

‘Saber brincar’: A childist decolonial approach to play

‘Saber brincar’: Uma análise criancista decolonial do brincar

‘Saber brincar’: Une analyse enfantiste décoloniale du jeu

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Abstract

The verb ‘play’ has multiple translations. The verbs used to denote play a musical instrument and play in children’s games differ in Portuguese as well as Nordic languages such as Norwegian. The theoretical distinction between verbs ‘jogar’ and ‘brincar’ guides a decolonial childist analysis of play, focusing on the role of the ‘figure of the child’ in Euro-centric coloniality/racism. The study uses an ethnographic exploration of children’s play in the Landless Workers Movement (MST), highlighting the importance of ‘brincar’ in connecting children with their parents, grandparents, and the surrounding world. Decolonial childism advocates for an educational approach that prioritises connections without disrupting the conviviality between adults and children. This perspective views play as a foundation for intergenerational relationships based on links, connections, and care, shaping adults into good ancestors by *learning from* children and childhood.

Keywords: play (brincar), decolonial childism, education, intergenerational relationships, Landless Workers Movement (MST)

Resumo

No português, assim como em línguas nórdicas, o verbo em inglês ‘play’ pode ter ao menos duas traduções distintas. Neste artigo, a distinção teórica entre os verbos ‘jogar’ e ‘brincar’ orienta uma análise criancista decolonial (decolonial childist) do brincar, chamando atenção para o papel da ‘figura da criança’ no colonialismo/racismo eurocêntrico. O estudo utiliza uma exploração etnográfica das brincadeiras infantis no Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST), destacando a importância do ‘brincar’ para conectar as crianças a seus pais, avós e o mundo ao seu redor. O criancismo decolonial (decolonial childism) defende uma abordagem educacional que priorize as conexões e que não afaste o convívio entre adultos e crianças. Esta perspectiva vê a brincadeira como base para relações intergeracionais baseadas em vínculos, conexões e cuidados, transformando os adultos em bons ancestrais, que aprendem com as crianças e a infância.

Palavras-chave: brincar, criancismo decolonial, educação, relações intergeracionais, Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST)

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Résumé

En portugais, ainsi que dans les langues nordiques, le verbe anglais 'play' peut avoir au moins deux traductions distinctes. Dans cet article, la distinction théorique entre les verbes 'jogar' et 'brincar' guide une analyse enfantiste décoloniale (decolonial childist) du jeu, attirant l'attention sur le rôle de la « figure de l'enfant » dans le colonialisme/racisme eurocentrique. L'étude utilise une exploration ethnographique du jeu des enfants au sein du Mouvement des sans-terre (MST), soulignant l'importance du 'brincar' pour connecter les enfants à leurs parents, leurs grands-parents et le monde qui les entoure. L'enfantisme décolonial (decolonial childism) défend une approche éducative qui donne la priorité aux liens et ne supprime pas la coexistence entre adultes et enfants. Cette perspective considère le jeu comme la base de relations intergénérationnelles basées sur des liens, des connexions et des soins, transformant les adultes en de bons ancêtres, qui apprennent des enfants et de l'enfance.

Mots-clés: jeu (brincar), l'enfantisme décolonial, éducation, relations intergénérationnelles, Mouvement des sans-terre (MST)

Point of departure: the historical lacuna of decolonial thought¹

There is a historical lacuna in the progression of decolonial approaches that this contribution roots its point of departure in.

The lacuna concerns a minor marginalisation, which has major implications for the very possibility of (Eurocentric) coloniality and thereof – decoloniality. The lacuna concerns the marginalisation of childhood, particularly the figure of the child (Rollo, 2018a, 2018b) from decolonial thinking. Whether in its material forms (Tuck & Yang, 2012) or psychological forms (Burman, 2017), decoloniality is preceded by coloniality which is premised on a developmental logic that infantilises the 'primitive other' and thus steers a self-righteous structuring of the present being and potential becomingness of the deep interdependence between them. In doing so, the self-acclaimed, superior coloniser restricts and colonises itself too and misses out on the plurality of ways of being, knowing and doing that are outside its own structure; a lose-lose situation for all (Biswas, 2022). In other words, the process of infantilising is interdependent on a self-conceptualisation of adulthood as, as in the Euro-centric case: rational, civilised, cultured and so on. Such a self-conceptualisation, regrettably, closes off the very possibility of recognising and *learning from* (Biswas, 2021) the complexity that those positioned as 'infants' and/or 'childlike' bring to the shared world. Decolonial childism, then, is a mode of a childist orientation (Biswas et al., 2023; Wall, 2019) that goes beyond adult-centrism in Euro-centric coloniality and learns from the 'childlike' to expand transformative, decolonial thinking.

Decolonial childism is a theoretical intervention in decolonial theory which addresses the marginalisation of positions of persons identified as children, childhood as a structure, as well as the significance of imaginations of childhood and childlike for coloniality. With this rationale, decolonial childist interventions distinguish themselves from esteemed efforts that seek to influence epistemological frameworks of childhood

¹ A preparatory note regarding our approach to translation: Throughout the article, readers will find citations in both English and Portuguese. The Portuguese citations are supplemented with English translations in footnotes. We have chosen to cite in the language the respective texts were read in and offered our translation to support readers, instead of citing our translation and either erasing or placing the original language of reading and primary comprehension as a footnote.

studied in a particular field, for example, childhood studies (Twum-Danso Imoh et al., 2024). The scope and focus of childism and its various modes, like decolonial childism, can be distinguished not only from field-specific projects like Afua Twum-Danso Imoh et al. take on in childhood studies, but also from pertinent social interventions such as *El Protagonismo Infantil* in Latin America, which operates with active participation of children and youth in decision-making processes (Alfageme et al., 2003; Gaitán Muñoz, 2015; Liebel, 2007). In other words, decolonial childism resonates with efforts to level the playing field caused by geopolitical epistemological imbalances in any field, as well as the child and youth leadership in decision-making processes in existing structures. But it is applicable beyond that insofar as it addresses the lacuna in contemporary decolonial thinking and takes a step back to contribute to broadening the horizons of contemporary understandings of Euro-centric coloniality. Thereby, opening channels for theorising with the inclusion of children, childhood and the child-like.

