

“WOMANISH” MODES OF PLAY AS A CULTURAL SIGNIFICATION:
WOMANIST TENETS AND ETHICAL DEVELOPMENT FOR
BLACK FEMALE HUMAN FLOURISHING

By

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INTRODUCTION

Two rows of ten young children, hands clasped, stand parallel to each other in a trailer park parking lot. “Red rover, red rover send Britney right over.” Britney makes the choice to let go of the two other hands she is holding and runs full force toward the parallel line of kids in front of her. As she is running she is thinking about how fast she needs to run, where is the weakest link in this chain of kids in which she could run and break the hold. Britney, in this moment of play, is given agency. She is making decisions about how she is choosing to act in the world. Britney must make a decision to choose to find the weakest link and take the “easy way out” or to find the strongest link in the chain and “try her best.” What will she choose? Either way it is Britney’s choice to make as this game of “red rover” gives Britney agency in a world where young black girls have little to none in other arenas. Britney in turn takes this agency she is given with her into adulthood as she is faced with more difficult decisions about school, work, and family. She continues to wrestle with the questions she faced in that game of “red rover”; does she take the “easy way out” or work hard and “try her best?” Either way it is Britney’s choice to make as she continues to allow herself agency that she learned from “red rover”.

Looking at another set of young black girls, Crystal finishes shuffling the deck of cards and begins to deal as she says “joker, joker, deuce, ace.” As Crystal begins this game of “spades” with her partner Jada she lays out the parameters for this game. She says that the highest cards are the big joker, the little joker, the two of “spades” and then the ace of “spades”. After she makes this declaration there is little to no talking for the rest of the game. Although there is much silence, there is much being signified and said in the silences. All players

are given agency in this game. All players decide how they want to act in the world. Each player decides what moves they will make in hopes of winning the game. This game offers another dynamic of team play that affects the decisions that one player makes. Since Crystal knows that Jada is her partner she will take more care into what she plays and how she chooses to act. As Crystal grows into an adult she continues to work with teams of individuals on her job and the same decisions she had to make as a young girl in that game of “spades” are the same decisions she is faced with making now as an adult. She must still decide how she will act in the world, being conscious of her co-workers on her team.

These two types, among many other types, of “womanish” modes of play for black women and girls are how black women and girls negotiate and make meaning in the world in which they live. I believe that what this negotiating and meaning making is signifying are the womanist tenets as well as ethical development that lead to their flourishing from black girls into black women. This thesis will use the womanist tenets as a methodology in looking at black women and girls “womanish” modes of play as a cultural signification.

The description of womanism in this thesis is based on the definition given by author, poet, and activist Alice Walker. Her definition of womanism encompasses four parts: 1) acting grown up and being “responsible, in charge, and serious,” 2) loving women and women’s culture both nonsexually and sexually and wanting the survival and wholeness of all people regardless of gender, 3) loves dance, spirit, food, and herself...regardless and 4) lavender to purple being a metaphor for womanist to feminist. The first chapter of this thesis will focus on this four part definition that really gave womanism its roots, grounding and beginning. I will also discuss three of the pioneer womanist scholars that gave Walker’s definition meat through literature and theological discourse; Katie G. Cannon, Jacquelyn Grant, and Delores Williams. I also go into

detail about the importance of play in the lives of black women and girls and how this importance, while affirmed in Walker's definition, is often left out or seen as less important in the literature and dialogue of many other womanist scholars.

As an offspring from Walker's definition as well as the three womanist pioneers we have the womanist tenets, which are the focus of Chapter 2. The womanist tenets have been laid out by scholar activist and ethicist Stacey Floyd-Thomas. Floyd-Thomas labels the four womanist tenets as radical subjectivity, traditional communalism, redemptive self-love, and critical engagement. In this section I thoroughly explain the four womanist tenets and I give a vignette for each. For radical subjectivity I give a vignette about playing house, for traditional communalism I give a vignette about a community game of tag, for redemptive self-love I give a vignette about sisters playing dress up and lastly for critical engagement I give a vignette of Presidential role-play. In this section we learn the methodology that will be used in this thesis to confirm that "womanish" modes of play are cultural significations.

The major crux of this thesis is play and its importance and affect on black women and girls. My third chapter focuses on the definition of play and play as therapy. To begin to define play I turn to Hans-Georg Gadamer's ontology of play. Gadamer believes play to be a mode of existing in the world. As Gadamer states play is "the mode of being of the work of art itself."¹ For Gadamer play gives clues to ontological explanation in that play is completely experience based. His notion of play as a way of being and existing in the world is how this thesis will frame play as it involves black women and girls. With Gadamer's definition play involves, but not excluded to; art, games, drama, sports, music, dance, "double dutch", "red rover", "spades", etc.

¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1975), 102.

Play is the most complete form of self-expression developed by the human organism.”² In this section I mention Stuart Brown’s seven properties of this play; “apparently purposeless, voluntary, inherent attraction, freedom from time, diminished consciousness of self, improvisational potential, and continuation desire.”³ I follow that Scott Eberle’s six steps involved in play which are; anticipation, surprise, pleasure, understanding, strength, and poise.⁴ I then give J. Piaget’s four stages of play. The four stages are practice play, construction play, symbolic play, and games with rules stage. I end this section on play by giving Luciano L’Abate’s thirteen ways in which play is meaningful. Play is meaningful as progress, fate, power, identity, imagination, self, frivolity, feasts and celebrations, a pathway to personal freedom and community, catharsis, danger, challenge, and humor.⁵ The second section of play involves looking at play as therapeutic. In looking at play as therepeutic there is a delicate balancing act of seriousness and yet nonseriousness. As Gadamer puts it “the movement of playing has no goal that brings it to an end; rather, it renews itself in constant repetition.”⁶ Play in renewing. In this section I also discuss Charles E. Schaefer’s fourteen factors involved in therapeutic play. The fourteen factors are overcoming resistance, communication, mastery, creative thinking, catharsis, abreaction, role-play, fantasy, metaphoric teaching, attachment formation, relationship enhancement, enjoyment, mastering developmental fears, and game play.⁷

² Charles E. Schaefer, *The Therapeutic Powers of Play* (London: Jason Aronson Inc., 1993), 42.

³ Stuart Brown, *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul* (New York: Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 2009), 17.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵ Luciano L’Abate, *The Praeger Handbook of Play Across the Life Cycle: Fun from Infancy to Old Age* (Denver: Praeger, 2009), 22-23.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Charles E. Schaefer, *The Therapeutic Powers of Play* (London: Jason Aronson Inc., 1993),5-13

After laying the foundation of my definition of play I will talk about play as cultural signification in Chapter 4. This chapter is split into two sections the first focusing on play as cultural signification and the second focusing on language and silence in play. In the first section on play as cultural signification I pull largely on historian of religion Charles Long's definitions and usage of significations to support my notion of play as a means in which black women and girls signify their realities and identities in the world. I explore Long's writings about how the dominate white culture has named black people's reality and place in the world. Play is a space where blacks have taken and renamed their realty and their place in the world. In this section I also bring literary critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr. into the dialogue. His notion of signification as "the nature of the process of meaning-creation and its representation"⁸ also supports my notion of black women and girls using play as a process of meaning-creation and its representation. In the second section language and silence in play are the focus. As Long mentions language has been prostituted in history and "the interrelation of language and silence gives us a new understanding of the totality of the language and range of experience of the human being."⁹ In play there are various cultural understandings and understood meanings that surpass words or even prove more effective than words. The silence allows one to experience language and its variants as one of the many experiences of being human. Also in this section I bring Aristotle and Luciano L'Abate in to the discussion when discussing how corporate relationships allow individuals to experience the diversity in cultures that we might not know otherwise. I bring L'Abate in the conversation and his thoughts about how socialization is directly linked to ones

⁸ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African- American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 47.

⁹ Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Colorado: The Davis Group, Publishers, 1995), 68.

culture and cultural ties. Play is not only cultural it is in fact a cultural signification for black women and girls.

