, or stockpiling emergency provisions—play that mirrored the prototypes developed by Ian (Brownell, 2020a).

However, Edstrom (2003) wrote that the children did not only use block play to reimagine a past tragedy—play like Cory’s counter-narrative. Instead, their play paralleled scenes that appeared on television screens, including discussions about the “bad guys” or about bodies falling from buildings. This sort of chatter and role-play, Edstrom (2003) suggested, offered children the chance to explore matters of life and death, loss and destruction—patterns of play that mimicked the ways the pencil-people of my students in New Orleans were “washed away” by hurricane waters. Each play act, Edstrom (2003) argued, was representative of how children were coming to understand what unfolded in their city. Moreover, new opportunities were presented for “teacher and student to come to know each other as they explore[d] a reality outside of themselves” (Silin, 2003, p. 262).

During the time of COVID-19, expressions of children’s play have filled my social media feeds. Friends and colleagues have shared images of their children’s play that clearly connect to the virus’s impact on our social world. For example, in early April 2020, just a few weeks into the recommended practice of physical/social distancing in the United States, my friend Erin posted a picture of her 5-year-old daughter’s doll play on Instagram (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Socially distanced doll play
The dolls’ bodies were arranged with adequate space between them in a formation likely familiar to readers who ventured to grocery stores in the early weeks of COVID-19 precautions being implemented. Additionally, in doll-to-doll conversation, Erin overheard the question, “Did you wash your hands?”—an important and recurrent refrain in Spring 2020. While Erin was not surprised to hear her daughter repeat a question she was often asked, Erin was surprised to see the dolls distanced from one another, noting they had not watched the news recently nor had they left the house in days.

At the close of April 2020, a picture depicting similar doll play appeared on my Twitter feed (Figure 2). Unlike the dolls in Figure 1 which were out gathering necessities, the dolls in the latter photo were together for a social purpose. As noted in the tweet from the child’s mother, sociologist Jess Calarco, the dolls were allowed the opportunity to play together if they kept a safe distance from one another. In many ways, the evolved doll play of Jess’s child mirrored the shift in what were deemed socially appropriate forms of social/physical distancing as more states relaxed stay-at-home orders.

In both cases, the images of children’s play reflected the current moment and children’s current reality (Semann, Davies, & Silin, 2013). From the children’s comments about their doll play, we, as adults, cannot deny their play was informed by the social issue at hand. The children, like the adults around them, were melding what was with what is and what is yet to come as their everyday lived experiences were, in many ways, upended.

As more structured play activities like organized sports or school-sponsored play were put on hold due to COVID-19, ideas for community play spread quickly across social media. Whole neighborhoods welcomed play from children and adults as they displayed teddy bears in windows (for “bear hunts”), chalked obstacle courses on sidewalks, and declared particular sections of the street for “silly walks only.” In my neighborhood in Toronto, families spent more time outside—one bikes, playing basketball, and having water fights—and they continued to connect (at a distance) with their neighbors through their outdoor play. In community moments such as these, play offers hospitality, it offers hope, and “hope belongs to all of us” (Silin, 2017, p. 96).
Play also affords an opportunity to critically consider how the world operates. Play can help children not only speculate about, but actually design new realities that foster space and forward social worlds that dismantle oppressive systems rooted in White supremacy. For instance, in Spring 2020, community members across the world organized to assist their neighbors by providing them with support and ensuring the most vulnerable had access to everyday necessities as new public health and safety measures were implemented due to COVID-19. In my former home of New Orleans—a city whose majority Black population was hard-hit by COVID-19, members of the Red Beans and Rice Krewe (a playful group of locals that annually march in handmade costumes to celebrate Lundi Gras during the Carnival season) banded together to “Feed the Front Lines” (e.g., essential workers). They supported local restaurants by placing orders for food paid for by donations. Following the success of this venture, the Krewe paired older, venerated culture-bearers (e.g., musicians and artists) with their younger counterparts to provide contactless food delivery during the pandemic in an effort known as “Feed the Second Line.”

Others across the globe continue to take to the streets to protest the sustained assault on Black lives. In the wake of the abhorrent killings of unarmed individuals like Breonna Taylor and George Floyd or the paralyzing gunshots Kenosha police fired into the back of another unarmed Black man, Jacob Blake, the enduring legacy of White supremacy, settler-colonialism, and systemic racism are being challenged in the streets and, more recently, in city halls and state legislatures. While changes to school mascots, public buildings, or street names as well as the banning or removal of Confederate statues and flags are—at best—superficial band-aids on a wound more than 200 years in the making, so too do such changes signal that change is possible. Still, the inequities, stresses, and traumas that people of color, but especially Black communities, face are historically and continually situated; arguably, much like the educational injustices and social inequities that were laid bare as the flood waters receded from New Orleans, COVID-19 has only exacerbated such issues.

In closing, I want to invite educators and caretakers alike to critically consider the responsibility we have to explore with children “how our society is responding to these difficult events” (Silin, 2005, p. 90). As displayed in the instances of children’s play in this essay, from Corona Tag to socially/physically distanced dolls, children are tuned into the “adult” issues of the social world. More than that, children are actively working to make sense of them. For many educators and caretakers, engaging with children about such issues feels as if it is a momentous task, wrought with difficult emotions and seemingly unanswerable questions. And as Silin (2013) pointed out, such work is “never easy, always complicated” (p. 22).

However, as evidenced in the stories shared in this essay, play and critical pedagogy grow in and out of one another; they are inextricably intertwined. Through play(ful) experiences, children cultivate their understanding of, and sometimes gain a sense of mastery over, ideas and events that may at first appear confusing, fear-inducing, or represent significant loss. By inviting children to re-enact or play out troubling events, there is the possibility for children to restore hope and gain agency as they reimagine the world with their own resolutions. We must take children’s play as a starting point for the critical work and care associated with our roles as educators and caretakers, especially when the world feels dark and filled with loss. For, as children have taught us, it is in such moments that our imagination may be nurtured in ways we never dreamed possible.

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