Decolonial childism as a theoretical framework is not limited to childhood studies but is relevant to broader discussions of the human condition. By examining deep interdependence, relationality, and the ways in which adults and children shape each other, decolonial childism resonates beyond its immediate context, in this case, play in Brazil's MST movement. Its exploration of how power structures, particularly age-based hierarchies, influence human relationships and knowledge production allows it to contribute to wider discussions in educational and play theory, philosophy, anthropology, and decoloniality. This gives decolonial childism broader applicability, making it a versatile lens for understanding how we exist and relate in a complex, interdependent world. The association between the figure of the child and colonialism reinforces what Du Bois (1903/1999) termed the "colour line" – a civilizational hierarchy underpinned by eugenic logics that constructs a rational and autonomous subject in opposition to one that is dehumanized, subordinated, and in need of civilizing, if not subjected to outright violence. Such racialised geographies (McKittrick, 2021) produce profoundly harmful effects across Latin America and Brazil, particularly among the populations with whom we conduct research. In this context, we refer specifically to children living in communities that are persistently criminalised and subjected to state-driven whitening policies (Alves, 2020; Paterniani, 2016, 2019). A decolonial childist approach to play then assumes a critical political role by challenging state power's classificatory logics. By foregrounding relationality and participation over presumed rationality, such an approach has the potential to unsettle racialising structures and reconfigure how agency and subjectivity are understood in these contexts.

Readers might find it useful to approach this particular work as philosophical anthropology because it offers a reflection on fundamental questions of what it means to be human by engaging with anthropological research. By exploring the ways in which children and adults engage in play as a means of knowledge creation and relational existence, it offers a possibility to understand relational human nature by challenging internalised adult-centric norms – such as the developmentalist logics that view 'play' as merely a preparatory childhood stage for adulthood rather than an ontological reality spanning the human lifespan. It moves beyond the practicalities of childhood development and examines how play becomes a bridge between generations, cultures, and ways of knowing. This makes decolonial childism not merely a

theory for understanding ‘children’, but a broader philosophical inquiry into the human condition whereby play is an ontological condition shared by human beings regardless of chronological age. The approach thus resonates with disciplines that ask how humans relate, exist, and grow together in a shared world through constant negotiations. As a framework, decolonial childism is epistemologically positioned to examine the human condition through the lens of interdependence, relationality, and play as the co-creation of meaning; in opposition to infantilising, developmental rationales. In turn, broadening the horizons of understanding Euro-centric coloniality to question the hierarchies of ‘adult-child’ development on which it relies. This is the intended reading this paper is authored for.

The empirical methodology adopted involved an ethnographic exploration of the nuances of play among children within a peasant movement situated several dozen kilometres from Brazil’s capital, Brasília. The ethnographic fieldwork took place between July 2015 and January 2016. Initially, the first author made sporadic visits to the Canaã encampment of MST. As relationships with the community grew stronger, he spent two months living in the home of one of the peasants, immersing themselves in daily routines, political activities, recreational activities, and children’s school journeys. The research was authorised by the leaders of the encampment, and all children and parents of the study were consulted about the participation.

The MST, an acronym for the Landless Workers’ Movement, is a well-known Brazilian movement founded in 1984 that advocates for land reform. Given Brazil’s vast size and national significance, the MST claims to be the largest social movement in Latin America, though it encompasses considerable internal diversity. Its history of struggles for land can be traced back to earlier movements dating at least to the 1950s (Fernandes, 2000; Rosa, 2009) Brazilian literature describes the MST as employing an innovative repertoire of land claims, using a shared language with the state – what Lygia Sigaud (2000) refers to as the “encampment form”. While this social movement’s context may seem unrelated to the data discussed in this article, previous research reaffirms that this co-creation of meaning with the state functions as a form of performance or play (Belisário, 2016), which is an important unfolding of this work.

The relevance of broadening the horizons of understanding Euro-centric coloniality by including the ‘figure of the child’ to think and do decoloniality as a transformative project is what this paper will explore in the following sections. It will do so particularly by including Brazilian peasant movements’ children and the ‘childlike’ in the anthropology of play. In what follows, we begin by offering an orientation to various approaches to play theory in relation to the decolonial childist perspective on the subject, which emerges in this piece. Here, we particularly evoke the nuanced distinction between two modalities of play that are found in Norwegian and Portuguese, while choosing to remain with the Portuguese variant through the rest of the text. We then move on to discussing the social history of toys with an anthropological focus on the game of dominoes in Brazil. Finally, before arriving at concluding articulations of the relevance of play to decolonial childist theorisation, we analyse what can be learnt from the role of a ‘café-com-leite’ player.²

² This concept is discussed further in the section titled *Playing with “café-com-leite”*.

