

## **Pedagogy of Play: A Holistic Project of Personal and Social Liberation**

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### **Abstract**

Play is a popular teaching practice used in early childhood education due to its well-known effects on cognitive and social development. Although human development is a life-long process, this paper argues that post-childhood education fails to utilize the inherent power of what the author calls *transformative play*—a praxis that is guided by an awoken imagination and that facilitates the innovation and connection needed in realizing a more just world. This failure is due, in part, to the dominance of Western conceptions of play that emphasize competition rather than connection, and promote conquest instead of co-creation. In this theoretical paper, play is discussed not merely as *activity*, but as *ideology*. This discussion is animated through an analysis of the ideological and material implications of finite/agonistic play versus transformative play, particularly in the realm of education. A *pedagogy of play* extends critical and holistic approaches to education by centering transformative play, which requires respect for the other, connecting mind, body, and spirit, as well as an openness to liberatory possibilities for personal and social transformation.

*Keywords:* holistic education, critical education, play studies, social justice, healing

This paper was inspired by the well-known potential of play to ignite an individual's sense of agency as well as connect and awaken the mind, body and spirit (Anzaldúa, 2009; Nachmanovitch, 1990; Pérez, 2010). The real catalyst for this project, though not as socially significant as those just mentioned, was ultimately my first successful handstand. In graduate school, after a few months of training capoeira, an Afro-Brazilian martial art/dance, I was attempting to overcome my lifelong fear of handstands, when my instructor said casually, "Ok, do the next one as if you were a little kid playing." I gave it an earnest go, and the result was the longest, most sturdy handstand of my life. That experience impacted my pedagogy in a profound way. It is what ultimately initiated this research, which argues that a holistic, critical pedagogy that centers on play, can inspire and enliven minds, bodies, and spirits, serving as an alternative to the alienating, "graveyard" nature of conventional schooling, which can be characterized by what Freire (1970) calls the "banking" concept of education (Jordan, 1995, p. 5). Inspired by play theories, such as James Carse's (1986) "infinite play," Maria Lugones' (2003) "loving playfulness," and Steven Nachmanovitch's (1990) "free play," I refer to this alternative educational project as *pedagogy of play*.<sup>1</sup> Like critical pedagogy, pedagogy of play prioritizes investigating the roots of injustice and imagining liberatory possibilities. Like holistic education, pedagogy of play nurtures the connection and integration of mindbodyspirit and the maintenance of healthy relationships. "Mindbodyspirit" is used in this paper to highlight the interconnectedness of these different aspects of self. Since separation is inherent to alienation, this term is used to underscore the possibility of restoring disconnection that might exist within the self through the processes of self-discovery and healing. This theoretical exploration, however, adds to holistic and critical pedagogy by highlighting the pedagogical value of *transformative play*. I define transformative play as a praxis that involves *the liberatory exploration of possibilities that awakens one's whole being*. Transformative play is *experiential* and can make abstract components of social justice, such as empowerment and political agency, experiences understood by the mind, body and spirit.

I begin this paper by examining the hegemonic qualities of agonistic/finite play. This analysis will provide a framework to examine the congruity of agonistic/finite play with conventional (post-early childhood) schooling, as well as the detrimental effects it has on the development of the individual and society. I then map out the characteristics of transformative play in order to show how a pedagogy of play can extend critical and holistic approaches to education and support the processes of liberatory personal and social development.

## Finite/Agonistic Play: In It to Win it<sup>2</sup>

Scholar and historian James Carse (1986), describes “finite” games as structured play that is defined by rules and roles. When conceived in ideological terms, “finite” play has an uncanny resemblance to bureaucratic, functionalist thought. Finite players are crucial for maintaining the current hegemonic order since hegemony depends on the internalization of rules and roles, self-policing, as well as the policing of others (Foucault, 1986; Gramsci, 1971; Zinn, 1991). Examples of finite play enacted are what Foucault (1984, 1982a) calls “games of truth” or “truth games,” which elucidate the power dynamics of play intended to bring about specific outcomes.