Play as a cultural signification involves not only looking at the womanist tenets but also looking at the ethical development that happens as well. In Chapter five I discuss the ethical development that happens during play. I begin this section talking about the various philosophers who stated conversations around ethics and virtue such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. I mention how all of these men not only talked about the importance of play but used play as a way to teach philosophy and ethics. I explain how Socrates used play to encourage dialogue, invite questions, and stimulate the mind. I then go into detail about philosopher Louis P. Pojman's four domains of ethical assessments. The four domains are action, consequences, character, and motive. I explain how play invites and often brings forth these four domains of ethical assessments

Black women's experience is not only critical but vital in this thesis. Chapter six will focus on the lives of two black women who affirm that play has been a cultural signification of the womanist tenets and ethical development in their lives, which has led to their flourishing as a black woman. I interviewed Dr. Monique Moulire and Ms. Muriel Smith. After gaining interview and sharing permissions from both women I have included both of their interview questions and answers in the appendices. Both of these women share their childhood and adult experiences of "womanish" play in their lives. They mention how play allows them to signify not only their cultural identity but their gender identity as well. Interestingly enough both of these women also find play to be a space of renewal and rejuvenation both in their work and in their personal lives that allow them to flourish as black women.

I will conclude my thesis by summarizing all that has been laid out from womanism, to the womanist tenets, to my definition of play, to the language and silence of play, to play as a cultural signification, to play as therapeutic, to the ethical development in play, to the interviews of two black women. Also in my conclusion I will mention any limitations or areas of overlook that I think I might have in this thesis. I will also mention potential areas of growth and places that I might be able to expand this thesis in the future.

CHAPTER 1

IN THE BEGINNING WERE BLACK WOMEN

“Responsible.” “In charge.” “Serious!”¹⁰ These are terms that most people, including womanist scholars, would use to describe black women. Black women, black mothers, black women workers, and especially black women professionals are automatically deemed serious and in charge simply by the nature of the amalgamation of their color and their gender. These categories that black women are put into or characteristics that black women are said to possess stem not only from cultural stereotypes, but black women scholars themselves. These terms stem from Alice Walker’s definition of womanist, in her book *In Search of our Mother’s Garden*. Walker’s book was the catalyst and continues to be the root and heart of womanism. In her book, Walker gives the four part definition of what it means to be a womanist:

“1. From womanish (Opp. Of “girlish,” i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “you acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “you trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. Serious.”

¹⁰ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*.(New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1983), xi.

2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter) and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white beige, and black?" Ans.: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time."
3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves moon. Loves the spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the folk. Loves herself. Regardless.
4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender."¹¹

This definition is the springboard that womanist scholars often jump from, and continue to revisit. In Walker's definition we see part one focusing on a womanist being "a black feminist or feminist of color" who is "acting grown up," "in charge" and "serious."¹² This first part of the definition is the section that most people are familiar with and apply to all black women, regardless of how different every person is in actuality. The second part of Walker's definition sheds light on a womanist being a lover of women and women's strength as well as being "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female."¹³ This part truly highlights how women of color want everyone to be whole and to thrive in society regardless of their color and gender. The third part, and the part that will be highlighted and lifted up in this thesis, is about what womanist love. It mentions how a womanist loves dancing and music, the moon and the spirit..."Regardless."¹⁴ An important piece of this third part is the notion of a

¹¹ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1983), xi-xii.

¹² *Ibid.*, xi.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

womanist loving dancing and music, which correlates to womanist loving play. Dancing and being musical are forms of play along with “spades”, “double-dutch” and “hand jives,” and Alice Walker is stating that part of being a womanist is loving play. Sadly, many scholars often overlook this love and importance of “womanish” modes of play in the lives of black women. The fourth part of Walker’s definition gives one understanding into the relationship of womanist to feminist, which is the same relationship that purple has to lavender. Womanism is not a completely different entity than feminism, it is simply a more directed, passionate, and focused area just like purple is a more passionate and vibrant shade of lavender. This definition is where any and every womanist scholar usually starts her research and writings, and thus were I will start as I begin my thesis about play and black women.

From the original definition that Walker provides in her book, three womanist pioneers used her concept as a springboard to jump into the pool of womanism and yet create subsequent waves of womanism that continue to travel and transfer energy among other rising womanists. These waves were created by trailblazing womanist scholars; Katie G. Cannon, Jacquelyn Grant, and Delores Williams. These three women all created critical awakenings through their scholarship and theological discourse such as; Katie G. Cannon’s *Black Womanist Ethics*, Jacquelyn Grant’s *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus*, and Delores Williams *Sisters in the Wilderness*. All these womanist scholars take on this definition of womanism and what it means not only for the academy but also for our society at large. Theologian Delores Williams’s states:

“...womanist theology emerged from what many of us saw as characteristic of black women’s experiences of relation, loss, gain, faith, hope, celebration and defiance...womanist theology attempts to help black women see, affirm and have confidence in the importance of their experience and faith for determining the character of the Christian religion in the African-American community. Womanist theology challenges all oppressive forces impeding black women’s struggle for survival and for the development of a positive, productive quality of life conducive to women’s and the family’s freedom and well-being. Womanist theology opposes all oppression based on race, sex, class, sexual preference, physical disability and caste.”¹⁵

As one can see here womanism and womanist theology give black women an arena to not only share their stories and experiences but to also have them affirmed and lifted up as important. Part of the story and experience of black women is childhood or “womanish” modes of play that continue into adulthood but is often not talked about or hidden because of a desire to “be taken seriously” in the world, especially in the academy. While I believe that the womanist perspective and womanist theology are vital for understanding the world, I do notice a missing piece within womanist literature and dialogue. That missing piece, for me, is the importance of “womanish” modes of play. My hypothesis is that often times black women played as girls and that play has continued well into their lives as women, but they are unable to express this play because of the stigma related to play such as; juvenile, not serious, and worthless. Due to the race, gender, and class oppression or the triple jeopardy that black women experience in this world, the need to be taken seriously supersedes their expression of the importance of play in their lives and their flourishing as black women.

Womanist scholars and those who have chosen to write about black women often leave out or lessen the importance and value of play in the lives of black women and girls. Play has

¹⁵ Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (New York: Orbis Books, 1993), xiv.

been and continues to be an aspect of life that gives agency and a space of exploration for black girls in childhood that continues into adulthood. This play that is experienced in the lives of black women and girls is indeed a cultural signification of both the womanist tenets and ethical development for black female human flourishing. “Womanish” modes of play (i.e. “hand jives”, “red rover”, “spades”, “double dutch”, etc) are ways in which black women and girls communicate, seek and negotiate meaning in the world; specifically in the areas of ethical development and the womanist tenets. Play is a means of exploring ones identity as a black girl becoming a black women and it is this play that gives black women and girls the freedom to explore what it means to be a woman and to be black. This play also gives black women and girls a place of rejuvenation and renewal that is not judged or ridiculed, but just is.

CHAPTER 2

WHAT MANNER OF WOMAN?

Womanist ethics “seeks to determine how to eradicate oppressive social structures that limit and circumscribe the agency of African American women.”¹⁶ Based on Alice Walker’s definition of womanism and the works of the womanist trailblazers, scholar activist and ethicist Dr. Stacey Floyd-Thomas lays out the four tenets of womanist ethics. In her book *Mining the Motherlode* Floyd-Thomas describes radical subjectivity, traditional communalism, redemptive self-love, and critical engagement as the four tenets of womanist ethics. She mentions the focus of part one of Walker’s definition about being serious, responsible, audacious, and in charge as “radical subjectivity.”¹⁷ This is the notion of a womanist’s “ability to grasp the radically subjective dimension of the ‘nature vs. nurture’ dialectic inherent within black women’s moral formation.”¹⁸ The dimension she mentions is among black women who nurture and mentor young black girls on how to navigate in a world where they must deal with racism, classism, and sexism; triple jeopardy. This mentoring and maturing allows all involved to “claim her agency and have a subjective view of the world in which she is not a victim of circumstance, but rather is a responsible, serious, and in-charge woman.”¹⁹ Play is space where black women are radically subjective. Kelly and Julia’s game of house can give us an example of this radical subjectivity.

