Playing with Possibilities
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Possibilities. There are moments in some lives when all seems possible. The single green light is shining at the end of the pier and the short journey across to a new world is there for the taking. Possibilities. The idea that what you do and make of your life is not determined by the world into which you are born. Possibilities: imagined futures, hope-filled directions.

Lives of possibilities are not guaranteed. Colour, class, gender, the accidents of birth routinely deny access to possibility. The cruellest act perhaps of the routine oppression of global capitalism is the denial of possibility. Life becomes a pre-prepared script, acted out by generations before, and re-enacted without a sense that anything else can be different. Born and dying in poverty, without ever seeing the glimmer of hope or justice is the lived experience of much of humanity at the beginning of the twenty-first century. That, and the snatching away of possibilities. As austerity and neoliberal policies globally reinforce and accelerate economic and political inequality, the super-wealthy increasingly realise the possibilities for even greater wealth at the expense of billions. Possibilities are the rewards, the baubles of greed. Yet another human right commodified, bought and sold, bartered for. A luxury item branded as exclusive, as something one earns by birth right. Possibilities can be played with, frittered away with vast carelessness, playthings that can be discarded into the valley of ashes. For the rich, there remains yet another and another toy to play with.

For two billion refugees without the sanctuary of home, dependent on the dwindling goodwill of more fortunate nation-states, possibility becomes a curse. Possibility reduces to chance, to a gamble between
running or staying, between trusting again or relying purely on yourself. Many nations increasingly see possibility as a threat. Refugees and migrants are feared rather than feared for. Millions of lost children, the price not of war, but of indifference. Allowing possibilities for those seeking safety is mercilessly construed as impacting on the chances of those already safe. Denying the “other” their right to possibilities is seen as protecting our own. Current times leave little or no space for alternative/possibilities, for imagining the world differently.

This book is a boat that beats against the current. It celebrates and links two things. Firstly, it acknowledges the right of possibility, the human need for hope in a sick and demented world. The obscenities of just eight human beings owning more than the half the world’s wealth, of Trump as a world leader, the permanent austerity that creates Grenfell Towers, the disgrace of Aleppo, these suggest the tide of human history is going out, carrying with it all the progress made in the last half of the twentieth century for a more just and equitable world. Rowing our boats against the current, claiming the human right to possibility we argue, as Kant did, is a moral responsibility. It is about sustaining the extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness to believe that, despite all the evidence, it is still possible for the world to change for the betterment of all.

And secondly, we link this possibility to play. There is also a romantic sensibility to our understanding of play. Play, as the world and work of the child, was revered by Coleridge (1817, 78) who understood that the imagination freed in play joins the human with the natural and supernatural world. It is “the living Power and prime agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM”. Freed of the rational world, the creative play of children is celebrated by romantics for its intensity and clarity of vision. There was a shared understanding amongst the Romantic poets that, if we were to remake the world, then we needed to remake it with the innocence and uncorrupted playfulness of the child. Imagination, released in play whilst a child or through poetry as an adult was seen as a way, not to simply transform the world, but to transcend it.

Play for us, as it was for the Romantics, is a form of political resistance especially at a time where the current of human history resists or punishes the social imaginary. Maxine Green suggests, “Social imagination is the capacity to invent visions of what should be and what might be in our deficit society, in the streets where we live and our schools. Social imagination not only suggests but also requires that one take action to repair or renew” (5). It requires imagination to disrupt the certainties of global neoliberalism that deliberately silences, fragments and displaces
So We Beat On: Boats against the Current


The neoliberal capture of the purpose of life as individualistic competition for achievement measured by the accretion of wealth is challenged by notions of play suggesting there are other things of value. Fun, laughter, the joy of being in the company of others for no other reason than to enjoy shared humanity is a challenge to those who would reduce all of life to economic transaction. The banishment of play from schools and, almost incredibly, from early childhood education, is designed deliberately to remind us that the purpose of life is serious, centred around achievement. The autotelic value of play cuts against a philosophy that suggests extrinsic reward is the key motivation for everything.

We have an ambiguous relationship to play. Even as we ban it from the classroom and suspect playfulness in adults, play is increasingly a commodity to be bought and sold along with everything else that can’t be nailed down. The most celebrated and rewarded people on the planet are those who have perfected the adult act of playing. Movie stars, who have retained their child-like ability to act convincingly as someone else, are paid vast sums of money for this very ordinary skill. They are rewarded by millions watching them play with their money, their celebrity and their causes. In the university where we work, we suspect people are nervous of those of us who are too playful, who laugh too much, who take their position and their status too lightly. Hierarchies are always threatened by those who see through the game, and can play it without taking it too seriously. As Bob Dylan says,

There are many here among us
Who feel that life is but a joke
But you and I, we’ve been through that
And this is not our fate. (Dylan 1965)

Play and playing with possibilities also gives us something else the Romantics understood, the capacity to imagine and to slow wonder. While the words *creativity* and *imagination* are used regularly these days, they are generally tied to the notion of innovation. Innovation, in turn, is generally tied to economic productivity. The value of imagination, play and slow wonder, as the chapters in this book conceive it, is connected to the idea that private imaginings are always connected to public possibilities. In this sense, imagination and play work “to un-conceal future possibilities in present actualities” (Garrison 1997, 177, in Halpin
Creativity, imagination, and play are not constrained to economic outcomes; instead they offer broader human possibilities.