While Foucault’s theories of power/knowledge, truth, and subjectivity are not new to education studies (Ball, 2013), the pedagogical insights offered in his concept “truth games” have yet been explored in connection with play theory and education. Like finite games, Foucault’s games of truth are structured and involve hierarchy, rules, roles, and players. Foucault’s (1982a) framework of truth games demonstrates the complex yet interdependent relationship between power, truth, knowledge and the playing subject. For Foucault, “truth” and “games” are social constructions and are only meaningful when recognized as such and inscribed with meaning by the subject. Truth games, Foucault (1984) explains, take the form of science—such as language, biology and economic analysis—as well as social practices of control enforced by institutions such as the mental health system and the prison system (p. 281). Within these games, truth is “produced” and made into law—into rules that define normal and abnormal. Foucault (1984) is not referring to games “in the sense of amusement,” but rather “a set of procedures that lead to a certain result” (pp. 296-7). This is why Foucault (1982b) situates his analysis of power relations within the context of a game. For example, depending on the military regime or prison system active in a society, subjects will view some killings (e.g., war, capital punishment) as just and “legal,” while other forms of killing (e.g. abortion, suicide bombing) as unjust and “illegal.” For Foucault (1982b), games, like his notion of power, involve creating strategy within a “field of possibilities” (p. 341). In finite games, power is *played* out as a struggle between forces and is a “means destined to obtain victory” (p. 346). In finite games, however, victory is designated for the few to the detriment of the masses.

How power is deployed (historically and currently) organizes knowledge into laws and practices that have enormous social impact. This knowledge production often goes unquestioned and is accepted as *Truth*. *Truth* is therefore

linked to the systems of power that produce and sustain it. Therefore, truth games are the structures and mechanisms “human beings use to understand themselves,” they “mold conduct” and “instill forms of self awareness and identities” (Foucault, 1982a, p. 224; 1994, p. xix). In conventional schooling, often practices of control are in place, such as strict disciplinary procedures, in order to ensure specific outcomes: an obedient student body (what Foucault calls a “docile body”) that will then go on to produce an obedient citizenry, as well as the reproduction of social stratification based on race and class. For example, Noguera (2003) explains how zero tolerance policies often employed in U.S. schools, which disproportionately affect low-income Black and Latino males, reflect the strategies used in the criminal justice system to reproduce racial and economic oppression. Clear power dynamics create roles of authority that often go unquestioned and unchallenged by students and the communities with which they identify. Also, systems of assessment (e.g., standardized testing, tracking) that also characterize conventional schooling, in many cases justify and determine the life opportunities available to students, which therefore influences how they define themselves as well as others. One’s experience with the education system, like with all games of truth, becomes a platform on which subjectivity is constructed. Viewing the education system through a “games of truth” lens, we see how power, knowledge, truth and the subject all coalesce in a way that limits the holistic development of the student.

Similar to finite games, Maria Lugones (2003) speaks of “agonistic” games, as seen in Huizinga’s (1968) *Homo Ludens* and Gadamer’s (1975) *Truth and Method*, as reflecting a “Western patriarchal construction of play” (pp. 94-95). “Agonistic” play, Lugones (2003) claims, creates a “fixed concept of self,” emphasizes self-importance, and the gaining and showing off of merits (pp. 94-95). A finite/agonistic player therefore runs the risk of internalizing the given rules and what they understand to be their “role”, believing that “whatever they do they *must* do” (Carse, 1986, p. 11; emphasis added). The logic and language of finite/agonistic play mediates social relations through an ideology of Social Darwinism placing individuals in vicious competition with one another. It demands that one view the other as a challenger one must beat in order to “win.” This mentality is inculcated in students, for example, who must compete with their fellow classmates for grades, scholarships, college entry, etc. Lugones (2003) views agonistic play as “deadly,” resulting in the wiping out of “other worlds” and possibilities (pp. 94-95). When adopted as a way of being in the world, “the agonistic traveler is a conqueror, an imperialist” (p. 94). In finite/agonistic play, one is praised not for her cooperation and *commitment* to the community, but rather for one’s ability to distinguish herself *from* the community.

Other defining characteristics of finite/agonistic play are the established beginning and end to its games and the clear dichotomy drawn between winner and loser. Finite/agonistic play is based on dualistic reasoning, which in a Western cultural context is used to justify hierarchy, domination and colonization based on class, race, gender, etc. (Dussel, 1995; Murphy, 1989). When meritocratic practices are legitimized and reified, it is believed that individuals are placed into their “proper” social positions and presumes that the most talented and deserving people will end up victors. This reasoning is problematic not only when it is accepted as “fair and square,” (ignoring factors that affect a player’s (dis)advantages before entering the game), but it is especially dangerous when stratification becomes institutionalized. Thus, the likeness of finite/agonistic play with the rationale used to organize Western societies is undeniable.

