Inside *The Games Black Girls Play*
An Interview with Kyra D. Gaunt

Ethnomusicologist Kyra D. Gaunt studies gender justice and music as violence against girls through song, scholarship, and social media. Her first book, *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop,* won the 2007 Alan Merriam Prize in Ethnomusicology, which contributed to the emergence of hip-hop music studies, Black girlhood studies, and hip-hop feminism. She began her latest project by asking in what kinds of play do girls engage on YouTube. Her findings will constitute her next book, tentatively titled *PLAYED: Music as an Instrument of Violence against Black Girls on YouTube*. **Key words**: Black girlhood studies; Black musical identity; double Dutch rope play; ethnomusicology; kinetic orality

American Journal of Play: In *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop*, you shared some childhood memories about handclapping games and double Dutch. Tell us about that play, about how and where you played.

Kyra Gaunt: Only children play games with themselves. Some good, some not-so-good, LOL. I was born in the early 1960s. I'm the only child of an outspoken single Black mother. Growing up during segregation, she was an outgoing, an even mischievous, middle child who as a teenager was a track star, snuck out of the house to see James Brown perform at Bud's on the Chitlin' Circuit, and was a top dancer in a neighborhood called Lincoln Park in Rockville, Maryland, founded in 1891 by her grandfather and his brother among others. I was introverted and painfully shy, but I knew at a young age I wanted to be a singer. My play was in the bedroom alone with the radio on my Panasonic boom box with a recording cassette player and around the television on Saturday mornings when *Soul Train* came on. I, like my mother, loved to dance. I'd sing along with the radio and make press-play and record cassette mix tapes on my boom boxes

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featuring popular funk and soul singles during the mid-1970s. I learned to play handclapping games with my cousins and dared to jump in the ropes of double Dutch, which my mother played and mastered, but body shame kept me from really getting keen on the practice. I thought I was fat.I wasn't, according to pictures from the time. This is what so many girls struggle with and what may take us out of our gendered play before we begin. Back then, so many Black girls left those games behind by middle school or no later than the start of high school. Now, that play is online, you can broadcast on YouTube or TikTok.

AJP: Were there other meaningful childhood play experiences that you can remember and share?

Gaunt: I did a lot of my preteen play imagining my identity as a Black girl through song lyrics singing into a hairbrush while my mother combed and braided my hair. We always had music playing in our house, and I sang along even when I wasn't supposed to at the dinner table.

My first favorite song that I still remember was "Going Out of My Head (Over You)," a romantic ballad about overcoming shyness to express your hidden affection for another, sung by the Harlem doo-wop group Little Anthony and the Imperials and released in 1964. Gee, I was only two years old in 1964! As a pop music scholar, I've learned that the song topped the Billboard 100 charts reaching No. 6 and peaked at No. 8 on the *Cashbox* magazine's R&B chart. Perhaps I related to the lyric about being shy as I recalled the song in my head as an adolescent.

I also remember playing jacks. I loved playing with the knobby, six-point jacks, preferably made of metal. I learned by myself, or with my mother, first. The rubber ball could also be used for play up against a wall or by itself on the pavement. When I first played jacks with Black kids other than my cousins at a social function, I was a nervous wreck. The other kids who were from downtown Washington, D.C., teased me. "You talk funny," they said, marginalizing my speech patterns, which sounded like white people to their ears. When I bounced the rubber ball, my dexterity failed me. I kept messing up, losing my turn. Being an only child is challenging because you have so little social interaction with kids your own age. You feel ostracized—or what kids would call feeling "stupid." Alienation led to withdrawal. I think I became a watcher pretty quickly, and some notion of perfectionism—needing to have it right before I ever stepped in—also led me to be reticent about learning double Dutch fully as I got older.

AJP: As you have noted, double Dutch represents something nostalgic for women in Black communities, and many of them still play it as adults.

Gaunt: Nostalgic is a great word. I was just listening to an informal presentation by an acquaintance of mine about nostalgia. I love little things like words. The etymology stems from νόστος (*nóstos*), meaning "homecoming," a Homeric word, and ἄλγος (*álgos*), meaning "pain" or "ache." According to *Wikipedia*, it was coined by a seventeenth-century medical student to describe the anxieties displayed by Swiss mercenaries fighting away from home, and it also was considered a malady associated with melancholy or depression. Some research suggests that nostalgia for, say, the good ole days can lead to in-group versus out-group social identifications that have adverse consequences. The nostalgia weeds out negative memories and combines a host of positive memories that contribute to some notion of an idyllic past. Black girls and women are given so little attention in empowering ways when it comes to mass media or schooling. You should read Monique Morris's book *Pushout* on the criminalization of Black girls in educational spaces. So double Dutch rope play may be nostalgic because it was difficult to copy by other groups. It excluded boys and many times created an elliptical boundary between us and them relative to race and sex, and it was just so inventive and creative, such an outright bold, cooperative social activity. Black girls shine in the ropes! And the game songs that accompanied our rope play stuck with me even though I never mastered double Dutch till I did my research for the book.

As I wrote in my *New York Times* article in July 2020, "Girls' musical play ignores the antipathy toward Black lives that were typically represented in the media in the seventies (and beyond). There's no airplay broadcasting stereotypes about teenage parenting or fears of getting pushed out of school by a system that tends to criminalize their cries for help." It was our voices calling on ourselves: "Go on, girl, do your thang!"