We unashamedly celebrate a romanticism which:

… represents a profound critique of some of modernity’s most problematic and dehumanizing features. In particular its rationalistic reductionism and homogenizing technicism, which it wishes to see replaced by certain foundational human values that have been marginalised in modern society – values to do with the importance of individuality, spirituality, spontaneity, feeling and emotion and community. (Halpin 2007, 15)

Our stance is an affirmation of the ability to slow down in the context of an intensified and “fast” world. At a time when it is common to have multiple tabs open on our screens and information is only a quick click away, the capacity to slow wonder should be fostered. In academia, the pressure to produce as many outputs as possible strips us from the ability to slow down and ponder slowly about the complexities of life. It hinders our ability to be open to the new.

The authors in this book were all invited to play with the title, Playing with Possibilities. We gave them the freedom to find their own way into the book, sensing, because we knew the work they had been doing in the area already, what they might bring. Our great joy when the chapters arrived on our desks was to discover how much was held in common across our writers and yet the significant differences in approaches and theoretical frames provides a richness we had hoped for, but hadn’t planned for.

If this book celebrates the possibility of challenging dominant currents, the repurposing of education is a common theme. The vital place of play, the imagination, of poetry, song, dance, of image making in an education system that should be more interested in making humans more fully human than making passive consumers is argued for, evidenced, and theorised. If we are fighting currents, many authors in this book recognise that play allows us access to other flows. Flow that helps make time and space elastic, that allows for joy and wonder and learning to arrive all at once in moments of unplanned serendipity. The authors in this book understand that allowing ourselves to, and providing opportunities for others to, engage with this different flow is among the most important political processes of our times.

Perhaps most surprising across the chapters was a nostalgic tone towards play. There is in many of the chapters a sense of longing for the joy of childhood. There is a deep and passionate embrace of the way we played as children, a romanticised ideal in some places, but also a political
urgency in recognising that many children in countries like New Zealand and Australia are losing the chance to play, especially in school. In our memories is the innocence and possibility William Blake sings of. In our grief for it passing, perhaps we know as we yearn for that which has gone, is that the past, “[i]t eluded us then, but that’s no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch our arms further . . . And one fine morning—” (Fitzgerald, 1991, 148)

Introducing the book

In opening the book, Paula Morris’ brief essay reminds us of the joy of playing, especially as a New Zealander at the beach. There is a nostalgic longing for the freedom and beauty of imagined play and a recognition that, in it, sit the infinite possibilities ahead of us when we are children.

Mary Ann Hunter and Abby MacDonald’s chapter takes as its focus unsociable play and questions why it matters. It draws on critiques of aspiration-building in educational policy, the everyday creative practices of economically marginalised young people, and new materialist philosophy, to argue for the centrality of play in systems that seek to raise aspiration beyond (or in spite of) the goal to “learn and earn”.

Julie Dunn’s chapter centres on play and the early years. Julie’s chapter draws upon two key research projects, involving children from 5-12 years of age, to outline both the positive and negative impacts adults can have on children’s dramatic play. Conducted in both educational and non-educational contexts, these studies suggest one of the key roles adults have in supporting play is permission.

Rawiri Hindle and Robyn Trinnick explore ideas about creativity within the context of indigenous Māori arts education, and related problematic tensions of New Zealand curriculum delivery. They use the metaphor of the upper jaw, Te kauwae runga (lit. “upper jaw”; fig. “celestial lore”), to remind us that all creative acts are associated with the origin of the universe and cosmology.

Adrienne Sansom and Sandy Farquhar’s chapter traces how early childhood is a time associated with play, nature, imagination, creativity and simplicity and yet early childhood education is now increasingly referred to as a sector, and harnessed for economic productivity—measured, quantified and commodified. Their chapter reminds us that play is under threat in neoliberal times.

Robert Gardiner considers the possibilities of a new online educational tool called Squiggla to address the practical pedagogical problem—how to
actually teach creative thinking. He argues that Squigglia is an exercise tool to develop intuitive creative thinking capabilities.

Anne Harris, Stacy Holman Jones, Larissa Hjorth and Misha Myer argue ethnography has, much like culture itself, taken on various manifestations and characterised, as has scholarship on play, by a pervasive interdisciplinarity. They conceive of both play and ethnography as a trickster-guide to rule-breaking and discipline-slicing, a means by which to chart the “unmasking” and “unmaking” tendencies of creative processes.