Vygotsky (1978) warns, “If play is understood as symbolic, there is the danger that it might come to be viewed as a system of signs that generalize reality, with no characteristics that I consider specific to play” (p. 94). Play, according to Vygotsky (1978), lies in “the realm of spontaneity and freedom” (p. 99). He (1978) claims that play is “not a predominate feature of childhood but it is a leading factor in development” (p. 101). Although his research attests to the invaluable role of play, Vygotsky fails to address the value of play for post-childhood development. He continues, “Play creates a zone of proximal development [ZPD] of the child. In play a child always behaves beyond his average age” (p. 102). It is important to recognize that as long as there is an intention to learn and grow in awareness and skills, one continues to enter a ZPD. *We are always becoming*. While Vygotsky speaks of play as only an *activity* benefiting children, transformative play is *a way of being in the world* that extends beyond childhood. While finite/agonistic play preserves rules, roles and practices of social control, transformative play, arising from spontaneity, opens up possibilities for self-fashioning and co-creation.

### **Transformative Play: A Win-Win Way of Being**

Transformative play is not an activity that is destined to end with a winner and loser. Instead, it is a way of being that is open, integrated, and willing to experience transformation in the realm of the unknown. Foucault (1982b) states that in games of truth “freedom may well appear as the condition for the exercise of power” (p. 342). With this freedom “it is always possible to discover something different and to more or less modify this or that rule, and sometimes even the entire game of truth” (1984, p. 297). Although Foucault argues that freedom is inherent to the exercise of power, awareness of one’s freedom often needs to be cultivated.

Unlike finite play, transformative play emphasizes and unveils freedom as the condition for exercising one's power and agency.

The rules and roles in transformative play (when there are rules and roles) are not “superimposed,” but are rather “an expression of agreement... not a requirement for agreement” (Murphy, 1989, p. 106; Carse, 1986, p. 56). Rules in finite play appear fatalistic, whereas in transformative play rules “have utility for solving problems and nothing more” (Murphy, 1989, p. 82). When transformative play is adopted ideologically, players can participate in finite games with *playfulness*. Often (self-defined) rules are used in transformative play to explore possibilities negated in non-playful, “ordinary” reality. This perspective is echoed by composer Igor Stravinsky (1942): “The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees one's self of the chains that shackle the spirit... and the arbitrariness [of the constraints] serves only to obtain precision of execution” (p. 65). Poetry for the People (P4P), an arts/activism course started at UC Berkeley by poet-activist-professor June Jordan, epitomizes how transformative play operates with rhetorical constraints within the context of post-childhood education. For over twenty years, this course has successfully facilitated authentic community-building while challenging and supporting students in raising personal awareness and social consciousness. One way this is accomplished is by requiring students to follow rigorous poetry-writing guidelines that push students to write/share/refine their perspectives through poetry (Rangel, 2016). Finite/agonistic players play “*within* boundaries” where “infinite players play *with* boundaries” (Carse, 1986, pp. 10-11; emphasis added). Like the player/poet who tells a story in vertical rhythm and metaphor instead of literal recounting, playing with verbal boundaries grants a person access to significantly more layers of description and depth.

### **Relating to Fellow Players**

Another fundamental difference between finite/agonistic and transformative play is reflected in the way one relates to *the other*. In both, the other is essential for fulfilling the game's purpose. In finite play, the purpose is to conquer one's opponent(s), in transformative play, the goal is to continue playing while “keep[ing] everyone in play” (Carse, 1986, p. 67). Carse (1986) explains that infinite players “do not *oppose* the actions of others, but *initiate* actions of their own in such a way that others will respond by initiating *their own*” (p. 31; italics in original). In a university setting, for instance, rather than employing highly selective admission practices, which perpetuates competition and greatly hinders the social mobility of the many, institutions might instead employ open admissions

in order to nurture the possibilities of the collective. Respect for all members of the collective is at the center of transformative play, making the other's wellbeing intrinsically tied to one's own.

*Respect*, according to Erich Fromm (1956), is one of the four elements required for practicing love, alongside *knowledge*, *care*, and *responsibility*. At the risk of oversimplifying, love is used in this paper to describe *the will to nurture life-affirming growth and connection*. While engaging with agonistic players with openness and love can at times be risky, Lugones (2003) advocates that women of color travel to the worlds of other women of color with “loving playfulness” in order to build coalitions, strengthen the movement of resistance, and to grow is self-awareness. Lugones (2003), like Fromm, affirms the importance of gaining *knowledge* of the other and identifying how it interrelates to one's own sense of knowing. She says, “we are fully dependent on each other for the possibility of being understood and without this understanding we are not intelligible...we are not solid...integrated” (p. 83). A pedagogy of play prioritizes opportunities for “world travel,” which can raise awareness of, increase compassion for, and establish unexpected connection with the other. The ongoing process of becoming whole and integrated therefore requires the other, which is an impossibility if the other is “wiped out.”