¹⁶ Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode: Methods in Womanist Ethics* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2006), 7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Kelly, a black girl, invites her white female friend Julia over to play. They begin by playing house. As Kelly grabs her hair brush to brush Julia's hair, since she will play the mother, Julia suggests something different. Julia mentions to Kelly that she should play the maid. She tells Kelly how her family has a maid who takes care of their house and her, and she is a black woman like Kelly. Kelly accepts this new role and begins to realize how roles can change with the color of her skin. In the various types of “womanist” modes of play black women and girls are introduced to the nature vs. nurture through playing house and doctor. Through these games black women and girls learn how their gender and their color often affect what roles that others think they should be playing. When a young black girl is encouraged by her playmates to be the maid while playing house, this effects how she views herself as a black girl. When a young black girl is only allowed to play nurse while the boys are always the doctors, it affects how black girls view their identity as black girls. During these moments of play black women and girls are afforded the agency to decide for themselves what roles they will and will not play as well as they will not be victims but in-charge women.

Floyd-Thomas names the second part of Walker's definition which focuses on the wholeness of all people as “traditional communalism.”²⁰ Traditional communalism focuses on not just caring and or writing about one's own fancies but about one's entire community as a whole. In this area womanists work “encompasses not only the personal story of individual women; it also takes into account the various gifts, identities, and concerns of black people in general in order to use every resource available to strengthen the community as a whole.”²¹ Within womanism, black culture and history keep womanist scholars accountable to the

²⁰ Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode: Methods in Womanist Ethics* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2006), 9.

²¹ *Ibid.*

community at large. During play black women and girls are introduced to community. We can look to Amelia and her neighborhood game of tag as an example of traditional communalism. *Amelia comes outside at 5pm, as usual for the neighborhood game of tag and she sees some of her friends coming out of their houses too. As they all gather by the street sign Amelia looks at all the neighborhood kids and thinks how colorful they are. She sees kids that are white, Asian, Hispanic, Indonesian, bi-racial, and African and regardless of their different colors they are all able to play together. Once they gather and decide who is “it” everyone runs so they do not get tagged. As Amelia is running she trips and falls and her Indonesian friend Mela comes and helps her up and they run together so that they will not get tagged.* As children gather from the neighborhood there are different hues and genders that engage in play together. Through this mode of play black women and girls learn the importance of inclusion and the necessity to work together for the survival of everyone. So from play black girls learn about this sense of traditional communalism and the importance of the success of everyone regardless of their gender, class, or color.

The third part of Walker’s definition, which is the focus of this research, is either seen as less important or lumped into the category of “redemptive self-love.”²² Floyd-Thomas’ third tenet of redemptive self-love focuses on the love discussed in Walker’s third part as “demystifying the perceptions of black women’s bodies, ways, and love as vile.”²³ She uplifts the idea of redeeming black women’s love for themselves and others. While it is a very important point to uplift and redeem self-love, it is just as important to uplift black women’s love of play and the agency and renewal, which play provides for black women. We can see how

²² Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode: Methods in Womanist Ethics* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2006), 9.

²³ Ibid.

black girls and women's love is redeemed by looking at sisters Eleanor and Jessica. *Sisters Eleanor and Jessica get done with dinner and decide they want to play dress up. They both run to their closets and put on the prettiest dresses along with jewelry and their mother's high-heels, which they can barely walk in. They get into their mother's make-up and put on lipstick, blush, and eye shadow. They finish it off with spraying perfume. Then they look in the mirror and laugh at how funny they both look. They tell each other how grown up they look with all this stuff on. Then as they get out of all their dress up items and wash off the make-up they look in the mirror again and talk about how pretty they are without all that other stuff, but how fun it is to play.* Playing dress-up and princess allows black girls to learn to love their beautiful black bodies as they are. So often black women's bodies are seen as vile or over sexualized but in playing these games black girls learn how to love themselves and see themselves as absolutely beautiful.

Floyd-Thomas concludes her womanist tenets with "critical engagement."²⁴ She mentions how womanism calls black women to "critically engage their world at the intersection of their oppression." It is more than sexism alone, which feminism focuses on, that affects black women. It is the black women's obligation to work tirelessly for "freedom, justice, and equality"²⁵ through critical engagement. Play again offers a place of critical engagement. In the arena of role play and improvisation black girls are given the space to engage the world critically. *Kimberly is inside playing with her friends when they decide to play President. She gets to play President first. So she stands on a chair behind the counter and fields questions from her reporters. Her friends ask her questions about education, schools, sports, health care, and of course having girls only clubs – no boys allowed! Although she does not know all the technical*

²⁴ Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode: Methods in Womanist Ethics* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2006), 10.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

language or politically correct things to say the important thing is that all of these girls are critically engaging with the world and issues that are affecting their lives. When playing President, black girls often have to think critically about the problems of the world such as freedom, justice, and equality. These types of role-play and improvisation allow space for black women and girls to think about critical issues that they might not normally think about and to engage these issues in new and interesting ways from the perspective of a black woman or girl.

Alice Walker's definition of womanism along with the three womanist pioneers paved the way for Floyd-Thomas' womanist tenets. These tenets are areas in which women identifying as womanist find themselves engaging in and wrestling with. While these are not the only areas of engagement these are the four that have been clearly spelled out by Floyd-Thomas. Play is just one way that black women and girls can signify and make meaning of their tenets in the world. Play offers black women and girls the freedom to explore the areas of radical subjectivity, traditional communalism, redemptive self-love, and critical engagement. "Womanish" modes of play such as; playing house, a community game of tag, sisterly dress-up and playing president are only a few of the modes of play in which black women and girls can engage in to explore these tenets both in their lives and in the world. One area in which these four tenets of womanist ethics is played out is through play. Play allows space for black women and girls to be radically subjective, to learn and appreciate traditional communalism, to redemptively love themselves, and be critically engaged in the world around them.

CHAPTER 3

LET'S PLAY!

What is Play?

“I know of no other manner of dealing with great tasks than as play; this, as a sign of greatness, is an essential pre-requisite.” –Friedrich Nietzsche²⁶

In looking at play in this thesis, there were many definitions that I went through before finding one that fit. In his book *Gods and Games*, David L. Miller explains play as

“...what children do. Children-we all once knew-experience life as characterized by freedom and coherence; they experience no substantial dichotomy between the life of play and the life of seriousness...He plays freely. His work is not different from his play; nor is his play different from his work. Play is the name of the unification of seriousness and nonseriousness for the child.”²⁷

While I agree with part of Miller's statement that play allows space for freedom and coherence and is a unification of seriousness and nonseriousness, I disagree that there is no differentiation between work and play. I believe that part of what makes play so enjoyable is because it is separate from work. I believe it is also this differentiation between work and play that allows exploration and learning to happen, because play allows a safe space where work can, but does not have to be involved. I also wonder that if the fact that white men see a correlation between play and work but many womanist scholars do not is because of the color and gender dynamic. I believe it is because we live in a patriarchal European society where white men are given the

²⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, No. 10, *The Philosophy of Nietzsche* (New York: New American Library, 1965), 25.

²⁷ David L. Miller, *Gods and Games* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1970), 115.

space to combine work and play in a way that Black women are not afforded because of their color and gender. White men can play at work, but if a black woman does the same she is not taken seriously as a professional or she is seen as not “doing her job.” Therefore white male scholars, such as David Miller, see how work and play go together in a way that black women cannot relate to.