Michael Anderson and David Cameron pick up on these ideas by considering how creativity, collaboration, critical reflection and collaboration are deepened through play. The chapter draws on recent research emerging from the “Playing Beowulf” project. The use of multiple and mashed-up technologies reshaped through the use of large-scale puppetry, video rendering, voice technologies, live performance, improvisation and machinima is shown to create deep learning and engaged playfulness in adolescents.

Paul Gardiner looks at how strategies that encourage creative collaboration often pose challenges to teachers preparing students for individual tasks. Paul explores research into playwriting pedagogy that develops student creative capacity and confidence. He focuses on the role of collaborative drama to increase student collaboration and risk-taking.

Claudia Rozas Gómez focuses on initial teacher education and argues the pursuit and privileging of the performative teacher has cast learning to teach in slimmer and more functional attire. She responds to five philosophical questions with short narratives to examine what might be lost when we diminish the space for sociological and philosophical thinking in initial teacher education. The narratives are offered as an affirmation that learning to teach should foster playful thinking and slow wonder.

Alison O’Grady and Kate Smyth talk about their interdisciplinary understanding of how drama and process drama as professional development and its potential to be powerful and disruptive in equal measure also provides teachers with the opportunity to assimilate and utilise the benefits of the creative facilitation of play. They develop a suite of five S’s to illuminate thinking about play and imagination—space, silence, structure, safety and surprise.

Jane Luton, rather than looking at play for students, looks at what play means for teachers. What does a drama and theatre teacher do when faced with an inability to play having succumbed to a sense of melancholia? Jane researched stories of resilience within the classroom from key
international drama educators. Interacting with playful personas who spend their lives playing seriously through drama, Jane’s research embraced playfulness. This chapter examines the ways in which participants at play can generate valid data and asks: can serious research really be playful?

Bruce Sheridan rounds out this section on play and schooling by arguing that playful learning allows implicit and explicit knowledge, whereas formal institutionalised education focuses narrowly on the latter and rarely incorporates non-goal-oriented play. Bruce argues playfulness is entirely intrinsic rather than goal- or outcome-directed drawing on these elements to argue a deeper understanding of playfulness.

Deborah Green uses arts-based inquiry and storying to offer the reader embodied insights into her lived role as art therapist during and following the Christchurch earthquakes. Deborah ponders her practice of inviting innovation and new order to emerge from the psychological, emotional, physical and existential chaos experienced by many of her clients.

Ralph Buck and Carlene Newall de Jesus provide a description of dance pedagogy in relation to community dance theory and play theory. They draw on theory of the elements of play to reveal the importance of play within community dance pedagogy.

Finally, Peter O’Connor and Ben Dyson write a play about a rugby match. Over beer, they discuss the game and what it might tell us about the nature of play in New Zealand culture. Looking at how play creates and manipulates space is something they both understand. But once the discussion enters into the relationship between play and ritual, play and games, the performativity of play and the ability to read play their playful banter gets a little heated.

**Conclusion**

Editing a book is supposed to be hard work with impossible deadlines and all the other seriousness that comes with producing a scholarly text. But we refused to see it that way. We have worked in the same department for almost seven years but we have rarely taught on the same course and we have never worked together on a book. This means most of our conversations have been about the world and how it would be a better place if Mission Statements were replaced with Poems. On a whimsy, Peter wondered what would happen if he asked Claudia to help him make a measurable outcome that justified our existence in the academy. We imagined it might just work, as long as we made our respective chapters playful and didn’t have too many references in them. We have laughed
lots and embraced the opportunities to play with ideas and to imagine fancifully. We were reminded that academic life can be solitary. Co-writing and co-editing provide unique possibilities for play. A pointed reminder the opposite of competition is cooperation and, instead of being hopeless romantics, it behoves us to be hopeful ones.

References

A memory from my school days in Auckland, New Zealand: it was 1976 or 1977. I was about eleven years old, and I’d stayed after school for choir practice. The choir stood in rows in a pre-fab classroom overlooking the staff carpark. I remember us singing: “With the free blue sky above us/And the greensward ’neath our feet/We poor gypsies envy no one/And our wandering life is sweet.” Although I didn’t know what “greensward” is, and had only seen gypsies on TV, where they were generally portrayed as unkempt and dodgy, I liked the spirit of the song. I sang with gusto, looking out at the half-empty car park, and imagining arriving home that afternoon.

There, waiting for me, were my dolls. Chief among them were a tanned Malibu Barbie I bought in Australia when I was seven, and a dark-haired Funtime Sindy. The dolls were given different names depending on the scenario and historical era in which they were the featured players. That afternoon, I know they and their clothes, furniture, and house were sitting in my bedroom, waiting for me to return and unlock the possibilities of the moment. Something about the freedom expressed in the song and the freedom of home—freedom from school and its schedules, and the relentless presence of other children—coalesced. I felt happy and excited because I enjoyed singing and, more than anything apart from reading, I loved to play.