### **Relating to the Unknown**

In transformative play, there is neither “wiping out” of the other nor an end to the journey—for playing without knowing the outcome “is to cherish freedom, to embrace life” (Lugones, 2003; Nachmanovitch, 1990, p. 190). Not merely an *act* of freedom, as stated previously, transformative play is a liberatory *way of living*. The logic and language of transformative play emphasizes freedom, interconnection and exploration of possibilities. It involves what Lugones (2003) calls “a metaphysical attitude” that does not expect the “world to be neatly packaged, ruly” (p. 95). Although interpretations of play vary, perhaps the most agreed upon characteristic of play is the element of uncertainty (Nachmanovitch, 1990; Carse, 1986; Lugones, 2003, Schwartzman, 1978; Vygotsky, 1978). Whereas in finite/agonistic play the uncertainty ends with the announcement of winner and loser, in transformative play the uncertainty is the vastness of possibilities. It is understood that to engage in play, one must be curious and willing to dialogue with the unknown. To engage in transformative play, one “does not expect only to be amused by surprise, but to be *transformed* by it” (Carse, 1986, pp. 18-19; emphasis added). Play implies openness and therefore

reflects the ontology of life itself. As Freire (1998) says, “Whenever there is life, there is unfinishedness” (p. 52). Where finite play aims for “a heroic final scene... infinite play” is an ongoing creative process of becoming (Carse, 1986, p. 40). With joy, curiosity, and intention, with responsibility and love for the other, transformative play allows for collective liberatory exploration in the realm of the unknown.

### **Transformative Play and Critical Pedagogy: An Intervention**

Critical pedagogy seeks to expose and disrupt oppression by promoting consciousness-raising and by emphasizing the power of collective human agency (Darder, 2009). Critical pedagogy has been heavily criticized, however, for being overly abstract, for perpetuating Western patriarchal ideology that elevates rationality over other forms of intelligence, human life over other forms of life, as well as for their “Eurocentric telos of human liberation... [which] requires a tacit acceptance of colonization over nature and naturalized peoples” (Tuck & Yang, 2011, p. 525; also see Ellsworth, 1989; Grande, 2004; Lather, 1991). While transformative play cannot address all of the shortcomings of critical pedagogy, it is *experiential*, drawing not only from rational thought but from embodied wisdom. Therefore, transformative play can assist in making abstract ideas like democracy and liberation, at the core of critical pedagogy, more accessible and intelligible once experienced with the mindbodyspirit.

Although many educators have had a profound influence on progressive education (such as John Dewey, Henry Giroux and Maxine Greene), it is Paulo Freire who is considered to be the most influential educational philosopher in the development of critical pedagogy. Freire’s work “promotes ideology critique, an analysis of culture, attention to discourse, and recasting of the teacher as an intellectual or cultural worker” (Leonardo, 2004, p. 12). Freire (1970) passionately condemns what he describes as *banking method* education and its role in stifling students’ creativity, their ability to think critically, and therefore their exercise of personal agency. In conventional educational practice based on routinization, “epistemological curiosity” has no space for rigorous development (Freire, 1997, p. 47). Being the impetus of play, curiosity is ultimately snuffed out by education that demands obedience and conformity. Education “in the service of domination” Freire argues, “stimulates naive thinking about the world” and leaves students with few options (Freire, 1997, p. 44). If they want to be a “successful” (finite) player, they must concern themselves more with learning the rules and obeying authority than with questioning the world around them.



Transformative play, like social transformation, is dialogical and depends on collective praxis. Freire (1970) explains that essential to dialogue is “the word” and that “within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action...*praxis*” (p. 87). Poststructuralists like Althusser (1971) and Volosinov (1973) make the case that although words/rules in essence are mere abstractions, they are real in their material consequences. Therefore, words are not lifeless; they need to be interpreted and acted upon, or as Freire says, they require “decoding” and “work” (Freire, 1970, pp. 87-115). When words are divested of reflection and action and students are unable to see their role in adding meaning to words, words become “idle chatter...an alienated and alienating ‘blah’” (p. 87). When students/players do not understand their relationship to the construction of the rules, they run the risk of unwittingly playing games that are to their detriment.

Critical pedagogy and play invites students to entertain new starting points of inquiry. What if survival did not depend on selling one’s humanity in the marketplace? What if we looked upon the other’s well-being as being intrinsically connected to our own rather than as a competing force? Or as Fanon (1952) suggests, “Superiority? Inferiority? Why not simply try to touch the other, feel the other, discover each other” (p. 206)? By asking these questions, students realize they are co-creating reality, whether by following the status quo or by denouncing it.