Play

Play has been theorised as an ontological structure of human society by cultural theorist Huizinga, who described humans as *Homo Ludens* (Duflo, 1997). Different approaches in studying play are roughly categorised in five groups, namely play as: an action, a psychological state of being, a structure, a meaningful experience and/or an ontologically distinct phenomenon (Feezell, 2013). In Western philosophy, John Wall (2013) has identified three main approaches which have a commonality in that they are all developmentalist. A top-down approach, as seen in Immanuel Kant's work, considers people's childhood and play as a start of animal-like chaos which has to be directed by a reason from above. A bottom-up approach, as seen in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's work, considers childhood and play as an expression of people's basic goodness and a natural spontaneity which can help resist the evils in the grown-up world. In John Locke's writings, play is neither considered good nor bad from the start, but a way for humanity to move forward by trying new things over time. While Locke's view, according to Wall (2013), might be closest to developmental psychological approaches as seen in Jean Piaget's theory, all three views are developmentalist insofar as the childhood state of play is on its way to becoming something else more 'developed'. Brian Sutton-Smith's (1997) evolutionary approach to play takes a similar instrumental view on play as enhancing an organism's ability for successful adaptation. The primary point of departure to ask questions in play theory is adultcentric whereby some see play as children's work, while others see it as a practice that helps children get ready for adulthood (Glenn et al., 2012). Childhood studies has approached play to understand how children read adult life and to move away from adult-centric interpretations of play (Evaldsson & Corsaro, 1998; Glenn et al., 2012; Lindqvist, 2001; Øksnes, 2008).

The childist approach to play is in line with that of childhood studies insofar as it is an effort to move away from adult-centric interpretations of play. It is distinct from the childhood studies approach since it broadens ontological understandings of play by learning from the context of children and childhood, for example, play as the creative capacity of being human – regardless of age. Wall (2013) explains this with a telling illustration of the case of Ying Ying Fry, who was adopted from an orphanage in China by an American family. Fry recounts her infancy in *Kids Like Me in China*, a book she wrote at the age of eight after revisiting her adoptive parents. Although she does not directly remember this period, she powerfully reconstructs what it must have been like:

To get people to have small families, the [Chinese] government made some rules, and they're really strict about them. But the babies didn't do anything wrong! Why do they have to lose their first families? I don't think those rules are fair to babies. (Fry, 2001, pp. 2–3, cited in Wall, 2013, p. 51)

Fry's story, as Wall (2013) interprets through a childist lens, reveals how she navigates the interplay of personal memory and larger structures—she is shaped by family histories, state policies, and global adoption systems, yet she does not merely inherit these forces passively. As both a newborn and an eight-year-old, she actively reinterprets and reimagines her place within these intersecting worlds. She is, in a sense, both played by and playing with the conditions that define her existence, engaging in an ongoing process of

meaning-making within a hermeneutical ellipse.

Tanu Biswas (2020) continues Wall's childist thought by paying attention to a linguistic nuance that she notices by examining the word play in English, German, Italian, French, Norwegian and Portuguese. As in English, German, Italian and French have one word to express the verb 'to play', namely, *spielen*, *giocare* and *jouer*, respectively. Norwegian and Portuguese have two distinct verbs to capture distinct modalities of playing *å spille* and *å leke*, which correspond intimately with the senses of *jogar* and *brincar*. The former refers to structured acts following a set of rules, for example, playing an instrument or a game of football, and the latter refers to unstructured and spontaneous actions whereby the rules are dynamic, responding to the momentary context. This distinction is nuanced, and frequently, these two verbs are considered synonymous. Yet, it is precisely this subtle distinction that enables us, within this article, to explore a decolonial childist approach to play. Here on, we will refer to the Portuguese variants of *brincar* and *jogar* because they correspond with the anthropological context that contributes to decolonial childist theorisation.

The attention to the coincidence of the uses in these two languages relates to the joint positionality and academic backgrounds of the authors. The first author, Gustavo Belisário (33), is an adult, white, cis, gay anthropologist from Brazil. He comes from a middle-class family of professors – a class position that, in Brazil, intersects significantly with whiteness and access to education. While not an official member of the landless workers' movement (MST), he is a supporter of agrarian reform and land struggles and has participated in occupations, demonstrations, and agroecological consumer networks. He has conducted research in collaboration with social movements advocating for land and housing fights in Brazil and Mexico, engaging with childist, queer, and Black perspectives. His anti-capitalist political stance has led him to critique the plantation system as a mechanism of epistemological homogenization and the erasure of differences.

The second author, Tanu Biswas (40), is an adult, polyglot, first-generation migrant, brown, queer woman childist philosopher residing in Norway, where she studied Norwegian. She comes from a Bengali-Maharashtrian, middle-class, upper caste Hindu family and was schooled in English in a conservative Catholic convent during the early years of India's economic liberalisation on the Konkan Coast in 1990s Bombay (a former Portuguese colony). She studied Portuguese language and culture in Germany (with a Brazilian Portuguese tutor) and in Portugal (with a European Portuguese tutor), connecting with strands of the Bombay-Konkan region and Brazil's shared colonial past. Her migration trajectory positions her in an ambivalent space – privileged through a university position in a wealthy welfare state, yet marked as distant due to her origins and being polyglot. Grasping worlds through words in her various languages is an organic part of theorising, as with the childist reading of play through its coinciding uses in Norwegian and Portuguese (Biswas, 2020).