How much time I had to play that afternoon I didn’t know, because—like most children back then, without phones or iPads, and too young for watches—I had little idea of time passing when I played. There was the time between arriving home from school and eating dinner, and the time between finishing dinner and going to bed. Our parents watched the clock: we were the ones called in from the street because we hadn’t noticed it was almost dark, or the ones summoned in from the sea because we hadn’t
noticed we were shivering with cold. While we played we could disappear into other worlds, beyond time.

Years later, a friend of mine in London asked me what I “did” when I played with dolls. She couldn’t grasp what it entailed. She and her brother didn’t really have toys, she said; they just had a piano. She asked: Did I act things out? Speak in their voices? I couldn’t really explain. When I played with dolls, I didn’t move much or talk much. Stories swirled in my head and I existed within a space created and defined by my imagination.

In my creative writing classes, I ask my students if they remember playing as children. I ask them if they remember being “in the zone” where everything in the world disappears apart from the imaginative moment. Most of them nod and look wistful. That intensity of play-time, in which we process the world around us, re-enacting or imagining, engaging in variations and new twists, is what we seek as adult writers. Not thinking, not planning, not deliberating—playing.

When we play, we imagine what isn’t there. My brother, who enacted cricket matches in the back garden in which he was, by turns, bowler, batsman and cheering crowd, was imagining hundreds of other people and the arena enclosing them. Sometimes my dolls’ house was a boarding school; sometimes it was a townhouse in Germany; sometimes it was a castle.

Once, when I lived in New York, I told a friend’s young daughter that I always wanted to live in a castle.

“I don’t need to live in a castle,” she told me. “Because I have a very good imagination.”

Patrick Bateson and Paul Martin distinguish between “the generation of new ideas (creativity) and their successful implementation and adoption by others (innovation)” (Bateson and Martin 2013, 65). But how does this relate to the work of an artist? Creativity resides neither in ideas or adoption by others. In a musician, creativity may exist within the moment of performance and the ability to interpret someone else’s work. Many thousands—tens of thousands—of musicians can reach high levels of technical accomplishment, but they lack the sensitivity, musicality and artistry that distinguish great soloists, or great orchestral and chamber players. These great players are creative artists because of transcendent moments of accomplished and nuanced musicality, not because of “generation” or “implementation”.

Bateson and Martin admit that, in the “creative arts … creativity may not result in practical implementation of any kind. The creative act may, however, be regarded as innovative when the outcome, such as a new style of painting, influences the work of others.” They go on to wring their
hands about how difficult it is to measure innovation and influence in art
when originality “is not best measured by popularity.” (Bateson and
Martin 2013, 65).

Indeed. Plodding distinctions like these reduce creativity to “the
generation of new ideas”, a phrase that suggests a commodified manufacturing
process conducted in conference rooms and oatmeal-coloured cubicles. Carrie Batton, in a New Yorker essay on Julia Cameron’s The Artist’s Way, complained that the word creative “sits right above ‘innovation’ and ‘disruption’ in the glossary of terms that have been co-opted by corporate America and retooled to signify an increasingly nebulous set of qualities” (Batton 2016, para. 4).

Earlier in their book, Bateson and Martin contend that creativity “is
displayed when an individual develops a novel form of behaviour or a
novel idea, regardless of its practical uptake and subsequent adoption”
(Bateson and Martin 2013, 3). I’ve argued before against a fixation with
the “idea”, fetishized in the creative arts as a moment of “inspiration”,
usually in a solitary situation (the artist in her lonely garret) (Morris 2016,
172). In this clichéd scenario, the artist struggles alone, in a fevered
torment of thinking, until epiphany strikes and art is created as a conscious
act. The idea is the thing. In fact, most artists do not exist in isolation and
the idea is rarely the thing—not the catalyst for a work of art, but that
work’s subconscious, seething and pushing beneath the surface.

“Most of the writers I know in the world don’t know how they do what
they do,” the late John Gardner told the Paris Review. “Most of them feel
it out” (Gardner 1979, para. 38). While this may seem to mystify the
process, Gardner points out the more concrete demands of producing art.
The fiction writer, he says in The Art of Fiction, “must shape simultaneously
(in an expanding creative moment) his characters, plot, and setting, each
inextricably connected to the others; he must make his whole world in a
single coherent gesture, as a potter makes a pot” (Gardner 1991, 46).

That notion of an “expanding creative moment” is one that’s hard to
teach to apprentice writers who want to be told what to do. They have an
idea, and expect me to reveal the step-by-step techniques by which their
stories will be realised. What they need, they believe, is an idea and a
manual.

They don’t realise how hard it is to work within that expanding
moment in which many things must be done simultaneously, and how the
apparently small details—gesture, action, the view from the window—
require imagination, technique and discipline, in order to work in a
coherent and persuasive way on the page. Instinct and accomplishment:
both must be in place, working together. The conscious self has developed
the skills necessary to write, but that’s not enough. The writer’s subconscious self is the pressure on the page. It’s the child’s play-mind, vivid with sensory experience, observation, passions, fears. Perhaps this is the state of ecstatic absorption psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2008) calls “flow”.

