

# Cosmoludics: Sylvia Wynter, C. L. R. James, and the Crossroad of Cricket

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## INTRODUCTION: REPAIRING PLAY

Scholars have long considered play to be a voluntary activity that's free from the determinations of practical reality. In his recent monograph, *Repairing Play*, Aaron Trammell contends that this definition precludes grappling with the non-voluntary manifestations of play and, by extension, the ways that play can function as a means of subjection (2023). Recall, for example, the Mauthausen concentration camp: Among other gratuitous activities, Nazis enforced tiresome games of leapfrog to produce pliant, docile bodies. Trammell argues that, to deal with such phenomena, we need to think outside the white, European intellectual lineage that too readily figures play as an expression of freedom. Specifically, he engages the resources of the black radical tradition to rethink the violence of play.

This paper comprises three parts. First, I relate Trammell's project to contemporary discourses that are, likewise, trying to reimagine longstanding concepts by making recourse to non-hegemonic intellectual traditions. In particular, I draw on Hong Kong philosopher Yuk Hui's cosmological perspectivism to argue that different cosmologies ground not only different discourses about play but also different ontologies of play. Then, charting a brief history of the sport, I treat cricket as an example of a game that exists at the crossroads of two cultures and, moreover, acquires a distinct existence for each social group: British colonists and Caribbean subalterns. Finally, I build on the work of Trinidadian Marxist, C. L. R. James, and Jamaican philosopher, Sylvia Wynter, to consider play not free, but fugitive.

## From Cosmotechnics to Cosmoludics

Following the "ontological turn" in anthropology, which precipitated the notion that different cosmologies have different conceptions of "nature" (Lemmens 2020), Hui envisions a technological pluralism. He argues that Heidegger's sweeping diagnosis of modern technology as "enframing" is really a diagnosis of Western technology, now globalized: Chinese philosophy articulates a different paradigm for technology. Hence, instead of a single "technology," Hui proposes that there are multiple "cosmotechnics" that unify different "cosmic... and moral order[s] through technical activities" (2016, 19). To be clear, "'cosmos' does not refer to outer space, but... to

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locality. Each culture has its own cosmology, which is a product of its own geography and the imagination of its people” (2021, 41). Furthermore, this isn’t pluralism for its own sake: Hui turns to Chinese thought “to re-discover, or, to some extent, re-invent the concept of technics” (Hui and de Castro 2021, 397).

My contention is that Trammell asks us to do for play what Hui does for technology: a *cosmoludics* instead of a cosmotechnics. While extant literature engages the discursive ambivalence of play (Spariosu 1989, Sutton-Smith 1997; Henricks 2015), this approach treats different cultural epistemes as the grounds for different constitutions of play as such.

## **Black Skin, White Flannels: A Little History of Cricket**

The fundamentals of cricket developed between 1780 and 1840, during the Industrial Revolution. Far from the upper-class associations it has now, cricket was originally for rural “men of hand and eye” (James 1993, 160). This pastoral connotation lent cricket to its bourgeois appropriation and, moreover, integration into the British education system. Cricket allegedly cultivated a code of conduct that corresponded with the Victorian moral order (James 1993, 39). Consequently, the proliferation of cricket throughout the British empire was intended to have a “civilizing” effect.

Akin to Judith Butler’s argument that gender is a performance, not an essence, Wynter contends that “*being human is a praxis*” (2015, 23). Following Franz Fanon, she clarifies that the “white masks” colonial subjects don are not so much visually white as a normative set of desires, aspirations, and customs (1986). Playing cricket was one of the ways in which subalterns were supposed to practice the habits of “Man” – a European model of the human – universalized by imperialism (Wynter 2003). In other words, cricket was believed to be a play activity that inculcated the Victorian worldview – a colonial cosmoludic.

## **“Not a Man Move”: A Fugitive Aesthetics**

By the mid-twentieth century, it became clear that cricket was not reducible to this disciplinary function. James explains that figures such as West Indian all-rounder, Garfield Sobers, were pivotal in fostering a sense of diasporic identity (1992) – especially in the wake of the middle passage (Gilroy 1993). For instance, when the crowd infamously shouted “Not a man move!” in response to Sobers’s signature stroke, it manifested a collective Wynter characterizes as carnival: the game no longer a spectacle, but something the people live in (1986).

This epiphanic moment renders a fugitive unity. Fugitivity, writes Fred Moten, denotes a “desire for and a spirit of escape and transgression of the proper and the proposed. It’s a desire for the outside, for a playing or being outside” (Moten 2018, 131). Beyond the wordplay – not a (European) Man move – James argues that the aesthetic communion of cricket augured a break from colonial rule. Indeed, unlike Marxists who consider the aesthetic mere ideology, or depict sport as isomorphic with capitalist axioms, James does not figure cricket as a mirror of the dominant mode of production. Rather, he shows that cricket helped establish a counter-cosmology – one that ultimately contributed to state-level decolonization. James’s native Trinidad achieved independence in 1962.

## **Conclusions**

Overall, this paper makes three primary contributions. First, I propose an approach heretofore unelaborated in the context of game studies – cosmoludics – that can serve as a resource for researchers eager to “decolonize” game and play theory from a philosophical, and specifically existential, perspective. Second, I demonstrate that two black thinkers who have largely been neglected by game studies have much to say about the relationship between play and power. In particular, Wynter and James go beyond extant critiques of racist representations in games to treat play as a means of practicing and, above all, reproducing a racialized model of the human. Finally, the paper weighs in on debates around the aesthetics of games. Typically, game scholars update classic aesthetic categories for games. On the contrary, cricket is the basis of James’s aesthetics and, furthermore, a lineage of aesthetic criticism that takes popular culture seriously (Hall 1992; Surin 1992). Games, therefore, are meaningfully rethought as progenitors of, not latecomers to, aesthetic theory.

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