In looking at Dutch historian Johan Huizinga’s idea of play, he too believed in terms of binaries. Unlike Miller, Huizinga sees the differentiation between play and work, but he also believes that play is separate from real life which means he does not see play as part of any cultural reality.²⁸ While I appreciate Huizinga’s differentiation of play and work I do not agree with his notions of play being separate from real life and therefore not being a part of anyone’s cultural reality. I believe that play is a part of real life as it allows space to develop morals and values that are used in everyday life. In womanist fashion I would affirm that one’s culture affects every facet of life including how one plays. How a black girl plays is going to be different from how an Asian boy plays because they have different social locations and different cultural realities. L.R. Goldman explains this difference in cultural realities as recapitulation. Goldman has laid out four theories of play:

1.Recapitulation. Associated with Hall (1906) and Gulick (1898), this mooted that the play stages of children recapitulated the bio-cultural history of development of the species. Child play was a rehearsal of ancestral activities, an instinctual, atavistic legacy which reproduced the sequential epochs of the history of culture – an ‘ontogenetic rehearsal of the phylogenetic hierarchy’

2.Surplus energy. In this play as a fundamentally goalless activity utilized energy not otherwise spent in subsistence (Spencer 1873). This hydraulic model assumed finite levels of energy, a compulsion to expend, and a presupposition about instincts and competitive activity.

²⁸ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 4.

3.Recreation/relaxation. Almost diametrically opposed to surplus-energy principles, this theory interpreted play as recuperation. In other words, play was engendered by a deficit not abundance of energy

4.Practice/ pre-exercise. Play is here conceived as an instinctual, adaptive mechanism that allows for the practice of adult activities. This theory has of course its roots in early Greek thinking and was subsequently embellished in the work of Groos, who has been generously cited throughout. Play as practice allowed for the assimilation of adult culture including games and sports”²⁹

An individual’s culture comes into play in all four of Goldman’s theories of play. A person’s culture is not only important but it affects how one uses their energy, relaxes, and practices, as Goldman has laid out above.

Before I begin to define play in the context of this thesis I would first like to assert that even in the very act of defining and analyzing play I am “taking the joy out of it.”³⁰ Part of what makes play, play is experiencing it. In this thesis play will be defined using Hans-Georg Gadamer’s notion of play as “the mode of being of the work of art itself.”³¹ Gadamer believed play to be the clue to ontological explanation. Play is a mode of being and existence in the world, specifically among black women and girls. This is what allows black women and girls to make meaning in the world in which they exist. Play includes art, games, drama, music, dance, “double dutch”, “red rover”, “spades”, etc. These types of play involve what Gadamer calls movement of “backward and forward.”³² This movement is essential in exploring oneself, the world, and the divine. This movement of going back then moving forward or moving forward then moving backward allows one to experience agency and decide their own behaviors, morals, and values which are incorporated in moving forward and backward. In this moving backward and forward

²⁹ L.R. Goldman, *Child’s Play: Myth, Mimesis and Make-Believe*, (Oxford: Berg, 1998.), 38.

³⁰ Stuart Brown, *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul* (New York: Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 2009), 16.

³¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1975), 102.

³² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1975), 104.

doctor, psychiatrist, clinical researcher, and the founder of the National Institute for Play, Stuart Brown has seven items that are properties of this play that Gadamer speaks of. The seven properties that Brown lays out in his book, *Play*, is “apparently purposeless, voluntary, inherent attraction, freedom from time, diminished consciousness of self, improvisational potential, and continuation desire.”³³ Part of play is “apparently purposeless”³⁴ because there are times when black women and girls play for the sake of playing and nothing more. Play is voluntary. There is no play requirement that must be met or any sense of obligation which is what makes play so unique. It is unique that play is completely voluntary and yet can signify so much and allow exploration of identity in the lives of black women and girls. Play is an “inherent attraction”³⁵ which gives pleasure and ignites excitement in black women and girls because it comes from within. Play is a “freedom from time”³⁶ in that it allows those who are playing to get lost in the game to the point that time is no longer an issue and hours can pass while still playing. This sense of time is especially important because our society places a high value on time and respecting individual’s time. When a black woman or girl is able to let go of time constraints and play there, is a real opportunity for fun and learning to occur. Play “diminishes consciousness of self”³⁷ which I feel is one of the most important properties in exploring one’s self. In diminishing consciousness of self, a black woman or girl stops worrying about how smart or awkward she is and she can play. Through the act of play, she is able to see who she is by how she plays when

³³ Stuart Brown, *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul* (New York: Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 2009), 17.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Stuart Brown, *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul* (New York: Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 2009), 17.

there are no constraints or self worry. Play has “improvisational potential”³⁸ which allows space for chance and spontaneity which helps black women and girls, develop creativity and explore themselves, the world, and the divine. Lastly, play involves a continuation of desire to play. Play leads to more play which allows more opportunity for exploration and creativity. Brown continues in his book to describe the six steps that play involves as laid out by historian of play Scott Eberle. The six parts that are involved in play are anticipation, surprise, pleasure, understanding, strength, and poise.³⁹ The anticipation that is involved in play is comprised of waiting for the play to happen with a sense of expectation and with this risk is involved because a black woman or girl never knows how the play is going to go or exactly what is going to happen. Play involves surprise because it can be unexpected and there are various types of discovery that is involved. Play involves a sense of pleasure or enjoyment of the play or a black woman or girl would not desire to continue the play. Play involves understanding because with play there is “acquisition of new knowledge”⁴⁰ that is gained through the discovery and exploration. Play involves strength because black women and girls learn more about how the world around them works and it empowers them to have the strength to power through experiences that might not be ideal. Lastly play involves poise which allows black women and girls to experience a sense of composure, elegance, grace and balance in life. As we have just learned play involves various elements and those elements come in various stages. J. Piaget lays out those four stages of play. The first stage is practice play which “involves non-goal oriented actions with objects...having actions and objects under one’s own control.”⁴¹ This stage

³⁸ Ibid., 18.

³⁹ Stuart Brown, *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul* (New York: Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 2009), 19.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Charles E. Schaefer, *The Therapeutic Powers of Play* (London: Jason Aronson Inc., 1993), 2.

involves repetition of activities such as turning ropes. The second stage is construction play which involves constructing and putting things together as well as grouping things. This stage involves things such as building a fort. The third stage is symbolic play which involves fantasy and the players “adapt reality to their own needs.”⁴² This stage involves role-play, playing house and doctor. The fourth and final stage that Piaget mentions is the games with rules stage with involves games such as checkers and sports games that have rules such as basketball and softball. Now knowing the stages and what play involves it is important to understand how black women and girls use play to express themselves.

“Play is an integral part of childhood, a unique medium that facilitates the development of expressive language, communication skills, emotional development, social skills, decision-making skills, and cognitive development in children. Play is also a medium for exploration and discovery of interpersonal relationships, experimentation with adult roles, and understanding of one’s own feelings. Play is the most complete form of self-expression developed by the human organism.”⁴³

Charles E. Schaefer defines play beautifully in his passage above. He explains how play is a mode in which individuals express themselves, especially black women and girls. Play, for black women and girls, is where they can be as “womanish” as they want and explore who they are as black girls and women. Play is not only significant culturally to black girls and women but it also has meaning. Play is meaningful in various ways. In his book *The Praeger Handbook of Play Across the Life Cycle: Fun from Infancy to Old Age* Luciano L’Abate lays out thirteen different ways in which play is meaningful. L’Abate mentions play as progress, fate, power, identity, imagination, self, frivolity, feasts and celebrations, a pathway to personal freedom and

⁴² Charles E. Schaefer, *The Therapeutic Powers of Play* (London: Jason Aronson Inc., 1993), 2.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 42.

community, catharsis, danger, challenge, and humor.⁴⁴ Play is meaningful as progress as progression from the play of our ancestors and eventually of those that come after us. Play is meaningful as fate in that when engaging in play the outcome is not predetermined and is often in the control of others. In the arena of sports such as football, basketball, hockey, and various other sports that require body contact, play as power becomes extremely meaningful. Often the individual with the most power wins in competitive play. Play as identity allows space for individuals to explore and discover who they are and define themselves. It allows space for black girls and women to explore their own identity and sense of self. Role-play and make believe are places where play is expressed and meaningful through using imagination. Being able to label and identify oneself, especially as one begins to specialize in a certain area such as; softball, running, or chess. This sense of specialization and exploration is how play as self is meaningful. There are times when play is merely a waste of time and energy done on purpose because play can also be meaningful as frivolity and nothing more. When individuals are engaging in whooping, jumping and hollering on birthdays, anniversaries, thanksgiving, Christmas and other holidays they are engaging in a form of play known as feast and celebrations. Play as a pathway to personal freedom and community is what allows individuals to explore their world and who they are in the world, including their community. Often times individuals get their feelings hurt and play as catharsis is the space where individuals explore and release those inner hurt feelings. Often times during play individuals get hurt and sometimes even killed. Play as danger is not only meaningful but a reality. During play there is often a challenge present, whether it is against an opposing team or within one's self. In preparation, practice, or competition play as challenge is indeed meaningful. The last of L'Abate's thirteen ways in which play is meaningful is play as