Stories, Flannery O’Connor believed, have humble beginnings—in the creation of individual characters and their actions—and “most people who think they want to write stories are not willing to start there. They want to write about problems, not people; or about abstract issues, not concrete situations. They have an idea, or a feeling, or an overflowing ego, or they want to Be A Writer …” (O’Connor 1970, 90).

For a writer, Bateson and Martin’s notion of creativity as “a novel form of behaviour or a novel idea” cannot be applied. The “idea” is not the thing. “The meaning of a story,” wrote O’Connor, “has to be embodied in it, has to be made concrete in it … When anybody asks what a story is about, the only proper thing is to tell him to read the story. The meaning of fiction is not abstract meaning but experienced meaning.” (O’Connor 1970, 96).

Too many apprentice writers are so seduced by the idea of the idea— the “novel idea”—that they believe this is the location of artistry. To be creative, they believe, is to have ideas. When someone I’m teaching or mentoring tells me they want to write a story “about” something, or that they have an idea from which the story, in contrary fashion, is refusing to materialise, I talk with them about the story itself, rather than its lofty and sometimes didactic aims. It’s usually possible, talking about the specifics of characters, setting and situation, to locate some concrete thing hidden beneath the heavy clouds of abstract thought and vague ambition. Writing a clear, taut, vivid sentence is a good start, but an artful story is more than a big idea expressed in a series of proficient sentences. For a writing student dragging around her big idea and looking to cram it into a story—or even a novel—something essential in the process has been hurried or overlooked entirely.

The hurry isn’t a surprise: creative writing classes at a university are only so many weeks, and students have to meet submission deadlines. They have other classes, as well as jobs, commutes, social lives and family responsibilities. They don’t have months to spend rolling disparate story components around in their head, daydreaming and imagining, trying out variations.

But this is another example of forgetting how to play. If I stayed after school for choir practice, walked home, changed out of my uniform, and ate afternoon tea while I chatted with my mother, it’s possible I had no
more than an hour or 90 minutes to play with my dolls—less if I had homework. But children don’t think that only having an hour means there’s no point in playing. They are restless prisoners always looking for the chance to escape. However little time I had for play on a school day, I sought it out. Play is not a prelude to the creative act: it is the creative act itself.

I’ve taught creative writing at a number of universities in the US, the UK and New Zealand, and taught classes in China and Europe as well. I also teach creative writing in schools and to community groups. In many school settings, where students are nervous about reading their work aloud in case their words and ideas are found lacking, I introduce another element of play to encourage them to see the writing we’re doing as an imaginative game rather than a task: each student adopts a name that’s quite different from his or her own. This might be Pania or Cleopatra, Thalia or Chimua, Ernesto or Te Rauparaha or the Empress Maria Theresa. Emboldened by their play roles, otherwise shy students are eager to step forward to read; they project their voices as if they’re addressing subjects or leading an army.

With older students, I incorporate a different kind of play-acting. Students act out gaits, gestures, short scenes: the rest of us come up with the precise, vivid vocabulary to describe what we see and hear. Is someone marching across the room, or stalking, or thudding? Is he or she sashaying, loping, strolling? I ask them to play with language, to try out strong verbs to convey attitude, mood and intent. A delight in the possibilities of the English language means access to a vast arsenal of vocabulary, and transforms writing from a frustrating chore to an expressive medium for point of view.

While many school students still retain a sense of play, it’s harder to entice university students to loosen up. The phrase “learning outcomes” makes sense to them in a way the phrase “creative process” doesn’t. A creative writing class, I tell my students, is about process: without the process there are no outcomes. The process requires time. While it may involve ideas and planning, neither of these things is necessary, and the process is not linear: idea, then plan, then execution of plan. It may involve false starts, reversals, changes of heart. The original “idea” may be jettisoned en route because, like any idea or premise, it may not work in practice.

In 2005 I lived in New Orleans, one of the hundreds of thousands of people who evacuated for Hurricane Katrina, and returned to a house that had flooded, to a city in ruins. Sometime early in 2006 I was down in the still-quiet French Quarter with my husband, and I wandered, for the first
time in my life, into a voodoo shop. There I had my tarot cards read by a
nervous, pale young man who lurked in the back room. He charged me
$20, and told me I was stressed out and depressed. My husband said he
could have told me the exact same thing for free.

But this young man also said something that I kept thinking about
afterwards. He apologised for being fidgety, and said he was freaked out
walking around the Quarter because the storm had displaced so many
ghosts. Time had been fractured, he said; no one was in the right place
anymore. I started thinking about what happened to ghosts after a
catastrophe like the levees breaking. What did a ghost do if the house it
haunted was swept away in floodwaters?