### **Reading and Traveling the World(s).**

In a Freirean context, learning occurs through the combined efforts of teacher and students. There is neither a formula for a given outcome nor ultimate final destination. One of the objectives is to understand one’s social conditions and imagine ways to create liberatory social conditions. In his chapter on freedom, Merleau-Ponty (1958) points out: “before being thought, [revolution] is lived through as an obsessive presence, as possibility” (p. 519). Therefore, when assisting students to imagine beyond the current material reality, play can become a pedagogical tool as useful as critical thinking. To be clear, play and critical thinking are not mutually exclusive. They are quite interconnected concepts, yet commonly understood as separate teaching strategies. A pedagogy of play involves the combined praxis of transformative play and critical thinking, which can increase the likelihood for generating new ideas.

Pedagogy of play emphasizes freedom and the possibility of creating *new* games and *new* truths. Using the metaphor of “games” to refer to systems of control is a useful analogy that can help students make sense of society and their

role in it. A game is understood as a social construction made up of rules and the *playing* out of certain roles. As Anzaldúa (1987) explains, “the metaphorical mind precedes analytical consciousness” (p. 91). For example, if students can metaphorically entertain the idea of a social system, which often appears fixed, as a game that is dependent on players’ consent, they can more clearly see that their agency and participation becomes central to understanding how a given system functions and is maintained.

Once a student understands the rules and strategies of a given game, that student is equipped to teach the other. They can invite others to play consciously by “showing... consequences, by pointing out that there are other reasonable options, by teaching people what they don’t know about their own situation, their working conditions and their exploitation” (Foucault, 1984, pp. 296-7). Through this process, the student/teacher exercises freedom and redirects power. A priority of critical pedagogy is to help students understand their position in the world, both as subject and object. As Foucault (1973) mentions, a subject always “constitutes itself within history and is constantly established and reestablished by history” (p. 4). Therefore, the concepts of transformative play and games of truth serve the educator when assisting students in understanding the historical construction of the subject, as well as the social practices that maintain the status quo.

Lugones (2003) also speaks to the importance of understanding the rules of the “world(s)” we inhabit. In “worlds that have agon, conquest and arrogance as the main ingredients in their ethos... it would be foolish to enter playfully” (p. 96). At the root of Freire’s pedagogy is the cultivation of skills necessary for combating foolishness. Raising consciousness (*conscientização*) requires a continuous re-examination of self and society (Freire, 1970). When the social analysis encouraged in critical pedagogy is complemented with the ideological perspective of transformative play, students can decide *consciously* which “games” or “worlds” are “ontologically problematic” and at what level they wish to participate (Lugones, 2003, p. 89). In capoeira, for example, a capoeirista expresses their *malicia*, demonstrating their comprehensive understanding of a situation and their ability to creatively disguise intent and detect the intention of others (Capoeira, 2002).<sup>3</sup> The cultivation of *malicia* involves praxis; it is a “living process, experiencing things, absorbing and digesting, and finally, embodying... in order to build a specific reality” (Capoeira, 2002, p. 15-33). Inside and outside of the *roda*, *malicia* can assist an individual to “read” more effectively the world around them. Lugones (2003) argues that for women of color and “outsiders” of dominant white culture, for example, understanding how to navigate and travel in and out of

different “worlds” is a matter of survival. She explains that world travel is not always conscious nor is it always a comfortable experience.

The Highlander Center, a grassroots organizing and movement-building institute in the Appalachian mountains, exemplifies how transformative play is used to generate liberatory activity. Role-playing has been used at Highlander to help people discover within themselves the courage and ability to confront an uncomfortable reality and change it (Horton, 2003). One of the ways Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) members prepared for the sit-in movement and Montgomery bus boycott was by role-playing and creating scenarios at the Highlander Center that would require they respond to the emotional and physical violence they would encounter from racist whites in future direct actions (See Hogan, 2007). Pedagogy of play is also illustrated beautifully in Augusto Boal’s (1979) *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Influenced greatly by Freire, Boal created an approach to theatre that changes people from passive “spectators” into “actors” who discuss strategies, and experiment with plans for change (pp. 97-98). Through play, students conduct a “rehearsal of revolution... within its fictitious limits, the experience is a concrete one” (Boal, 1979, pp. 119-120). Huizinga (1955) refers to play as a “magic circle,” a space of “free activity” standing outside of “ordinary life” (pp. 11-13). In this definition, play is understood as separate, isolated activity that takes place in a specific time and space. Transformative play, as a way of being in the world, allows one to move in and out of activity—role-play, rehearsals of revolution, even finite games—with playfulness. When “magic circles” are used for the practice of conscientização and creating community, students participate *with mindbodyspirit*, in liberatory activity that can help them access new levels of consciousness and connection with others. Vygotsky (1978) says, “a child’s greatest achievements are possible in play, achievements that tomorrow will become her basic level of real action and morality” (p. 100). Pedagogy of play guides students of all ages to explore alternate possibilities, creating room for spontaneity and liberation from confined ways of thinking and being.