⁴⁴ Luciano L'Abate, *The Praeger Handbook of Play Across the Life Cycle: Fun from Infancy to Old Age* (Denver: Praeger, 2009), 22-23.

humor. Whether it is laughter, smiles, a joke, or something different humor is an important and meaningful part of both child and adult play.⁴⁵

Therapeutic Play

As one can see my idea of play is a delicate balancing act of seriousness and yet nonseriousness. There is a sense of playing for the sake of playing and yet there is learning and exploration of oneself, the world, and the divine. I believe that theologian Jürgen Moltmann says it best:

“...man’s games are an expression of freedom and not of caprice, for playing relates to the joy of the creator with his creation and the pleasure of the player with his game. Like creation, games combine sincerity and mirth, suspense and relaxation. The player is wholly absorbed in his game and takes it seriously, yet at the same time he transcends himself and his game, for it is after all only a game. So he is realizing his freedom without losing it. He steps outside of himself without selling himself.”⁴⁶

In his book *In Praise of Play*, Robert Neale discusses how the harmony between religion and psychology is what comprises play. While I agree with him to some degree I completely disagree with him when he states that “play cannot be promoted as beneficial to mental health or anything else.”⁴⁷ Not only does play allow a space for agency and values and morals learning but it provides a place of renewal as well. As Gadamer states “the movement of playing has no goal that brings it to an end; rather, it renews itself in constant repetition.”⁴⁸ Play is a space of constant renewal that black women turn to, time and time again. Play is “experienced as

⁴⁵ Luciano L’Abate, *The Praeger Handbook of Play Across the Life Cycle: Fun from Infancy to Old Age* (Denver: Praeger, 2009), 22-23.

⁴⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Play* (New York: Harper & Row, Inc., 1972), 18.

⁴⁷ Robert E. Neale, *In Praise of Play*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 79-80.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

relaxation”⁴⁹ and is therefore renewing. “The structure of play absorbs the player into itself, and thus frees him from the burden of taking initiative, which constitutes the actual strain of existence. This is also seen in the spontaneous tendency to repetition that emerges in the player and in the constant self-renewal of play, which affects its form.”⁵⁰

Play is a place of renewal and often therapeutic for black women and girls. There are several factors as to why play is so therapeutic and in his book *The Therapeutic Powers of Play* Charles E. Schaefer lays out the fourteen factors that are involved in therapeutic play. The fourteen factors are overcoming resistance, communication, mastery, creative thinking, catharsis, abreaction, role-play, fantasy, metaphoric teaching, attachment formation, relationship enhancement, enjoyment, mastering developmental fears, and game play.⁵¹ Play is therapeutic in that it allows individuals to overcome resistance and develop “working alliances.”⁵² The second factor is communication. There is a very distinct and special type of communication that takes place during therapeutic play that allows individuals to understand each other. The third factor involved in therapeutic play is mastery. Involved in therapeutic play is the desire to master their environment and with that comes self-esteem. Creative thinking is the fourth factor in therapeutic play. In thinking creatively one develops the ability to innovate and find solutions to problems in new and creative ways. Catharsis is a factor of therapeutic play that allows the release of tension, stress and emotions which is necessary in life. In life everyone has past events that might be stressful and bring up certain emotions in individuals. Abreaction is the therapeutic play factor that involves reliving these harmful events. This factor teaches individuals how to adapt and adjust to trauma. Being able to learn new behaviors is an important trait in play and role-play is

⁴⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1975), 105.

⁵⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1975), 105.

⁵¹ Charles E. Schaefer, *The Therapeutic Powers of Play* (London: Jason Aronson Inc., 1993), 5-13

⁵² *Ibid.*, 6.

an important factor in developing this trait as a part of play therapy. Using one's imagination and being able to be flexible and visionary are part of what results from fantasy play therapy. In fantasy play therapy individual's capacity for imagination is increased. Another factor that is part of play therapy is metaphoric teaching. These metaphoric teachings come from the myths that we create and the stories we believe in. These teachings allow place for insight in play therapy. Attachment formation is another important factor in therapeutic play. This factor allows for interactions to take place and the learning of various forms of attachment whether it be familial or friendly. Relationship enhancement is another important factor in therapeutic play as it allows relationship formation; it develops self-esteem and allows space to develop closeness with others. Pure enjoyment is another important factor as it gives an ego boost and allows space for enjoyment. "Play can reduce anxiety by the process of systematic desensitization."⁵³ Being able to master developmental fears is a factor that is very important in play therapy as it promotes development and growth as a person. The last factor of play therapy that Piaget mentions is game play. Game play allows socialization about individuals and the world as well as strengthening one's ego.⁵⁴ There are various stages and factors involved in play, which further shows how important and necessary play is in the lives of black women and girls.

For many women of color, playful games and activities such as hand-jives, "spades", "double dutch", "red rover" were and still are places of agency and ethical development. These forms of play have and continue to provide black women and girls with the space to explore their gender, identity and who they are as women. Play comes in many forms and serves different meanings at different times. There are times when play is meant to be frivolous, identity forming, challenging, or a multitude of other things. There are also times when play is therapeutic and is a

⁵³ Charles E. Schaefer, *The Therapeutic Powers of Play* (London: Jason Aronson Inc., 1993),13.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 5-13.

point of release and renewal for many individuals, especially black women and girls. These forms of play have and continue to allow black women to encounter and explore various morals and values and decide for themselves which they deem important and which they deem arbitrary.

CHAPTER 4

PLAY, THE GREAT SIGNIFIER

Play as Cultural Signification

Play is a way in which black females communicate, seek, and negotiate meaning in the world. Play is a way in which black females signify their realities and their place in the world. As L.R. Goldman stated understanding the philosophy of play involves three aspects: “(1) The role of imagination in human existence, (2) the ontological status of representations and (3) the aesthetic constitution of imaginal products.”⁵⁵ In his book *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* Charles Long states that signification is “one of the ways in which names are given to realities and peoples.”⁵⁶ “The cultural reality of blacks in the United States has been created by those who have the power of cultural signification.”⁵⁷ In the history of African Americans, Long mentions, how other cultures and groups of people have named black people’s reality and place in the world. Play is a space where blacks have taken and renamed their reality and their place in the world. Instead of play being seen as useless and frivolous play it is now seen as signifying one’s culture, a place of agency, a place of renewal, and a space of creating meaning. “The nature of the process of meaning-creation and its representation”⁵⁸ is how literary critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr. defines signification in his book *The Signifying*

⁵⁵ L.R. Goldman, *Child’s Play: Myth, Mimesis and Make-Believe*, (Oxford: Berg, 1998.), 18.

⁵⁶ Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Colorado: The Davis Group, Publishers, 1995), 4.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵⁸ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African- American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 47.

Monkey. Knowing the history between white persons and their domination over black persons, as Long suggests in his writings, Gates makes a differentiation between significations and Significations. Gates speaks of the renaming ritual that blacks had to engage in because of the language that white persons of power placed on them.

“To revise the received sign (quotient) literally accounted for in the relation represented by the *signified/signifier* at its most apparently denotative level is to critique the nature of (white) meaning itself, to challenge through a literal critique of the sign the meaning of meaning. What did/do black people signify in a society in which they were intentionally introduced as the subjugated, as the enslaved cipher? Nothing on the x axis of white signification, and everything on the y axis of blackness.”⁵⁹

Gates poses a very poignant question in asking “what do black people signify in a society in which they were intentionally introduced as the subjugated?” Although things are not as they once were there is still a sense of unequal power dynamics between white persons and black persons and I believe that black women and girls have and continue to use play as a cultural signification of the womanist tenets and ethical development that leads to their flourishing as black women.