This was the spark of a novel called *Ruined*, a book I wrote in 2008
trying to capture something of the strange, dispiriting, exhilarating world
of New Orleans after the storm. I say “spark” rather than idea or premise
because, by the time I wrote the book, the story had evolved in my head to
something quite different. There was still a ghost in the book, and the
setting was still the city post-Katrina, but the story that really interested
me, I discovered, had deeper roots: the crisis that sets off a disastrous
chain of events in the novel is pre-Civil War, embedded in the inevitable
clash between old French Creole society, *gens de couleurs libres* from
Haiti, and brash new American money. It was only in playing around with
the elements of the story over a couple of years that the book I ended up
writing emerged. The initial idea was a false start, and that wasn’t a bad
thing: unlike athletes, the artist can have an infinite number of these,
without penalty. The artist needs patience and a willingness to experiment,
to play with the possibilities.

For in play, we discover meaning as we go along, or don’t worry about
meaning at all. We’re “staying loose”, as Denise Shekerjian describes it in
her book, *Uncommon Genius*. Creative people, she writes, “seem to have a
greater tolerance for the ambiguous circumstances that begin most projects
and are more accepting, even welcoming, of this unstructured time …
They are more willing to entertain a prolonged period of leisurely drifting
about, curious to see where the unpredictable currents will take them”
(Shekerjian 1991, 33).

In that time of drifting, we immerse ourselves in the moment. Things
don’t need to make sense. We don’t need a destination. When we’re
playing, we’re working—disappearing into our work, in fact, rather than
imposing something on it. It’s a dream from which we awake only when
someone calls us for dinner, or beckons us in, shivering, from the sea.
References


Yesterday afternoon, a young man was playing on my street. He was at the wheel of a car “burning rubber”: engine roaring—air laden with fumes and smoke. This short burst of enlivened activity engaged ALL his senses and almost all of mine, for better or worse.

Yesterday I also attended a university symposium about “aspiration” in my home state of Tasmania—an island known as much for its creativity (think MONA museum, Antarctic science, the birthplace of the first Green Party) as it is for its troubling levels of poverty, low literacy, and unemployment.

At the symposium, we had held a lot of hope in the room. Teachers, principals, administrators, and researchers, trading our wares: programmes aspiring to provide pathways to employment, education and training for local young men and women of my street player’s assumed age. I cannot say whether he was already on one of these pathways or not, but statistics and the time of day suggest his creative choices that mid-afternoon were not officially in “earning or learning”.

And I got to thinking about this street play, and wondered about the possible aspirations veiled in what I’d deemed to be dark and dirty play—dark in its blatant mis-use of resources and dirty in that these were streets lined with kindly worker households, a beloved dog park, the occasional burnt-out car body, yes, but also kids playing on their bikes.

But a different understanding of aspiration revealed itself today when I cycled past where this young driver was “playing with possibility”—and I found myself admiring the line and form of this bitumen tattoo. Without knowing the street player or his intentions, I, as audient and witness, arrived at a new appreciation for the thrill of his sensate expression and marveled at the creative thinking at play.

How did he actually do that?
What to do with this admiration for his achievement, even as I acknowledged its “fuck you” disassociation with all that this tough but sociable neighbourhood represents?

There are aspirations and then there are aspirations. Who’s to say which ones matter?

These were magical lines on the road—he was seen and he was heard. He left a legacy and he made his mark. Was this really about this street player’s lack of fair play ... or mine? ... implicated as I am in a system of schooling that fails to really read these kinds of marks.

This chapter focuses on dark play and why it matters. It queries what we mean by aspiration and troubles the normative assumptions of what constitutes good education. It seeks a new relational mapping of creativity and play when it comes to thinking about the purpose of schooling—and takes a creative and critical philosophy approach (Rodriguez 2016) to access an ethical perspective on dark play and its effect on us as educational researchers: particularly on how we might think and do schooling differently, and how we may re-imagine educational reform. It entertains the possibility of creatively attuning to play that is usually judged unsociable, disruptive and unruly, and investigating how it may affect and in-form (Massumi 2002) our understanding of the good educational act (Biesta 2010). In raising these questions and possibilities, we seek not to romanticise the voice of the voiceless (Lather 2001) but to render an example of a young person’s dark play as a critical event that interrupts a contemporary politics of aspiration. Our concern is whether it is possible to recover “aspiration politics” from an ideologically inflected mapping to school standards and achievements to understand, instead, more nuanced possibilities.

In addressing this question, we use the oft-cited four Cs of 21st century education as a lens to re-imagine questions of value in the educational act. What can we, as educators, learn from turning our attention to the dark play and supposedly antisocial, though no less virtuosic or creative, skills of those students disenfranchised from the very systems that seek to support them? What does an openness to their practices bring to our thinking about what matters and what motivates in school-based education? Here, we invite the reader to lean into these questions via our own aesthetic responses to the practices and policies we have been encountering.