This study delves into the distinctions between 'brincar' and 'jogar' in different games and practices – dominoes, dodgeball, 'café-com-leite' - to highlight fundamental axes of communal education from global South. However, the etymology of the verbs 'brincar' and 'jogar' can already provide insights into the

distinction we aim to bring forward. 'Jogar' comes from the Latin verb *iocare*, which can be translated as to toy around, pastime or joke. On the other hand, the verb 'brincar,' also of Latin origin, derives from *vinculum*, which in English can be translated as bond or link. The seemingly subtle difference in everyday language holds profound implications for a decolonial approach, particularly a decolonial childist approach. 'Brincar' implies a way to conceptualize play as the construction of bonds, valuing participation over strict adherence to game rules. This perspective allows us to perceive play as one of the foundations for an intergenerational relationship based on links, connections and care, or, in other words, that can shape us, as adults, into good ancestors (Biswas, 2023). 'Jogar' corresponds to a reading of developmental psychology, and is commonly used in the social world, which separates ages based on stages of cognitive abilities insofar as it focuses its understanding on the domain of abstract rules.

Dominoes and the social history of toys

The relationship between rules and play has been extensively explored in developmental psychology. On one side, there are games where the rules are clear-cut and predetermined. On the other, certain playful activities offer more flexibility in norms, empowering the imagination of participants to take a central role in shaping the unfolding storyline. It is fundamentally the relationship with the rules of the game that defines the criteria for participation and exclusion, the possibilities of competition or cooperation, and that distinguishes one playful activity from another.

Consider, for instance, the game of dominoes. The rules are established beforehand and have clear definitions, their absence would hinder the ability to play. In the way this game is played in Brazil: each player begins with seven tiles, each displaying two numbers from zero to six. A player is only permitted to place a tile when its number matches that of the tile on the table. Points are accrued by a team when one of its players exhausts all their tiles, and victory is claimed upon reaching a total of four points. If a player begins the game with fewer tiles than required or plays their tiles freely without regard for their turn or the matching numbers, the game becomes unplayable.

In a developmentalist framework, the rules governing this way to play the game of dominoes are intrinsically linked to cognitive abilities that vary by age. Clearly, there are players who are better than others as they handle their moves more adeptly based on a greater understanding of the possibilities provided by the rules. There are winners and losers. However, there are also skills that serve as prerequisites for playing: one must know how to count from zero to six, understand the concept of waiting for their turn, and be able to keep track of the total count of tiles in the game to predict which tiles have not yet been played.

We align ourselves with the criticisms that literature has raised regarding this developmentalist paradigm (Matusov & Hayes, 2000). The cognitive approach to play assumes a series of stages that correspond to a linear progression of cognitive abilities, logic, and abstract thinking, all leading toward a singular, adult-centric path of socialization within societal rules. From this standpoint, games like dominoes are not

intriguing due to the various ways of perceiving them, but rather due to the potential for children to integrate specific cognitive skills and develop into adults with comprehensive capabilities.

Despite our divergence from the core of this theoretical perspective, we agree with Wall (2013) when he argues that developmentalism has the merit of placing play on a continuum involving children and adults:

The chief advantage of developmentalism, for our purposes, is that it connects childhood to adulthood along a shared play continuum. Children's play is neither to be overcome nor preserved but rather formed in new ways over time. The disadvantage, however, is that play is interpreted chiefly through the lens of the fully developed beings that children, by definition *are not yet*. It is understood functionally as a means toward a future state of adulthood. This criticism is made by those in the field of childhood studies who view developmental psychology as having neglected children's own agency. More generally, play is not just a means to an end but a meaningful activity in and of itself. (p. 37)

Regardless of our disagreements, the fact is that this developmental frame not only appears in academic debates on the interpretation of play, but also belongs to the social world. As we will see, a lack of cognitive skills and a distinction between children's and adult games were mobilised in fieldwork to justify exclusion in a game.

During the research, domino was a popular game in the encampments of landless peasants and at their gatherings in public squares and buildings. It's a good pastime for those who have to wait a long time – hours, days – in one place to receive a response from the State regarding their demands. During one of the field excursions, overseeing the children in these gatherings uncovered a revealing insight into the essence of domino as a game.

Two children approached the table where adults were engaged in a game of dominoes in the middle of the square, where an MST (Landless Workers Movement) demonstration was occurring. The protest unfolded in front of the Palácio do Buriti (the governor's residence in the Federal District) and echoed the urgent call for agrarian reform. One of the children was very young, probably no more than 5 years old. The other child was older, around 11 years old. Their fascination grew as they watched the tiles being deftly manoeuvred, igniting an eagerness to participate. The younger child, drawn by curiosity, began touching the pieces on the table, exploring their textures. One of the men, perturbed by the perceived disruption, asserted that the child was too young to play, prompting tears that sought comfort from their mother.

This particular moment in the research highlighted a significant observation: it wasn't just children engaging in play; adults were active participants in games as well. Moreover, certain games were deemed specifically for adults, and the involvement of children could mess them up. While this discovery opened new avenues for research, it wasn't entirely new in the social history of childhood. Historian Philippe Ariès (1981) argues that the notion of toys and games being exclusively for childhood is a relatively recent concept, emerging alongside the modern idea of childhood.

According to Ariès (1981), the leisure activities of adults and of children were frequently the same, and the separation between games and play according to age only began to manifest during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This period saw a moralization movement in childhood that redefined gambling

– games such as cards, chess, and dice (we could add dominoes), previously commonly played by children – as unsuitable for them. Subsequently, a division emerged distinguishing games and play as appropriate for either children or adults.

