

Aaron Trammell, **Repairing Play: A Black Phenomenology**, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2023, 144 pp., \$20.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Kishonna L. Gray
University of Kentucky

Wade in the water
Wade in the water, children
Wade in the water
God's gonna trouble the water.

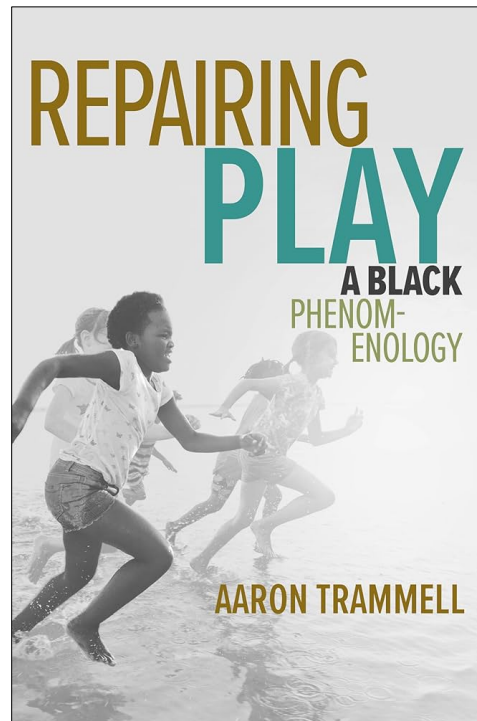
I open this review with the chorus of the Negro spiritual "Wade in the Water" because of Aaron Trammell's engagement with Black communicative traditions and practices of song. His academic contributions to game studies reveal that he is continuing to trouble the waters of play, and this book is a testament to that.

I would argue that Trammell provides generative conversations in and around game studies, media studies, and also Black studies. I situate his work in fields like Afropessimism and, as Frank B. Wilderson III (2020) states in his text titled the same, Black people are everywhere but are always excluded, and gaming is included in that. So Trammell makes the linkages between the horrors and legacies of slavery and racialized oppression and how these often become the sutures between historical practices that influence contemporary realities. Gaming and media are often left out of these institutional practices of exclusion and oppression, and **Repairing Play: A Black Phenomenology** offers a corrective for this.

Trammell offers a curation of experiences, and the table of contents illustrates this. The blending of the philosophical, theoretical, and applicable lets us know that this book adheres to the call of Black radical traditions. This text weaves the theoretical trappings of Black studies traditions, game studies, and media criticisms. In this way, Trammell explores how play considers the practices that take place in and around games, recognizing that some of these practices have no bearing on games or play at all. In this way, he offers a reparation of play, where Black narratives of pain exist alongside the pleasurable.

Trammell sets the tone for *Repairing Play* with a decolonial framework that forces us to interrogate the myriad of assumptions about what play means and who is afforded the luxury of leisure. In these examples, Trammell offers us a glimpse into his background as a scholar who has blended multiple approaches to develop narratives of play in real life (see his earlier work on analog play [Trammell, 2021]) and play online. The historical patterns unveiled in the book provide alignments for the previously misaligned and maligned curations of Whiteness and play.

Copyright © 2024 (Kishonna L. Gray, unicorn@uky.edu). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at <http://ijoc.org>.



Repairing Play also engages concepts like *affect* and what this means for play and leisure. While there are a variety of ways to engage affect within our work, Trammell frames his approach within affect as a type of stimulus and response, something that provokes our senses and demands an emotional response. I link this engagement of affect to the Black church tradition of *call and response*. Call and response is a mostly performative act that can be viewed as a communal practice of engagement. There is something that stimulates us, and we respond. This is the nature of gaming that Trammell highlights. There is something beautiful in the response of Black users and audiences within gaming in the face of so much oppression that Trammell engages. He also calls for a dismantling of these structures to provide a sort of respite, especially for minoritized and marginalized folks in the space. Many Black folks have adopted these practices in service of freedom and liberation, and you see some of the same practices within gaming. So this book serves as a sort of reclamation of history and storytelling to ensure a recognition of and rectification of past injuries and injustices.