Our aim is not to take a moral stance on the choices that young people make nor on the circumstances in which young people find themselves. Rather, we wish to investigate with curiosity how this exemplar critical event might open our eyes, as educational researchers and artists, to the
politics of aspiration and a global 21st century skills agenda in education. Mary Ann’s opening vignette of dark play is used as the playground for our reconsiderations and reimagining of the educational challenges of our time. We therefore use this exemplar as the springboard for inquiry; an event to think with, and a pre-text through which to view the four Cs: “Creativity, Critical thinking, Communication and Collaboration” (Fadel and Trilling 2009; Jefferson and Anderson 2017). In our unsettling of normative assumptions, we are playing with our own methodological possibilities for reflecting, re-analysing and revaluing the creative products and learnings of dark play situated outside institutions of schooling, but inside personal and social worlds of risk, motivated action and accomplishment.

**Exploring dark play through 21st century skills**

It is becoming increasingly recognised that knowledge alone does not adequately prepare students to thrive. In recognition of this, schools and educational researchers are becoming increasingly interested in re-prioritising curriculum and pedagogy to ensure students know how to learn, and to develop the curiosity and confidence to engage with the world as active citizens in small and big ways (Jefferson and Anderson 2017). While claims that the “question of good education seems to have disappeared” (Biesta 2010, 2), in response, the four Cs of 21st century skills (Fadel, Bialik, and Trilling 2015; Fadel and Trilling 2009) are being presented as a means of transforming learning and teaching by cultivating creativity, critical thinking, communication and collaboration for the better good for students as well as systems.

In this chapter, these four Cs become our situational lens through which we make personally significant meaning of the street-player encounter and channel a discussion about its impact on our thinking about aspiration and educational change. The street-player vignette provides a space for our lingering and for being affected by these larger issues. Here, we intentionally and critically recount the event in its incompleteness and complexity, disrupting—as it does—our normative assumptions about engagement, motivation, artistry and accomplishment. In other words, our assumptions and understandings of what is good in education. We were guided by Woods’ (1993) description of a critical event as having the “right mix of ingredients at the right time and in the right context” (102). We were able to embrace this notion in Mary Ann’s encounter of the street-player event and in Abbey’s encountering of Mary Ann’s experience. In the re-living and retelling of the experience (Behar 1996;
In the following sections, we unpack the vignette in relation to the four Cs to cultivate transversal and alternative thinking on this. We consider how the encounter impacted upon our sensibilities as artists and educators and how this affectivity enabled us to be present to the unsettlements of dark play. This process generated creative prose by Abbey and narrative excerpts by Mary Ann which we further entwine with critical discussion of educational policy and philosophy. Two perspectives are inferred by the font within Abbey’s prose: when stepping into the street-player’s action, she indicates this with **bold** text; and artistic and educative propensities of teaching and learning are indicated with *italicised light grey* font. Mary Ann’s narratives echo out each section and are differentiated by right-aligned light grey font. We incorporate these as a means to invite readers to sense the dynamic of a shared criticality in our encounters of the street-player. This process, a methodological play with possibilities, disrupts our own knowns and rejects a striving for objectified evidence as it conventionally plays out in social science research. Our aim, therefore, is not to prove that the street-player demonstrated the four Cs in his actions, but to play with what his actions meant for us, as researchers, educators and artists, using these lenses. Our writing thereby calls into question the very certainties we are often expected to daily strive for, as teacher educators and researchers, in evidencing outcomes that do not yet exist.

**Creativity**

Drop the clutch  Dip the brush  Fluid motion  
Shift the stick  Hesitate  Brace  
Soft hands  Sweep across  Unfold

What struck us both was the provocative and evocative qualities of the street-player event in relation to our existing perceptions of creativity. We both work in pre-service teacher education in the Arts and we find ourselves exploring the domains of teaching creatively and teaching for creativity (Craft, Jeffrey, and Leibling 2001; Sefton-Green, Thomson, Jones, and Bresler 2011) through and beyond the Arts on a daily basis. So it has been gratifying for us that, as school systems seek to reform in the face of 21st century post-institutional life, creativity appears to have become paramount in policy efforts to keep schooling relevant. Yet, while
creativity in teaching and learning may be an attractive future-proofing exercise embedded in the schemata of curriculum adjustment and pedagogical reform, the reality is there are many young people practising these desired skills of the 21st century all too well in their everyday lives. It’s just that, for some young people, those skills are not necessarily (or usually) applied in the name of educational aspiration; and, rarely, if at all, are they applied to the task of getting a job.

Creativity has variously become a trait to aspire to, a skill to be developed, a pedagogy to be implemented, and the holy grail of graduate attributes that promises to prepare students for future employability in jobs that seem unimaginable today (see Harris 2016b). Aligned with principles of play and risk-taking, creativity in teaching and learning offers ways to make schools as engaged and as engaging as possible in supporting young people to manage the flow of new (mainly digital) practices for contemporary expression, communication and innovation on local and global scales. Our street-player encounter was incredibly evocative of “in-the-now” rather than the future, and very material rather than digital. It was mastery and creativity made tangible, and it was very performatively present. Educationally speaking, is this an opportunity or a threat to how we see the creative impulse?