When the man in the square tells the young child they can't play, it's not a moral prohibition but a cognitive limitation he's referring to. In this developmentalist framework evoked by him, the child not only lacks the ability to play dominoes but also the capacity to learn how to play—a skill that an older child possesses. From this standpoint, the rules dictate the structure of the domino game, and any deviation from these norms disrupts the game's flow. Mastery of dominoes entails understanding and respecting these established rules. Understanding the rules of the game is a cognitive matter and, consequently, an adult-centric age-related issue.

In Brazilian Portuguese, when someone doesn't know the rules of a game – whether due to lacking a necessary stage of cognitive development or simply due to ignorance – it's said that this person “*não sabe jogar*” (doesn't know how to play). This distinction underscores a situation where the terms ‘*jogar*’ and ‘*brincar*’ aren't interchangeable. ‘*Saber brincar*’ holds a significantly different meaning and would not fit to this situation with the small child, as we will explore further ahead. ‘*Jogar*’ thus seems to have a closer relation to the rules of the game, cognition, and competitiveness.

Vygotsky (1991; read in translation) posits that play cannot exist devoid of rules. Even within the realms of the most imaginatively creative make-believe, there exists an underlying framework of cultural norms that steer the course of play. Play, integral to the process of socialisation, forms part of a child's journey toward adulthood by internalising cultural behaviours and norms during these playful interactions. Even when subtly embedded, these rules underpin the essence of play:

Pode-se ainda ir além, e propor que não existe brinquedo sem regras. A situação imaginária de qualquer forma de brinquedo já contém regras de comportamento, embora possa não ser um jogo com regras formais estabelecidas a priori. A criança imagina-se como mãe e a boneca como criança e, dessa forma, deve obedecer às regras do comportamento maternal.³ (p. 63)

From Vygotsky's (1991) developmental, adult-centric perspective, we might deduce that ‘*saber jogar*’ and ‘*saber brincar*’ are inherently intertwined. The creation of connections thrives within the framework of cultural rules and standards; there's no meaningful play without these foundations. Every instance of play serves as a form of socialization within a cultural context, and within every cultural context lies a framework of rules and behaviours.

Conversely, Walter Benjamin's (2009) perspective (read in translation) aims to draw a semantic distinction between toys and playthings. According to Benjamin, toys, serving as tools for play⁴, encapsulate an imaginative essence: each toy, by virtue of its appearance and function, implies a specific set of play activities associated with its use. This imaginative aspect becomes more pronounced with the advent of the

³ “One can also go further and propose that there is no toy without rules. The imaginary situation of any form of play already contains rules of behaviour, even though it may not be a game with formally established rules a priori. The child imagines herself as a mother and the doll as a child, and in this way, she must adhere to the rules of maternal behaviour.” (Translation by the authors)

⁴ Named *Spielzeug* – literally “play-tools” – in German, the language in which Benjamin wrote, and *leketøy* (also “play-tools,” where *lek* corresponds to the Norwegian equivalent of *brincar*) in Norwegian.

commercial toy industry. Mass-produced dolls, cars, and games prescribe clearer guidelines on how children should engage with them compared to homemade toys. However, Benjamin argues that the nature of play itself is not solely dictated by the imaginary content embedded within the toy:

Hoje talvez se possa esperar uma superação efetiva daquele equívoco básico que acreditava ser a brincadeira da criança determinada pelo conteúdo imaginário do brinquedo, quando na verdade dá-se o contrário. A criança quer puxar alguma coisa e torna-se cavalo, quer brincar com areia e torna-se padeiro, quer esconder-se e torna-se bandido ou guarda.⁵ (p. 93)

Hence, the realm of imagination isn't bound by rules; rather, it has the power to reshape both the world and its regulations according to the player's creative whims. Benjamin (2009) argues that 'play tools', like dolls and toy cars, are different from 'vibrant play' and imagination by striving to replicate aspects of the adult world. In his view, the conventions, rules, and aesthetics of the adult world become embedded in toys, a distinction he draws from 'playthings', which emphasises spontaneity, movement, imagination, and the bonds between the child and the world. Benjamin's perspective leans more toward drawing attention to the difference between 'brincar' and 'jogar.' There's something in the spontaneity and imagination of those who play that isn't entirely contained or prescribed by the toy or the rules of the game. As we'll see, 'brincar' is associated with these creative and imaginative possibilities in dealing with the 'jogar', distinctly differentiating itself from its rules and behaviours.

At its core, the distinction between 'brincar' and 'jogar' sparks a discourse on the concept of culture. Instead of confining culture solely to a set of rules and behaviours where play serves as a tool for socialisation, within the framework of decolonial childism of play, how we engage with rules and socialisation becomes integral to the connections established within a broader community. It's not just about acquiring rules and behaviours; it's also about imagining, subverting, challenging, and adapting them, acknowledging these possibilities as integral aspects of 'culture' itself.

Playing with "*café-com-leite*"

During a day at the peasant's occupation, a teenager called Verônica⁶ (16), rallied neighbouring children for a game of dodgeball (Queimada). The Brazilian version of dodgeball boasts significant differences from its American counterpart. Both games share the objective of striking players from the opposing team with the ball, involving a mix of throwing, evading, and catching skills. Yet, while American dodgeball involves 6 balls and restricts the number of players to 6, Brazilian dodgeball revolves around a single ball on the field without a set player count. Furthermore, in the United States, dodgeball has been professionalised with national competitions, refereeing, and specific regulations, while in Brazil, it remains predominantly viewed as an amateurs' game.