Critical pedagogy unveils the structural issues (social, economic and political) that inflict wounds of alienation and subordination on humankind, a dilemma that I will elaborate upon later. Freire (1970) argues, “Human beings *are* because they are in a situation. And they *will be more* the more they not only critically reflect upon their existence but critically act upon it” (p. 109; italics in original). It is from this point that a student can access freedom, act meaningfully, and make informed decisions regarding their existence. Teachers do not liberate,

they invite students to liberate themselves. I will argue that this is most effective when education addresses the *whole* person—mind, body and spirit.

### **Holistic Education and Transformative Play: Nurturing the Development of one's Relationships**

Although critical pedagogy addresses some of the same explicit values of holistic education such as critical thinking, creativity and social responsibility, most critical pedagogies do not emphasize the relationship between mind, body and spirit nor one's relationship with the earth (Grande, 2004). Like Anzaldúa (1987), Mani (2009), and others, I use *spirit* not in reference to a separate compartment of one's being, but rather to signal an aspect of ourselves that is woven into all of life—the personal, social and political. Leela Fernandes (2003), when speaking of spirituality, refers to “a transcendent sense of interconnection that moves beyond the knowable, visible material world” (p. 10). Similarly, John A. Powell (2012) defines spirituality as “the practice of addressing ontological suffering by relating to something more authentic or larger than the egoistic self” (p. 208). In holistic education, one's spirituality and one's intellect are cultivated in tandem. John Miller (2007) describes holistic education as:

the relationship between linear thinking and intuition, the relationship between mind and body, the relationships among various domains of knowledge, the relationship between the individual and community, the relationship to the earth, and our relationship to our souls. In the holistic curriculum the student examines these relationships so that he or she gains both awareness of them and the skills necessary to transform the relationships where it is appropriate. (p. 13)

As mentioned before, while critical pedagogy is unapologetic in its critique of structural oppression, it tends to share with current Western patriarchal thought the focus and elevation of reason over wisdom that lays in the body and spirit. Similar to the way play is deemed inferior to work, matters of the spirit are often considered too “touchy-feely” in “serious” pedagogy (not to mention in academia in general).<sup>4</sup> In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa (1987) tells of the ethno-poetics of her lineage, “the shaman, my people, the Indians, did not split the artistic from the functional, the sacred from the secular, art from everyday life” (p. 88). Due to the irreversible damage caused by colonization and epistemicide, we will never know the full scope of non-Western cultures that reflected holistic epistemologies (Santos, 2010). However, resuscitating holistic pedagogies that incorporate

transformative play and artistic co-creation can help students entertain life-affirming alternatives to social reality. Besides requiring imagination and mindbodyspirit participation, this process also requires “unlearning” what no longer serves us. Liberation begins with tending to our wounds. Before one begins a process of “unlearning,” one first recognizes a reason for doing so. Or in the Sartrean (1989) sense, why look for an exit if you are sufficiently comfortable where you are?

Critical intellectuals, spiritual masters and holistic doctors seem to agree that in order to solve a problem, it is necessary to understand and address the root of the issue. Often, people know intuitively that something is *off*, or not quite right about the way they live. At the root of this *offness* is a deep sense of disconnection, or what many call alienation. Marx (1976) explains alienation as a condition in which one’s actions become an alien power instead of an expression of one’s authenticity. Following Marx, Fromm (1955) finds the concept of “idolatry” to be useful in illustrating alienation, which occurs when one transfers one’s sense of self or “life force” onto an external idol. While Marx and Fromm focus on capitalism as the root of our alienation, feminist/decolonial thinkers emphasize the alienating effects resulting from the intersection of colonization, patriarchy, capitalism and white supremacy (Anzaldúa, 2009; hooks, 2003; Smith, 1999). Speaking to the alienation experienced by blacks, Fanon (1952) explains, “The black man stops behaving as an *actional* person. His actions are destined for ‘the other’...since only ‘the other’ can enhance his status and give him self-esteem...” (p. 132, italics in original). This is not a sense of interconnection *with* the other, but rather a sense of dependency *on* the other in order to feel a sense of worth.