All these things that the street-player triggered for us were subjective and situated in our personal positions as artists and educators. Who’s to say that, while Mary Ann marvelled at the demonstration, a neighbour watching through his window was incensed by this street-play and thus pricked in a very different sense? Perhaps he reported it in a rant about reckless dickhead kids. The way in which we sense an experience impacts on how we make sense of it. If creativity is about opening up thinking and future options, what does this mean for our encounters of this creativity of the seemingly darker kind?

I (Abbey) have sought to infer in my prose the connections I drew between Mary Ann’s encounter, my own experiences of engaging in teenage street-play, and my creative propensities as an artist. I personally have felt the criticality of bracing the steering wheel executing a burnout, in readiness to catch and guide the car lurching to escape your control. And I relate these purposeful, practised and instinctive actions to where I place a paint brush as I sweep pigment into a composition at just the right place. And I (Mary Ann) am inspired by this transversal kind of knowing. Abbey’s prose is compelling and our sharing of similar experiences of youth is a surprise and a delight. We marvel at recognising a shared “grounded aesthetics” (Willis 1990, 22) of childhood—surrounded by Commodores and Toranas—yet from different generational and regional
perspectives. We find reason for at least 10 more creative conversations just on the play of our common, car-centred youth alone. Beyond the bright exchange, however, we both see the street encounter as a kind of dark play: play of the creative, but perhaps unethical kind.

Among the exhaustive research on creativity and education, small mention is made of creativity’s darker sides. While Harris has comprehensively queried the co-option of creativity by neoliberal agendas (2016a) and Carlile and Jordan (2012) reference the darker sides of creativity in their schematic exploration of creativity in a social context, specific concerns about the use of creativity for unethical ends have been raised mostly in other fields, such as terrorism studies, business, and psychology (Chamorro-Premuzic 2015; Cropley, Kaufman, and Cropley 2008; Cropley et al. 2010; Mumford et al. 2010). These studies raise awareness of contemporary society’s default toward creativity as benevolent, particularly in assuming that creative products are creative by virtue of their benefit to an individual or group. Yet, as Cropley et al. (2008) argue, the uses toward which creativity is put can be varied. Creativity is sometimes only accidentally or selectively benevolent, for example, and, as they argue in the case of terrorism, it can be intentionally malevolent. What needs to accompany creativity to allow it to “do good” in the world? What does this ask of the educator and researcher?

As I cycled over the lines on the road, I found myself admiring this creative product. While I’m familiar with the evidence of burnouts on the streets, I’d not encountered this pattern before. It wasn’t aspiring to be a perfect circle or a straight set of parallel lines. The tyre marks zigzagged twice before ending in a kind of curly flourish. The design appeared to be crafted, anticipated. As I glided over the lines on my own (pedal-powered) wheels, the sense of movement in the work was clear, the accomplishment palpable. It was dynamic in every way.

Perhaps we were able to recognise a particular view of creativity in this risky street-play as we ourselves at this time are engaging with how to teach something as complex and yielding as creativity with pre-service teachers. Personally, I (Abbey) found myself revisiting my own teenage experiences on the north-west coast of Tasmania, experimenting with friends whether it was possible to perform a burnout in my brother’s (automatic) canary yellow VL Commodore. The memory of a racing heart, tensed core, trembling hands and squeals that swung erratically between thrill and terror empowered and surprised me at the moment I connected two seemingly disparate experiences from my past and present.
Perhaps it is the combination of our personal and professional experiences that enabled us to be present in, and to, the creativity we drew from the street-player’s activity. This is not to say that it was good or bad, or that creativity was the street-player’s intention at all; we cannot speak for this. Rather, in being present to this action, we opened ourselves to question the wider assumptions we often make in the name of creativity and its role in contemporary education. For creative skills are not value neutral—their context, application, and reception by others are paramount in their effectiveness. If we largely consider creativity to be of benefit—a valuable future-proofing skill or trait—how do we then embed questions of: to whose benefit, whose future and for what outcomes? While we don’t wish to dwell on the particularities of creativity’s darker sides, the encounter refracted commonplace claims made in the name of creativity in education: particularly within the “paradoxical politics” of educational aspiration, whereby questions of whose aspirations, and for what ends, are rarely raised.

### Critical thinking

*Assess the risk*  
*Find the danger*  
*Cut close to it*  
*Squealing Burning*  
*A spray of grit and gravel*  
*Sets me on edge*  
*Acrid smoke I drink it in*  
*Enlivened by the act*  
*And disregard for consequences*

Alongside creativity and creative thinking, critical thinking has also moved to the forefront of Australian education policy via inclusion as an Australian Curriculum General Capability. The Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Authority (ACARA) defines critical thinking as learning “to recognise or develop an argument, use evidence in support of that argument, draw reasoned conclusions, and use information to solve problems” (ACARA 2014). It includes, among other processes, “interpreting, analysing, evaluating...inferring, hypothesising, appraising, testing and generalising”. Yet, like the case of creative thinking (Harris 2016a), school leaders and educators still seek clear and consistent approaches to its implementation. As distinct from creative thinking,