⁵ "Today, one might expect an effective overcoming of that fundamental misconception which believed that a child's play was determined by the imaginary content of the toy, when in fact the opposite occurs. The child wants to pull something and becomes a horse, wants to play with sand and becomes a baker, wants to hide and seek and becomes a bandit or a guard." (Translation by the authors)

⁶ We work with fictitious names to avoid the identification of children who participate in eventually criminalised social movements.

Verônica gathered kids from the neighbourhood, both younger and older, for a game - except for two. She invited even an adult, Alberto (about 40), to play. Noticing Lucas (12) and Leonardo (9) weren't included, Gustavo (24 years old at the time of research) inquired why they weren't invited to join the dodgeball match. Verônica mentioned they weren't invited because they didn't 'know how to play' (*Não sabiam brincar*). When Gustavo asked what she meant, she explained that they 'threw the ball too forcefully,' resulting in potential harm to the other children.

Once again, '*brincar*' and '*jogar*' aren't interchangeable verbs in this context. Verônica's decision not to invite Lucas and Leonardo wasn't due to their lack of understanding of the game's rules or insufficient skill to partake in dodgeball. Their inability to 'play' stemmed from a different *topos*. They took the game rules too seriously and had an excessive drive to win, potentially risking harm to other children. Prioritising the bonds over the game rules or the urge to win requires a different mindset – one that Lucas and Leonardo lacked.

The game starts with two children doing team selection. They alternate picks until only Caetano and Victor, both 5 years old, remain. Verônica proposes that they can be 'cafés-com-leite' and assigns one to each team. After selecting the teams, Cleonice (11) marks the middle of the field with a flip-flop, takes ten large steps in one direction, marks another spot, returns to the centre, and takes another ten large steps in the opposite direction. This way, she marks the boundaries for both teams and the area where tagged players go.

The game kicks off. The ball starts in our team's possession. A boy launches it vigorously towards Cleonice, who narrowly evades it. Gustavo dashes to the field's edge to avoid getting tagged. Cleonice hurls the ball my way, leaving a smudge of dirt on my white shirt, sparking laughter among the kids. Retrieving the ball, Gustavo dashes across the opponent's territory and passes it to my team. As we hold the ball, it's their chance to target the other team, prompting them to sprint back and forth across the field. Rather than clustering on one side, our team strategically disperses across the field, taking turns in launching the ball to the opposing side.

While older children and adults dash back and forth, dodging the ball, little Caetano, one of the 'café-com-leite', finds delight in a plastic bottle. He fills it with the red soil, takes a stroll, and sprinkles the earth onto the ground. Occasionally, he even crosses the boundaries of the opposing team's field without disrupting the game much. When the ball eventually halts in their field, he releases the soil, complaining about not having thrown the ball yet. Reluctantly, one of the boys delivers him the ball. His throw is feeble, the ball landing directly on the opposing team's field. The game persists, now with the ball in the possession of the other team.

'Café-com-leite' is a special status in the game. Younger children take part, but under different conditions: the ball cannot be thrown at them with the same force and intent as with the other participants; it's ensured that the 'café-com-leite' throws the ball without the expectation that it will contribute to their team's victory; their movement across the field takes very distinct directions from the other players and doesn't need to adhere to the established boundaries.

In the literal sense of the Brazilian Portuguese expression, ‘café-com-leite’ means ‘milk with coffee,’ a blend that softens the taste of coffee, allowing those with more sensitive palates to enjoy it despite its bitterness. In the context of playing with children, ‘café-com-leite’ is less about imposing new rules (‘you can’t throw hard at them’) and more about softening the existing rules to encourage greater participation in the game. The gentler the treatment of the rules, the more personalised the possibilities for everyone to participate in the game, regardless of cognitive, behavioural, developmental, or competency-related barriers.

Another characteristic of the ‘café-com-leite’ players is their ability to make multiple games coexist. This concept resonates with Guilherme Fians’ (2015) observation of young children playing ‘one game within another.’ For instance, during a dodgeball match, one child, as noted by Gustavo, ascended a wall, pretending the ground below was a pool of lava. The child’s challenge was twofold: avoiding the imaginary hazard while actively participating in the dodgeball game. Similarly, for Caetano, dodgeball is intertwined with games involving a plastic bottle and the terrain. Engaged in several games simultaneously, these children’s trajectories differed significantly from those merely running between set boundaries in the field, as they were more focused on avoiding being tagged.

Once again, our distance from the developmental framework is made explicit. The Piagetian reading that children up to a certain age have an egocentric perspective on play because they are unable to discern the perspective of anyone other than themselves does not hold up in this empirical case. The child simultaneously plays several games, some with himself and a bottle and others with other people. We corroborate the criticism that it is Piaget’s adult-centrism that is revealed when he judges the child’s incapacity based on his own inability to see the child’s perspective:

It is possible to argue that what Piaget called the children’s egocentrism was actually Piaget’s adultocentrism of confusing the children’s unfamiliarity and disengagement with the task as defined by the researcher and attributing to the children the cognitive deficit of egocentrism. (Matusov & Hayes, 2000, p. 232)

In this case, it is the inability to take part in several games at the same time that reveals an adult-centric difficulty in shifting one’s own perspective and not the multivariate perspective of those who interact with the natural and social environment based on several simultaneous logics.