⁵⁹ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African- American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 47.

Language and Silence in Play

As one can see language and the spoken word are historically very important in terms of signifying and signification. Long would say it is partly because “language has been prostituted by the very techniques that brought it into being.”⁶⁰ Gates states that “signification depends for order and coherence on the exclusion of unconscious associations which any given word yields at any given time, Signification luxuriates in the inclusion of the free play of these associative rhetorical and semantic relations.”⁶¹ Often times in play there may be few actual words exchanged while the game is still played. Charles E. Schaefer confirms that “play is a special form of communication. It is primarily nonverbal and constitutes a language quite different from verbal language. Play is a more fantastic, drive-dominated form of communication that is full of images and emotions.”⁶² In play there are various cultural understandings and understood meanings that surpass words or even prove more effective than words. As Long states “the interrelation of language and silence gives us a new understanding of the totality of the language and range of experience of the human being.”⁶³ The silence allows one to experience language and its variants as one of the many experiences of being human. I believe it is often the silence of play which allows individuals to pass over play as useless and frivolous, but I would say that often the silence says more than the words. Long also mentions in his work the importance of silence. Long speaks of the “voice of silence.”⁶⁴ He states:

⁶⁰ Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Colorado: The Davis Group, Publishers, 1995), 66.

⁶¹ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African- American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 49.

⁶² Charles E. Schaefer, *The Therapeutic Powers of Play* (London: Jason Aronson Inc., 1993), 6.

⁶³ Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Colorado: The Davis Group, Publishers, 1995), 68.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.

“silence does not mean absence...pointed to mode of their existence...silence is a fundamental ontological position, which though involved in language and speech exposes us to a new kind of reality and existence ...silence expresses a fundamental ontology of both objectivity and intimacy. It is a silence which may no longer terrify us, and it is a silence which in its showing might give us an understanding of the human mode of being which moves us beyond conquest, enslavement, and exploitation.”⁶⁵

I would like to take his notion of the voice of silence and add that to my notion of play in terms of silence that can often take place during play. I would deem this the silent voice of play which allows black women and girls to experience a sense of objectivity and intimacy while allowing them space to better understand the human mode of being.

Play as a cultural signification has a great deal to do with language and silence but it also has a great deal to do with corporate relationships that allow individuals to experience the diversity in cultures that we might not know otherwise. Aristotle believed that “human flourishing lay in the appropriate conduct of these corporate relationships...Aristotle’s assumption that human flourishing is best understood corporately.”⁶⁶ It is only in looking at the whole picture that we are better able to understand and appreciate the various pieces. The pieces which represent the various racial and ethnic backgrounds that individual possess. Luciano L’Abate mentions the complex issues that are involved around cultural play:

⁶⁵ Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Colorado: The Davis Group, Publishers, 1995), 69.

⁶⁶ Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004.), 23.

“Play is a universal, natural, and pleasurable experience, and in children as well as in some adults, it is an integral part of their lives. Play’s very nature is social, and by being social it is inextricably linked to culture. Although play is universal, the way play looks and works differs across and within cultures. Despite the diversity of play in different cultures, various aspects of play appear universal because play is integrally related to other major characteristics of all cultures, such as religion, levels of subsistence, social complexity, and child-rearing customs....the nature of children’s play across cultures can be reduced to four major types (1) play as imitation of and/or preparation for adult life, (2) play as a game or sports activity for physical skill, (3) play as a projective or an expressive activity, and (4) play as a pastime.”⁶⁷

In this passage L’Abate mentions how socialization is directly linked to one’s culture and cultural ties. Since play is social in itself, play is also cultural. One can often find that play relates to various characteristics of cultures such as child-rearing, religion, and various other cultural rituals that might affect play. Play in itself is cultural and the cultural signification of “womanish” modes of play can be seen through womanist tenets and ethical development which lead to the flourishing of black woman.

⁶⁷ Luciano L’Abate, *The Praeger Handbook of Play Across the Life Cycle: Fun from Infancy to Old Age* (Denver: Praeger, 2009), 47.

CHAPTER 5

ETHICAL DEVELOPMENT

During the backward and forward movement that Gadamer mentions is involved in play, there are various ethical developments that take place. During play, there is learning of values and morals which black girls take into adulthood. The ethical development in play has been known and used by philosophers such as Socrates. Socrates often used a mode of play when talking with his students. He would often break down the argument by asking questions and playing with his students as can be seen in Plato's *The Last Days of Socrates*.⁶⁸ Socrates was so playful that his student Plato chose to depict his last days in the form of a play with roles and dialogue. In the dialogue there is this banter back and forth between Socrates and the students he is speaking to. Play includes reasoning and intellectual activity that many philosophers such as Socrates and Plato used to draw out philosophical and ethical discourse. Philosopher Aristotle believed that ethics was an intellectual activity that involved reason and choice. Play involves reasoning and making choices and thus allows space for ethical development.⁶⁹ Play involves free will and human action all parts of ethical formation and development.

According to philosopher Louis P. Pojman there are various domains of ethical assessment along with evaluative terms that will show how play leads to ethical development. There are four domains of which Pojman speaks, namely: action, consequences, character, and

⁶⁸ Plato, *The Last Days of Socrates* (London: Penguin Classics, 2010).

⁶⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1999).

motive.⁷⁰ In the domain of action or the act one can evaluate or ethically assess what is “right, wrong, obligatory, and optional.”⁷¹ An act that someone does can be right or wrong. In order to make this easier to understand I will use the example of the game of “red rover” that Britney played at the beginning of this thesis. *Britney’s action of letting go of the kid’s hands can be seen as right or wrong or even obligatory for the game to continue.* The second domain involves consequences which can be “good, bad, and indifferent.”⁷² *The consequences of Britney letting go of the other kid’s hands can have a good, bad, or indifferent consequence.* The third domain of ethical assessment is character which can be “virtuous, vicious, or neutral.”⁷³ *During the game of “red rover” Britney’s character could be virtuous or neutral.* The last domain of Pojman’s ethical assessment is motive which can be “good will, evil will, or neutral.”⁷⁴ *Britney’s motive in dropping the other kid’s hands to run to the other side could be good will or evil will.* Regardless of which evaluative terms Britney falls in she is constantly being faced with these ethical dimensions in which she must chose her actions knowing her consequences with her character and motive in mind the whole time. These decisions lead to her ethical development as she makes these hard decisions.

⁷⁰ Louis J. Pojman, *Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong* (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1999), 9.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Louis J. Pojman, *Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong* (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1999), 9.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

CHAPTER 6

WOMANIST'S STORIES

Dr. Monique Moultrie

In womanist form, what better way to explain how black women and girls play is a cultural signification of the womanist tenets and ethical development for black female human flourishing than by allowing a black woman to share her experience and story of the power of play in her life as a professional black woman in today's society. I interviewed Monique Moultrie, Ph.D. Moultrie is currently an Adjunct Professor in Ethics at American Baptist College in Nashville, Tennessee and visiting Assistant Professor at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green, Kentucky. Moultrie received her Bachelor's degree at Duke University, Master of Theological Studies degree at Harvard Divinity School and her Ph.D. at Vanderbilt University in Ethics and Society. Moultrie's focus is sexual ethics and violence and AIDS, especially among black women. I asked Moultrie a series of questions to understand her context, her history with play, and the importance of play in her life contributing to her flourishing as a black woman. (See Appendix A) Moultrie is a 34 year old professional black woman who identifies as a womanist. As a young girl she played a lot, but there were two important aspects of her childhood that affected her play as a young black girl. One important aspect of her childhood that affected her play was being socialized with mostly white children and adolescents. Growing up with white children affected her play culturally. She mentioned how when she is teaching or presenting to all black audiences she finds herself more anxious than in other audiences, because

she does not feel as culturally competent having been socialized in white culture. She mentions how in these audiences of all black individuals she often finds herself guarding her own play because she is not sure how it will be taken among her all black audiences. Having experienced these cultural differences, Moultrie is able to positively affirm that play is a cultural signification as she was often left out because she did not cultural identify with some of the games that black girls played because she was raised in white culture. The second aspect of Moultrie's childhood that affected her play as a black girl was growing up in a neighborhood of mostly boys. Growing up with boys meant that she did not play or know of the games that black girls played such as "hand jives", "double dutch", or hopscotch. Instead Moultrie was climbing trees and playing boys games. This experience confirmed for Moultrie how important gender was in play. Moultrie mentioned that in her adult life there was a time when some young black girls and older black women were playing handjives and she had no clue how to do them or where to even start. In this instance she felt isolated because she did not know this game that the other black girls and women were familiar with because she was raised with white boy play.