To avoid confronting difficult thoughts and feelings, people often “treat” discomfort by resorting to that which they have been socialized to do best: consume. Consumption in the form of material goods, food, drugs, television, and so on, are used in attempts to fill the void created by alienation. Although temporarily gratifying, these distractions only delay one’s process of “unlearning” that leads to self-realization. Under the conditions of conventional education, alienation often manifests in students as disinterest and an inability to concentrate in school. Without a thorough understanding of how we have been made wounded and how to approach healing, adults also use drugs, such as Ritalin, to treat our youth. Instead of helping to awaken students, we are drugging them and numbing their senses (Robinson, 2010).<sup>5</sup> Psychiatrist David Hawkins (2002) explains that, “Healing requires changing the context, bring[ing] about an absolute removal of the causes rather than the mere recovery from the symptoms” (p. 73). Indeed,

identifying how we have been *made* wounded constitutes the *reflective* element of praxis. What often occurs, however, is that along with newly gained awareness, disabling emotions arise that hinder a person's ability to *act*.

## **Mending the Wounds of Alienation**

Nepantla, a Náhuatl word meaning “in-between space,” is a term Gloria Anzaldúa (2009) develops in her post-*Borderlands* theory of process. It is a metaphorical “in-between space” that allows us to *act* from a connected place. It is the space where the different aspects of ourselves unify, giving us the opportunity to bridge, thus strengthening our ability to connect with others. Nepantla is a site for healing alienation, a space where creativity is born, and the launching pad for transformative play. Nepantla is said to be a place where the artist plays and creates artistic expression that heals the feelings of disconnection, facilitating a deeper sense of wholeness (Anzaldúa, 2009). By introducing students to this metaphorical space and inviting them to integrate mind, body, and spirit, students can understand with their *whole being* how states of alienation—how feelings of frustration, depression, and anger—can serve as catalysts for liberatory connection.

Pedagogy of play uses transformative play in order to engage *all* sources of intelligence available to an individual. This anti-Cartesian approach encourages “*embodied* consciousness,” guiding a person through “the visualized, perceived, imagined, felt, cognized world” (Greene, 1998, p. 167; italics added). Kant (2005) refers to the aesthetic dimension as the medium in which the senses and the intellect meet. Aesthetic education is therefore understood as a project that integrates the mind with the senses (Marcuse, 1966). In *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse (1966) explains how the elevation of reason has repressed the cognitive processes/intelligence of our senses.<sup>6</sup> He also affirms play and imagination as the mediating components for accessing the wisdom of our senses and its unification with the rational mind (Marcuse, 1966). Greene (2011) argues that imagination provides a conduit for meaning-making and for making sense of the world. It also “makes empathy possible. It is what enables us to cross the empty spaces between ourselves” towards the other, and to alternative realities (p. 3). Thus, transformative play breaks the inertia and sets us free from fixed ways of understanding. Greene (2009) speaks of how the poet “reminds us of absence, ambiguity, [and] embodiments of existential possibilities.” She continues by saying that the poet, “awaken[s] us to reflectiveness, to a recovery of lost landscapes and lost spontaneities” (p. 84). Inhabiting nepantla and recovering what Marcuse and Greene suggest we have “lost,” can be facilitated with transformative play within a

pedagogy that tends to the splits within ourselves as well as our sense of connection to all the relationships that sustain us. This requires that educators create opportunities that encourage mindbodyspirit integration as well as the exploration of liberatory alternatives to current reality.

## Conclusion

Conventional schooling, which reflects finite/agonistic play, limits possibilities for self-development and coalition building by encouraging competition as well as by elevating rationality over embodied intelligence—the wisdom that emerges when the mind, body and spirit coalesce (Anzaldúa, 1987). Intelligence is diverse and the future is unpredictable, yet normative education trains students in convergent thinking, rewarding them for finding single, pre-determined “right” answers. This approach is antithetical to inventive/divergent thinking, a skill that proves useful when preparing for the unknown (Choi, 1999; Robinson, 2010). Pedagogy of play goes beyond gesturing superficial importance to creative ways of being and supports the inventor within to thrive. This is done by encouraging students to embrace the unknown, explore creative impulses and multiple perspectives, as well as by emphasizing the generative power of connecting with one’s emotions, such as vulnerability, anger, and joy. As Anzaldúa (2009) asserts, “When we refuse to consider the value of knowledge that is rooted in the body, in the psyche, in paralogical experience, we fail to challenge colonialist, post-Renaissance, Euro-Western conceptions of reality... we need to move beyond... to embrace other theoretical paradigms inclusive of embodied and in-spirited knowledge” (p. 230). Pedagogy of play synthesizes ideas of critical pedagogues, third world women of color theorists/activists, decolonial theorists, Western social philosophers, musicians, poets, psychiatrists and spiritual mystics. Because of the multiplicity of epistemologies it draws from, pedagogy of play challenges Western attempts at defining what is “legitimate” knowledge (Anzaldúa, 2009; Smith, 1999). Pedagogy of play also challenges the notion that play is merely frivolous childish activity, non-consequential amusement, and therefore lacking a “serious” role in higher learning. Consistent with the epistemologies it stems from, pedagogy of play *challenges* dominant ideology in order to bring about personal and social transformation.