Professor Trammell disrupts common narratives associated with play, recreation, and leisure when it comes to Black folks. He moves us beyond just seeing Black folks from a deficit model and a lens of harm. He offers a model of repairing these harms through play. He forces us to contend with the reality that we have been offered an incomplete theory of play, and he urges us to philosophically and theoretically engage what play looks like when Black people are at the center of the conversation.

Trammell moves play along, and it is a project that encompasses and surpasses its traditional notion of productive affects of pleasure. This is a powerful intervention because it highlights how Black folks, and other minoritized communities, have not traditionally held access to the privilege of leisure. As we have continually witnessed (and Trammell offers examples), games can be built around harm and exclusion, even when that harm is mediated through play.

Also, in this tekst, Trammell resists many assumptions we have about play; we expect our games to be safe and consensual, but in this turn we have forgotten that games are not always safe and consensual. Play is often violent. Play forces us to contend with the truth that we must always negotiate our own experience with that of others.

Repairing Play offers a variety of examples to illustrate the premise that when we center Black play, we can disrupt legacies and traditions of White supremacy. One such example is hide-the-switch, which prompts us to reconsider how we understand play. Specifically, Trammell argues that the Black experience shows us that we must expand our understanding of play to include torture, even in its most brutal and barbaric form. Hide-the-switch relates to the relationship between play and cultural identity in very significant ways. At its core, hide-the-switch is a game where children hide the switch and, when found, proceed to hit each other with it. While a very violent game, it illustrates some of the borders around what has constituted play in the Black community.

So what would it mean to actually repair the harms of these games and practices, and is it even necessary to do so? Trammell suggests that to repair play is to offer a sort of reparation to redress the harms that were inflicted on Black folks' pleasure because of the oppressive structures in which they

resided. So in this way, the trauma of slavery is not only remembered through storytelling but also memorialized in forms of play.

Trammell offers a framework to understand play if it's not repaired. Left unaddressed, we are left with a concept of play that allows players to uncritically appreciate torture even in its most bloody, brutal, and harmful forms and to render Black experiences illegible and unable to engage in pleasure, especially since play has been aestheticized to exclude the Black experience.

Ta-Nehisi Coates's (2015) bestseller *Between the World and Me* rightfully suggests that the world insists on seeing the spectacle of Black death. Further drawing linkages between Trammell's work and other scholars of Afropessimism, he espouses an orientation on engaging and exploring the past and making meaning in how current iterations of Black life are largely informed by this oppressive past. *Repairing Play* offers a sketch or structural map of human experiences through play and how much of these experiences are shaped by harm, pain, and struggle. And play is not exempt from these trends.

Trammell's work shifts how we think about digital pessimism. As other scholars have noted, social death describes the continued experience of slavery. For scholars like Frank B. Wilderson III, the state of slavery is a permanent condition. Trammell's engagement with BDSM (bondage, discipline, dominance, submission, and sadism) reflects this trend of slow death, over time, and then it permeates every social institution of life, play included.

Aaron Trammell creates a bridge to bring game studies into conversation with Black radical traditions. While he may not have directly engaged the work of scholars like Cedric Robinson and the aforementioned others, Trammell invokes the idea of belonging and exclusion and disrupting the past to reimagine a future that centers Black experiences.

Contemporary scholars of Black Game Studies are continuing the tradition of innovation and excellence, and *Repairing Play* is now a part of that canon. From Lindsay Grace, Samantha Blackmon, TreaAndrea Russworm, Stephanie Ortiz, and Soraya Murray to emerging scholars like Akil Fletcher, Reginald Gardner, and Javon Goard, *Repairing Play* propels the culture of Blackness and gaming.

References

Coates, T. N. (2015). *Between the world and me*. New York, NY: Spiegel & Grau.

Trammell, A. (2021). Black analog game designers. In L. Grace (Ed.), *Black game studies* (pp. 34–56). Pittsburg, PA: ETC Press.

Wilderson, F. (2020). *Afropessimism*. New York, NY: Liveright.