When playing with ‘café-com-leite’ participants, a skilled player isn’t solely determined by the relentless pursuit of victory. A good player is attentive to the specifics surrounding each person’s participation, even if it occasionally means ceding ball control to their opponent. The coexistence of different ages— Caetano at 5 and Alberto around 40—during dodgeball requires the softening of rules to accommodate various games and diverse cognitive systems. ‘Saber *brincar*’ differs from ‘saber *jogar*’ by prioritising connections over the desire to win.

The more earnestly the game or playful activity is approached, the narrower the space becomes for accommodating ‘café-com-leite’ participants. In essence, as one loses sight of the joy of simply playing, fewer diverse games find room within the activity. The distinction between adults and children dissolves in the realm of play. In our participation, Alberto and I engage just as Cleonice or Caetano would. Depending

on the game, very young children might struggle due to unfamiliarity with the rules. Moreover, play isn't confined to children alone, or even exclusively to humans (Bateson, 1972/2000). The differences between 'café-com-leite' players and others are navigated within the play as they unfold.

A bridge in the lacuna: bonding with decolonial childism

The differentiation between a play style centred on fostering connections and constructing bonds, and another focused on adhering to game rules and the desire to prevail over other competitors enables a perspective of decolonial childism of play. These distinct orders of reality, borrowing the expression from the Sri Lankan Stanley Tambiah (2013), bring about subtle differences in the dynamics of play but are of great relevance when considering the variations in the global south's modes of life.

Stanley Tambiah (2013), revisiting an anthropological debate initiated by Levy-Bruhl, meticulously dissects two modes of apprehending the cosmos. According to him, these structures of reality are universally encountered, whether in a hybrid or complementary manner, in all human beings. They play a significant role in delineating what separates a 'primitive mentality' from a 'modern mentality,' employing the somewhat anachronistic terminology of the 19th century, but also the difference between magic/science; holism/individualism; etc. These two modes are called by him participation and causality:

Essas duas orientações chamarei de participação *versus* casualidade. Causalidade é, fundamentalmente, representada por categorias, regras e metodologias das ciências positivas e da racionalidade discursiva lógico-matemática. O foco científico envolve um tipo particular de distanciamento, uma neutralidade afetiva e certa abstração em relação aos eventos do mundo.⁷ (p. 211)

On the other hand, the author provides the following definition of participation (emphasis by authors):

A participação pode ocorrer quando pessoas, grupos, animais, lugares e fenômenos da natureza são representados em relação de contiguidade e essa relação é transladada a uma relação de existência imediata e afinidades compartilhadas. (...) Além disso, a relação de participação também pode ocorrer entre pessoas: *o vínculo entre pais e filhos*, a relação entre parentes por laços de sangue e amizade; a transmissão de carisma ou metta através de amuletos e talismãs entre um santo budista e seus seguidores (ou entre a realiza thai e seus súditos); o conceito indiano de darshan de uma deidade cujo cuidado recai sobre seus devotos à medida em que estes também olham por ela – tudo isso são intimações de participação. A conectividade entre pessoas, a sensação de fazer parte de um todo de relacionamentos, tal como descrita por Gilligan e Kakar, também são pontes para a realidade da participação.⁸ (Tambiah, 2013, s. 213)

The analytical distinction drawn by Stanley Tambiah between participation and causality sheds light on

⁷ I will call these two orientations participation versus causality. Causality is fundamentally represented by categories, rules, and methodologies of the positive sciences and logical-mathematical discursive rationality. The scientific focus involves a particular type of distancing, an affective neutrality, and a certain abstraction in relation to the events of the world." (Translation by the authors)

⁸ "Participation can occur when people, groups, animals, places, and natural phenomena are represented in a relationship of contiguity, and this relationship is translated into a relationship of immediate existence and shared affinities. [...] Moreover, the relationship of participation can also occur among people: *the bond between parents and children*, the relationship among relatives by blood ties and friendship; the transmission of charisma or metta through amulets and talismans between a Buddhist saint and their followers (or between a Thai ruler and their subjects); the Indian concept of darshan of a deity whose care extends to their devotees as they also watch over her – all of this signifies participation. The connectivity between people, the feeling of being part of a whole of relationships, as described by Gilligan and Kakar, also serves as bridges to the reality of participation." (Translation and emphasis by the authors)

certain aspects of our exploration into the differentiation between ‘brincar’ and ‘jogar’. The cultural emphasis placed on the rules of the game and this notion of “affective neutrality” suggests that specific configurations of languages, educational systems, and interactions between adults and children indicate a socialisation of this logical-mathematical discursive rationality. On the other hand, the valorisation of ‘saber brincar’ in the studied ethnographic contexts raises the hypothesis of an intention to tread another path that brings play closer to magic, to holism in the following sense: play is a way of ordering the world that entangles the earth, animals, deities, different ages, plants and the worlds in between.

Ultimately, we can understand that every child – even those from the global north – encounters, in their play, a connection with diverse worlds and nature. Yet, we may question the inevitable progression towards abstract thinking and logical-mathematical rationality as the exclusive avenue for socialisation and the primary pedagogical contribution of games and play. In some communities, the cherished aspects of play lie precisely in the opportunities they offer to connect with the whole.