Pedagogy of play shares the sense of urgency as well as the commitment of critical pedagogy to address social injustice by preparing students with the tools and practices needed for becoming socially conscious agents of change. Believing “education must teach, reach and vibrate the *whole* person” (Nachmanovitch, 1990,

p. 177; italics added), pedagogy of play equally prioritizes teaching methods that rigorously nurture the expansion, exploration and unification of the mind, body and spirit. More than a political intervention, pedagogy of play emphasizes the power of play to inspire and engage—inviting students to not only intellectually grasp ideas of freedom, but to embody freedom. Play theorist Nachmanovich (1990), offers an intriguing perspective that links the ideas of play with love and wholeness:

There is an old Sanskrit word, *lila*, which means play. Richer than our word, it means divine play, the play of creation, destruction, and re-creation, the folding and unfolding of the cosmos. *Lila*, free and deep, is both the delight and enjoyment of this moment... It also means love... *Lila* may be the simplest thing there is... its coming to fruition is a kind of homecoming to our true selves. (p. 1; italics in original)

Moving beyond approaches to education that restrict personal transformation and spiritual exploration to one's private life, a pedagogy of play openly addresses the process of self-discovery and what it means to be in relationship with self and others. powell (2012) explains that the healing process “is both personal and social, these realms must be interactive and porous... much of what is necessary for the constitution of the self is subject to institutional and societal arrangements. Therefore, to address our being, to heal our suffering, we must be willing to actively engage these arrangements” (p. 210-211). Healing and liberatory personal and social development, like transformative play, require the other. These are processes that are only maintained through community and depend on constant reassessment and dialogue. According to bell hooks (2000), love is at the foundation of dialogue, requiring a willingness to change and to commit to the other. “When we choose to love, we choose to move against fear—against alienation and separation. The choice to love is the choice to connect...to find ourselves in the other” (p. 93). Pedagogy of play invites students to adopt transformative play as a worldview—an attitude of openness to the unknown and a willingness to explore liberatory possibilities and to participate in *embodied* knowledge production. When this is experienced, and we witness the other do the same—play, love and work integrate and become a way of being that heals and liberates.



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#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> The term “pedagogy of play” has been used by Elizabeth Wood (2004), Roberto Farne (2005), as well as other early childhood educators. Their use of this phrase has no direct reference to the multiple books Paulo Freire published (prior to 2004) with similar titles: *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, *Pedagogy of Hope*, *Pedagogy of the Heart*, etc. My use of ‘pedagogy of play’ is to give homage to Freire’s preceding works and situate this pedagogy within a larger legacy of liberatory education.

<sup>2</sup> “Finite“ and “agonistic” are not to be used interchangeably. Both describe types of play that often go together, yet each brings a particular flavor that I will explain later in this section.

<sup>3</sup> *Malicia*, in Portuguese is directly translated as ‘malice,’ however in the capoeira community, it is used to describe a philosophy of street smarts that manifests in the game. *Mandinga* is used interchangeably with *malicia*, however, the original meaning of *mandinga* refers to an African ethnic group known for being dangerous sorcerers (see Capoeira, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Keating (2008) refers to this as “academic spirit phobia.” This phobia is even more severe when non-Western spiritualities are sought out as epistemic points of reference (see Alexander, 2005; Pérez, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that all medical interventions should be done away with. However, I think we should question the increasing rate at which drugs are prescribed, especially to youth whose neurological networks associated with psycho/social development are still in their early stages.

<sup>6</sup> Not only is students’ ability to connect rational thought with the senses hindered through the use of conventional pedagogy, but in the decade up to 2010, prescriptions for Ritalin, which has anesthetic affects on a person’s senses, quadrupled. Numbing the senses of young people is another way we increase their

estrangement and impede their holistic development (See Doward, 2012; Robinson, 2010),