Although Moultrie's play is different from her black female counterparts she still finds great value in play and views it as coming from cultural cues. As a professor Moultrie is able to use play in the classroom and at presentations to disarm the presumptions that students and audience members may have about her when she enters a room. She has discovered that often when she, a black woman, enters a room there is a sense of "heaviness" or "bitchiness" associated with her but when she begins to play it takes the power away from those presumptions that her students or audiences may have made and allows them to see what she wants them to see. Being playful in the classroom and at presentations allows her to effectively disarm the cognitive dissonance that is in the room. As a black woman and a womanist she finds that play

helps her cultural signify that she is not a bitch but someone who is approachable and down-to-earth.

Renewal and self care is another way that Moultrie experiences the importance of play. She experiences play as a means to keep sane in a crazy world. Moultrie plays and uses humor especially when talking about her issues of focus around sexual ethics and violence and AIDS because these are often dark topics that are life and death. These issues can be very depressing but she uses play as a way to talk about these issues and to have these conversations. Play allows Moultrie to keep is all together and sometimes she uses play as a defense mechanism which allows her to feel comfortable in her own skin. For Moultrie play is not only a way that she negotiates, communicates, and makes meaning in the world but it allows her to succeed as a professional and flourish as a black woman.

Fairness is part of the ethical development that play afforded Moultrie as a little girl, and this sense of fairness has continued to stay with her into her professional life. As a little girl Moultrie never liked the idea of being chosen last or leaving someone out of a game. She recalls often seeing the unfair treatment of others and thinking that it was wrong. Moultrie's sense of fairness and thinking that the world has to be fair has continued into her adult life. This sense of fairness is part of what lead her to womanism and its sense of communalism. Moultrie wanted and still wants everyone to be heard and included.

Although Moultrie's experience with play has been different than her black female counterparts she still sees how play is a cultural signification. It is because her childhood play was different that allowed her to see how much of a cultural signification play can be. She has also experienced the ethical development that takes place during play. During her play she realized what was and was not fair and that has in turn influenced her adult and professional life.

Moultrie also feels that play has contributed to her flourishing as a black female as it has allowed her space to disarm various presumptions and levels of awkwardness that others may have concocted while she is teaching and presenting. Play also gives Moultrie a space of renewal and self care. Play allows Moultrie to give voice to dark and often depressing issues that are of vital importance. Moultrie is one of many black women that would affirm my thesis that black women and girls play is indeed a cultural signification of the womanist tenets and ethical development of black female human flourishing.

Ms. Muriel Smith

Muriel Smith is a 22 year-old black woman who identifies as a womanist. She is currently a middle school history, geography and social studies teacher at New Vision Academy Inc., in Nashville, Tennessee. She is also a corps member for Teach for America. Smith is a recent May 2011 graduate from the University of North Carolina where she obtained her bachelor's degree in Global Studies. I asked Smith a series of questions to understand her context, her history with play, and the importance of play in her life contributing to her flourishing as a black woman. (See Appendix B) As a young black girl Smith played a great deal. She played "hand jives," "spades," "double dutch," "red rover," she sang and danced and she especially remembers spending a great deal of time exploring in the woods. Smith loves to play and continues to play on a daily basis. She plays in both her work and her personal life. In the classroom she writes songs for the students to use to remember information. She most recently took Usher Raymond's song *Confessions* and made a song about the Great Depression. Smith is playful in her very interaction with the students through dancing around and using play and humor to relate to them and to get them to learn the information in an open and free space. In her personal life she loves to play. When she is at home she plays the Wii and dancing games. She plays soccer with a fellow teacher everyday during her planning period. Smith also plays on a co-ed volleyball team here in Nashville and walks twice a week with her friends.

When asked if play was a place of agency for her she replied yes. Smith finds play to be a very freeing space. Play, for her is like a deep breath. Play allows Smith freedom to think through things and process and her decisions for herself. It allows her to be herself and to be ok with that. Play is also very therapeutic for Smith in various ways. Play is a way in which she makes meaning in the world. Play, for Smith, allows her the space to let go of her pressures and

responsibilities that might exist. She finds it extremely interesting that she does not go into play with the intentions of being empowered and strengthened but that is what play ends up giving her. Play allows Smith to be herself and that is ultimately what makes her stronger and is encouraging for her as a black women. When asked if she thought of play as a cultural signification she stated yes. Smith believes that many games and modes of play are culturally specific. She believes that the cultural communities in which a person is raised in makes a difference in the types of games that one plays when growing up. Smith mentions having friends from India growing up, and remembering that some of the games they played were different then the games she was familiar with. When asked about the impact play has on her as a womanist, she replied that play has helped her to become more confident in her identity and who she is as a black woman. Growing up her play groups were generally multiethnic, so much of her play was cross cultural, which was freeing and allowed her to be comfortable in her own skin and its color. However, it was in her familial play that she found more cultural games that shaped her. She found her blackness and more types of black play within her family. Play for Smith took place in both places and was equally as important and influential.

Play has also had an impact on Smith's ethical development. She mentioned that as a kid she don't have a job or professional responsibilities outside school, except to be a kid and to play. Often, people could be mean or too physical and she had to start evaluating things that she saw and hear for herself. In those moments were the first times she developed a sense of what was ok, what was not and what was ethical. She started to develop her sense of social engagement and what she believed about what was ok and what was not ok within herself. Along with ethical development Smith also believes that play has contributed to her flourishing as a black woman. She finds that play allows her to stay light hearted. Especially as a teacher being able to stay

balanced and in control is very important and play affords her that opportunity. Being able to play has helped keep her not only balanced but also feeling good and not overwhelmed. Play helps Smith not feel overcome by things so that she can be successful. Smith believes that in life there is a time and a place for everything and that there should always be a space for play, especially since it has been such a place of growth, discovery and renewal for her.

Although Moultrie and Smith have different childhood experiences and different experiences with play, they both find play to be a space of agency, growth, discovery, and renewal. While Moultrie had more of a white male experience and Smith had a multiethnic experience, both women found play a space of discovery around their identity and who they were as black girls. Both women find the various modes of play that I mention to be cultural significations of the womanist tenets and ethical development which lead to the flourishing as black women. As teachers, both Moultrie and Smith, find play to be a way to bridge the divide between student and teacher. Play for these women is a way in which they are able to brake down initial stereotypes and barriers to engage with their students. Both women use play in the classroom and have found much success in its usage. Moultrie and Smith both contribute their ethical development and sense of womanism to various modes of play and in turn these modes of play have aided in their flourishing as black women. Also both women find play to be a play of renewal for them. Moultrie finds play to be therapeutic and cathartic at times, while Smith finds play to be a place of release and balance. Play for both of these women allows them be stay balanced and in control without becoming overwhelmed but their students, their own problems, or society as a whole. Moultrie and Smith use play, not only in their work lives, but especially in their personal lives. Both women would confirm that when play is not had there is often a shift in balance and things seem out of order or extraordinarily more burdensome then they would be

otherwise. Moultrie and Smith are two of many black women whose lives have been not only affected but enhanced through play.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

Play is a way of being and existing in the world. Play is a way of making meaning and understanding the world. Play offers a place of self expression, renewal, and release. Play is a means in which black women and girls signify their realities and identities in the world. Play is a space where blacks have taken and renamed their reality and their place in the world. In play there are various cultural understandings and understood meanings that surpass words or even prove more effective than words. The silence allows one to experience language and its variants as one of the many experiences of being human. Womanism and the womanist tenets allow the space for black women and their experiences to be heard and appreciated. Through radical subjectivity, traditional communalism, redemptive self-love, and critical engagement black women are able to develop ethically and use their play to signify who they are and how they live in the world. Women such as Monique Moultrie and Muriel Smith are among two women who not only believe that play is a way in which they make meaning in the world, but actually use play to make meaning in the world.

