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## Book Reviews

### **Kingdom of Play: What Ball-Bouncing Octopuses, Belly-Flopping Monkeys, and Mud-Sliding Elephants Reveal About Life Itself**

*David Toomey*

New York: Scribner, 2024. Introduction, epilogue, acknowledgments, notes, bibliography, and index. 304 pp. \$29.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9781982154462

In most fields of study, knowledge develops gradually, marked by spurts of fresh insights that seem to occur when a cluster of scholars do work that builds on each other's findings. So it is with the study of animal play. Ethologists and others involved in the study of animal behavior have long explored and pondered the role of play in animal behavior, cognition, and social relationships. Over a century ago, Charles Darwin and Karl Groos reflected on what animal play revealed about the nature of life itself. In the mid-twentieth century, psychologists became deeply interested in animal behavior, including play, to see what it revealed about human conditioning and learning. And at the start

of the twenty-first century, there was an efflorescence of animal play research from a range of scholars studying everything from the neuroscience of laughter in rats to the ball-rolling antics of bumblebees. That work revealed much about the nature of play and its role in animals' lives. And now David Toomey has brought these findings together in a highly readable, entertaining book meant for the general reader.

Toomey himself is not a biologist or psychologist, but an English professor, and he leans heavily on the works of others, most notably Gordon Burghardt. Burghardt's *The Genesis of Animal Play* (2005) magisterially synthesized much of the research on the subject, along the way offering definitive criteria for identifying play and articulating a theory of play as the expenditure of surplus resources. Burghardt is Toomey's guide for this world of research into animal play—a Virgil to his Dante—but Toomey introduces the reader to a host of other key researchers. These short profiles of key researchers and their studies are some of the most enjoyable parts of Toomey's book.

Those familiar with the study of play

in animals will recognize many of the individuals Toomey discovered in the course of his journey through the subject. He discusses Jaak Panksepp's work tickling out the locus of laughter in rat brains, Vivien and Sergio Pellis on the social benefits of rough-and-tumble play for monkeys (and by extension humans), and Marc Bekoff on play as training for the unexpected. The first years of the twenty-first century were an exciting time for animal play research. I remember how invigorating the insights of these researchers proved as The Strong adopted its play mission and founded the *American Journal of Play* during this period. And Toomey summarizes these scholars' work clearly and articulately, deftly calling out choice anecdotes that amuse and inform.

As a work of popular science, Toomey's book resembles Ed Yong's *Immense World* that explores the idea of *umwelt*, in which animal species each have their own unique sensory worlds. But I found myself laboring to finish Yong's work as examples piled on examples. In contrast, Toomey writes crisply and carries the reader along through a series of entertaining chapters. Occasionally one wishes that he had spent more time exploring the issues involved more deeply. In the chapter "Play as the Roots of Culture," for example, I felt Toomey tried to tackle too large a subject in too small a space to truly clinch his case. And the last chapter, which profiled people who played at being badgers, goats, and other animals, felt as if it distracted from—rather than wrapped up—the work's central argument. These quibbles aside, however, the book was a pleasure to read.

Toomey's fluid writing certainly owes something to his training in English,

and this background also helps explain, I believe, his desire to find greater meaning and symbolism in the role of play. More specifically, for him the very process of natural selection that guides the development of play is, in a sense, a form of play itself. Whereas Johan Huizinga argued in his seminal work *Homo Ludens* (1938) that culture arises in the form of play, Toomey sees natural selection itself as a form of play, thus neatly folding the subject of play in animals back into itself in a very literary way.

Play, in his telling, is a synecdoche of life itself. "Since natural selection shares so many features with play, we may with some justification maintain that life, in a most fundamental sense, is playful" (p. 234). Such a statement, although bringing a literary unity to the book, left me with doubts, wondering if this instead better reflected the labile nature of our use of the word play in everyday life rather than the rigorous scientific study of play in animals that he so neatly described throughout his text. We talk about light playing on a surface, the play of waves on the shore, or music playing in the background. What is meant in these cases is something different than what we mean when we talk about two bear cubs wrestling. There is a similarity—what Ludwig Wittgenstein might have called a family resemblance—but there is also something fundamentally different. Natural selection might have playful aspects as with these other phenomena, but I felt identifying natural selection as play itself was perhaps a case of the author trying to tie everything together too elegantly.

Still, I respect his ambition, and above all I appreciate this book. It lovingly and

clearly brings together the important research of many underappreciated scholars in the field of animal play. I hope many people read the book and find it as rewarding as I did.

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—Jon-Paul C. Dyson, *The Strong National Museum of Play*, Rochester, NY

### **Repairing Play: A Black Phenomenology**

Aaron Trammell

Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2023.

Acknowledgments, introduction, conclusion, notes, references, and index. 144 pp. \$24.00 paper.

ISBN: 9780262545273

*Repairing Play: A Black Phenomenology* highlights the long-overdue need to explore how the American conceptualization of play becomes romanticized through a White racial lens. As the title suggests, author Aaron Trammell argues that our understanding of play is flawed, incomplete, and even harmful. To address these shortcomings, he suggests that our theory of play needs to be repaired. Following the introduction, he uses five chapters to present his argument for why phenomenology through the Black experience could help us establish a more complete lens through which we can view play.

Chapter 1 calls for the decolonization of play. In this chapter, Trammell attributes the development of play theory to the work of Johan Huizinga. He provides details about how and why this theory developed out of Western European thought and experience and the conse-

quences of such a narrow lens. Here, he criticizes Huizinga for viewing Whites as civilized and determining that play is what civilized people do, thus concluding that play is natural to White people. Furthermore, Trammell explains how this starting point in play theory development led to the play of Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) being scrutinized, demonized, or ignored. Trammell's opening discussion sets the stage for his thesis that the study of play needs to be freed from its roots in colonization.

In chapter 2 Trammell examines affect as a product of play and offers the study of affect as vital to understanding the Black play experience. This chapter reflects on the range of emotions that play produces and specifically on the emotional burdens play carries for Black people. Recognizing the pain that can derive from Black play, Trammell criticizes Huizinga once again for romanticizing play as producing only pleasure. Although play enthusiasts may be tempted to ignore the potential for play to produce pain, Trammell suggests that by embracing affect in its entirety as a product of play, we can have a richer understanding of the complexities of play for Black people.

In chapter 3 Trammell challenges the voluntary nature of play. While he discusses power in chapter 1, in this section of the book he expounds on how power influences play. He defies the assumption that everyone voluntarily engages in play. He provides examples to highlight moments of coerced or involuntary play for non-Whites. He touches on arrest, captivity, and policing to further the argument for involuntary engagement in play for BIPOC in general and Black people in particular.