Antônio Bispo dos Santos (2015) prominent leader among Brazilian quilombola⁹ communities, echoes this sentiment by highlighting the contrast between what he terms the “Euro-Christian monotheistic matrix” and the “Afro-Pindoramic¹⁰ polytheistic manifestations”. According to the author, the divergence in these thought frameworks is epitomized by the contrast between capoeira and football. This underscores that the semantic senses from ‘brincar’ and ‘jogar’ in Brazilian Portuguese aren’t mere linguistic translations but encapsulate distinct cosmological perspectives. According to him:

Observando o conteúdo organizativo e os regramentos que governam essas diferentes modalidades, logo podemos perceber que as manifestações de matriz eurocristã monoteísta trabalham o coletivo de forma segmentada e as manifestações afro-pindorâmicas politeístas trabalham o indivíduo de forma integrada. Um exemplo ilustrativo é a diferença entre o futebol (criados pelos ingleses, um povo de cosmovisão monoteísta) e a capoeira (criada pelos povos afro-pindorâmicos, de cosmovisão politeísta). O jogo de futebol é regido por regras estáticas e pré-definidas, onde vinte e duas pessoas jogam, uma pessoa julga e milhares de pessoas assistem. Pode ocorrer que entre as pessoas que assistem exista alguém que jogue melhor que uma das vinte e duas pessoas que estão jogando. Mesmo assim, dificilmente esse alguém poderá entrar no jogo. Numa roda de capoeira, regida pelos ensinamentos de vida, podemos ter cinquenta pessoas jogando, uma pessoa ensinando e pouquíssimas assistindo. Entre as poucas pessoas que assistem pode haver alguma que nunca viu a capoeira. No entanto, se esta quiser, ela pode entrar na roda e jogar.¹¹ (p. 42)

⁹ Quilombos are self-governing black communities from Brazil characterized by the collective pursuit of cultural, educational, political, and environmental activities. Usually, these autonomous settlements are mythically traced back to enslaved individuals who successfully liberated themselves from captivity. Notably, quilombos share striking similarities with maroon communities in Caribbean countries.

¹⁰ “Pindorama” originates from the Tupi-Guarani indigenous language, serving as a vernacular expression to denote the territories of South America. Within this framework, the term is employed to underscore the contrast between the indigenous conception and the entity that evolved into Brazil during the colonisation era. “Afro-pindoramic” encapsulates the cosmological fusion between the indigenous population of Pindorama and the black communities stemming from Africa.

¹¹ “Observing the organisational content and the rules that govern these different modalities, we can soon realise that the manifestations of Euro-Christian monotheistic roots work with the collective in a segmented manner, while Afro-Pindoramic polytheistic manifestations work with the individual in an integrated way. An illustrative example is the difference between soccer (created by the English, a people with a monotheistic worldview) and capoeira (created by Afro-Pindoramic peoples, with a polytheistic worldview). The game of soccer is governed by static and predefined rules, where twenty-two people play, one person judges, and thousands watch. It may occur that among the spectators, there is someone who plays better than one of the twenty-two players. Even so, that person will hardly be able to join the game. In a capoeira circle, guided by life wisdom, we can have fifty people playing, one person teaching, and very few watching. Among the few spectators, there may be someone who has never seen capoeira. However, if they wish to, they can enter the circle and play.” (Translation by the authors)

Here, the circularity of capoeira and its interaction with the surrounding community and environment are contrasted with the predefined rules and rigidity in soccer participation. Antonio Bispo dos Santos (2015) elevates this disparity to an expression of a cosmological divergence, an illustrative example of the cleavage between Euro-Christian and Afro-Pindoramic thought. While the surrounding landscape can transform each game of capoeira, soccer needs a replicable field to abstract the elements around it. This understanding elevates the idea of play to an organising principle of forms of life, rejecting the ageist position of limiting it to a period in life's evolutionary stages division. Playing is an action for everyone in this multiple-bonds-making-world. In Brazilian carnival, the people who participate in the festivities or who carry out the cultural expressions at the parade are called, among other names, "*brincantes*" – which means the one who plays. It is another expression of a broader semantic understanding that it is not just children who play in this world.

This abstraction of the "world around us" sustains an economy detached from ecology and an education of children geared towards this economy. The education in the Western world seeks to separate children from their families and communities to protect them from work and prepare them for a future. Meanwhile, school strikers in the global North have argued that this future may not be there (Biswas, 2023). This education is entirely based on the belief that cognitive development and abstract thinking produce better adults to face the game of life. However, there is a fracture when the ties to the "world around us" are sacrificed, only to encounter that same poorly cared-for world in the future.

'Brincar' is the emphasis on bond production in play. 'Brincar' involves creating connections that bridge children with their parents and grandparents, unite children across different ages, and intertwine children with animals and plants. Essentially, 'brincar' revolves around the ties to the surrounding world that all children – from the global South to the North – experience. One of the challenges of a decolonial childism, among others, lies in establishing an educational approach that prioritises these connections with the world around us without disrupting the conviviality between adults and children. In this sense, *saber brincar* embodies a relational mode of being that transforms adultist-colonial structures of participation. The historical lacuna of decolonial thought, that is, the intersection of adultcentrism and coloniality, thus offers a crucial bridge for further exploring resolutions to the challenges of transforming education – as intergenerational relating – that valorise creating and sustaining bonds. Such an exploration would need to unfold in transcontinental dialogues with situated expressions that resonate with decolonial childism, such as El Protagonismo Infantil. While the latter has long advocated for children's leadership in decision-making structures, decolonial childism expands the focus beyond participation alone – towards questioning the very structures that frame participation through adultist-colonial logics, in which we are differently entangled, whether our positionalities are shaped by Brazil, Norway, or elsewhere. It advocates for a communal education where the emphasis shifts from merely knowing the rules of the game to knowing how to produce bonds – something adults, even from the global North, can *learn from* the child and child-like 'café-com-leite' players.

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