In conclusion “womanish” modes of play for black women and girls are how black women and girls negotiate and make meaning in the world in which they live. I believe, and based on the research and interviews done in this thesis that what this negotiating and meaning making are signifying are the womanist tenets and the ethical development that lead to their flourishing from black girls into black women.

APPENDIX A

1. Do you identify as a black woman?

Monique Moultrie (MM): Yes I do, happily.

2. Do you identify as a womanist?

MM: Yes I do

3. Do you consider yourself a professional black woman?

MM: Yes I do

4. What is your age?

MM: 34

5. What is your current occupation?

MM: I am currently a visiting Assistant Professor at Western Kentucky and an Adjunct Professor of Ethics at American Baptist College in Nashville, Tennessee

6. What is your highest level of education?

MM: I have a Ph.D. in Ethics and Society from Vanderbilt University

7. Did you play as a little girl? What kind of play were you involved in?

("spades", "hand jives", "double dutch", "red rover", dancing, singing, etc).

MM: Yes, but it was more along the lines of tomboy stuff because there were not many girls in my neighborhood growing up. So I can climb a tree like no other.

8. Do you still play?

MM: Yes I play a lot.

9. What type of play do you participate in?

MM: I watch a lot of cartoons and animation. I go to places like the Adventure Science Center by myself, just to go. I also use a lot of humor, which I do intentionally to keep myself less serious because I deal with a lot of dark topics, (AIDS, sexual violence, etc) that are life and death issues and it is these issues that feed me so humor helps me disarm the awkwardness that comes from dealing with these issues when I teach and present. That's why my dissertation title was Horny or Holy. Humor reminds us that we can afford to approach these topics.

10. Do you find play to be a place of agency for you? Why or why not?

MM: I find play as more a part of self care for me. Play is how I keep sane in the world. I use humor to talk about things that would normally make me depressed. Play helps me keep it all together. Play is also a defense mechanism which makes me comfortable in my own skin.

11. Do you feel that play is a way you make meaning in the world?

MM: Yes it helps me keep everything together and stay sane when I deal with depressing issues.

12. Do you think play is a cultural signification?

MM: Yes, definitely. I would say more so with black men such as Tyler Perry's portrayal of black women as being sassy and humorous but with if black women portrayed themselves as sassy and humorous they would be deemed a bitch. Play comes from cultural cues. I am often more anxious with all black audiences because I was socialized mainly with white children growing up. I missed out on the games that black girls play. I don't know the "hand jives" and it makes a difference. I often don't feel as culturally competent in all black spaces so I usually am more guarded with my play.

13. Do you feel that play has had an impact on you as a womanist?

(keep womanist tenets in mind)

MM: Not that I would articulate. Play is not an embodiment of my womanism but I can see how the definition would lend itself to it for other womanist.

14. Do you feel that play has had an impact on your ethical development?

MM: Yes, in a sense of fairness and thinking the world has to be fair. When I was a little girl I never liked the concept of being chosen last or it being ok to leave someone out of a game. My sense that the world should be fair came from seeing the unfair treatment of others and me thinking it was wrong. That is part of what let me to womanism is the sense of communalism and wanting everyone to be heard and included.

15. Do you think play has contributed to your flourishing as a black woman?

MM: I do in a sense of my professional self. I teach and present playfully and it is effective for disarming the cognitive dissonance of the room and academy. Usually when I walk in a room there is a sense of heaviness or bitchiness but when I am playful it takes the power away from those presumptions and makes the audience see what I want them to see. This is especially helpful since, for many of my students, I am not only their first black professor, but their first black female professor so I try to be more approachable.

16. How do you feel about having to make a playful space, so you are not considered a "bitch," where your other male and white colleagues do not have to do the same?

MM: I think it is sad but it is what it is. It is our reality. I teach undergraduates so being playful works well in my context.

17. Would you agree that black women are often deemed "bitches" or overly serious because they are not afforded the space to play in their professions or they are not considered as hard workers or serious about their job?

MM: Yes I would agree that in certain spaces this is true. I believe that there are certain spaces where play does not show professionalism, but the professorate allows for play.

APPENDIX B

1. Do you identify as a black woman?

Muriel Smith (MS): Yes

2. Do you identify as womanist?

MS: Yes

3. Do you consider yourself a professional black woman?

MS: Yes

4. What is your age?

MS: 22

5. What is your current occupation?

MS: I am a middle school history, geography, and social studies teacher at New Vision Academy Inc., and a Teach for America corps member.

6. What is your level of education?

MS: I have a bachelor's degree in Global Studies from the University of North Carolina.

7. Did you play as a little girl? What kind of play were you involved in?

(“spades”, “hand jives”, “double dutch”, “red rover”, dancing, singing, etc)

MS: Yes too all above. I played spade, “double dutch”, and I especially spent lots of time in the woods exploring.

8. Do you still play?

MS: Yes, everyday!

9. What type of play do you participate in?

MS: I play in both my work and personal life. In the classroom I writing songs for the students to use to remember information. I am playful in my very interaction with the students through dancing around and using play and humor to relate to them and to get them to learn the information in an open and free space. In my personal life I love to play. When I am at home I play Wii and dancing games. I play soccer with a fellow teacher everyday during our planning period. I also play on a co-ed volleyball team here in Nashville. I also walk twice a week with friends.

10. Do you find play to be a place of agency for you? Why or why not?

MS: Yes I find place a very freeing place. Play is like a deep breath for me. It allows me freedom to think through things and process and my decisions for myself. It allows me to be me and to be ok with that. Play is therapeutic for me in many ways.

11. Do you feel that play is a way you make meaning in the world.

MS: Yes play helps me let go of pressure and responsibilities that might exist. I don't go into play with intentions of being empowered, but it ends up doing that. Play allows me to be myself and that is what ultimately makes it something that is encouraging and strengthening for me and has allowed me to become a stronger person.

12. Do you think play is a cultural signification?

MS: Yes I believe that many games and types of play are culturally specific. Definitely how, where, and in what cultural community you are raised in makes a difference in the games you grow up playing. I have Indian friends who have different games they play together that I do not know of.

13. Do you feel that play has had an impact on you as a womanist?

MS: Yes I do. It has helped me to become more confident in my identity and in who I am as a black woman. Growing up my play groups were generally multiethnic, so much of my play were cross cultural games which was freeing and allowed me to be comfortable in my own skin and its color. It was in my family that we played more cultural games such as "spades". I found my blackness and more types of black play from my family than anywhere else. Play for me took place in both places and was equally as important and influential.

14. Do you feel that play has had an impact on your ethical development.

MS: Definitely, yes. As a kid you don't have a job or professional responsibilities outside school. People can be mean or too physical and you must start evaluating things that you see and hear for yourself. In those moments are the first times you develop a sense of what is ok or what is not and what is ethical. You start to develop your sense of social engagement and what you believe about what is ok or not ok within yourself.

15. Do you think play has contributed to your flourishing as a black woman?

MS: Yes play has helped keep me light hearted. Being able to play has helped keep me balanced, feeling good and not overwhelmed. Play helps me not feel overcome by things so that I can be successful.

16. How do you feel that black women are often deemed "bitches" or overly serious because they are not afforded the space to play in their professions or they are not considered as hard workers or serious about their job?

MS: I believe there is a time and a place for everything. It shouldn't be shunned just because it sense nonsensical to some.

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