AJP: What sparked your interests in ethnomusicology and the relationship between culture and musical play? How does it inform your research on social media and musical performance?

Gaunt: Obviously, or not so obviously, my own experience being a girl singing game songs, rhymed chants, and popular song lyrics and my studying patterns of music making as a graduate student between girls' musical games and hip-hop emceeing and break dancing all felt like the ideals of musical blackness I was learning about in scholarship by musicologists like Olly

Wilson, Sam Floyd, Portia Maultsby, and Christopher Small. But it was eight- or nine-year old twins Stephanie and Jasmine who really turned my head around and made me feel and sense the connection between girls' games and male-voiced songs in emerging popular hits. It's a nonlinear pattern, but my mind loves nonlinear connections. I call what I study "music between the sexes." I used the phrase to name one of my articles. In the article, I demonstrate the sophisticated musical forms that are taught, learned, and exchanged between girls' play and male-voiced popular singles over nearly fifty years from 1958 to 2000. A particular gender twist emerges that reveals how Black male artists incorporate the rhymes from girls into emerging songs and how girls' chants were in constant dialogue with commercial forms of music associated with an identification with men and an attraction to heteronormative masculinity. I stumbled upon the connection in the interviews I had conducted with about fifteen African American women with Southern roots. I excluded recent African, Caribbean, or South American immigrants because their metrical or rhythmic orientation to music making—and sometimes their orientation to blues melodies—are different. In a half dozen interviews, the women remembered or mentioned songs that featured melodic material that stemmed from girls' own musical play—like "Walkin the Dog" by Rufus Thomas (1963), which opens with a riff from the "Wedding March" by Tchaikovsky and the lyric "Mary Mack all dressed in Black," and "Shimmy Shimmy Ko-Ko Pop" by Little Anthony and the Imperials (1958), which appears in a handclapping game song. It's not clear which came first, the popular song or the game song, but connections between girls and men in the business of music are consistent over time.

AJP: In your research, you emphasize ethnography. How did you come to this methodological approach and what does it offer the study of play?

Gaunt: I'm an experimental ethnographer. I do what a qualitative researcher might call a grounded theory approach. In other words, I learn from doing and interacting and immersing myself in activities of children's play. The process reveals my next moves, observations, and the questions I might study as a researcher. I started with life histories of a dozen or so women aged eighteen to sixty-four. I had difficulty getting them to remember games from the past until I happened to play a recording of Jasmine and Stephanie singing several of their game songs back in 1995. Then a flood of memories came over each person I interviewed thereafter. Music is a strong trigger of nostalgia. I learned it by chance. I also spent two weeks at

a summer camp for underprivileged and homeless kids in Ann Arbor while writing my dissertation, and I learned a few more songs and observed some fascinating interactions between the sexes. When girls were the subjects of my camcorder lens, the boys always tried to steal the show. They mocked the games girls played from the sidelines or burst into the scene claiming they knew how to do that, too! Girls would often force them out of the frame after they proved unfit. I also interviewed my mother. She was one of the fifteen women I interviewed because she's a cultural historian and community activist. I made sure when I wrote my book that people like my mother could read it and get what it was about. I avoided too much jargon in my text. I think that's why it still resonates with readers today.

Another aspect of my methodology is autoethnography—or social memoir. The knowledge I create has a knower. I'm not hidden from the reader. And my experiences as an only child in many ways shaped how and why I viewed the subject matter and material the way I did. As an ethnographer, I knew I needed to learn double Dutch when the opportunity presented itself. When I met the Double Dutch Divas in New York City, that was it! It's an example of how I continued to play as an adult. I spent a good bit of time attending their rehearsals, which I describe in my final chapter.

I love ethnographic methods! "No new experience, no new insight." They are diverse and so revealing when done well, and they are valuable and scarce tools to help students navigate a complex and often diverse reality.

AJP: In *The Games Black Girls Play*, you mention kinetic orality, which you call a word of mouth and a word of body. What types of play falls in its scope? Are there new variations of such play? Why is this kind of play important for Black play?

Gaunt: Kinetic orality is a descriptive process of acquiring cultural knowledge that is also a process of child and adult socialization. It can apply to anything, really, but it helps suss out the ideals, values, and norms of musical Blackness. I use a small "b" because anyone can learn to become musically Black as we see with game songs or with the crossover to and appropriation of popular styles of Black music, dress, language, or food.

Kinetic orality focuses attention on the power of sensational knowledge as an educative process particularly in the classroom of music and dance studies. It allows the social body of participating in musical situations to become the instrument of learning to feel one's way through a culture.

So handclapping games, embodied cheers where girls perform rhymed chants and embodied gestures for themselves and not on the sidelines of male sports, and double Dutch along with its melodic rhythmic chants are examples of what I call an "oral-kinetic etudé" or social musicking lesson in Black musical style. Surely Irish dancing could be an example of kinetic orality—or fiddling, or even poetic storytelling in Persian musical culture. Orality and kinetic language, like lexical or linguistic language, is always changing. It's variations have much to tell us about time and place. For instance, "Down, down baby / down, down the roller coaster," the handclapping game, has different lyrics depending on the region or neighborhood where your learned it. "Eeny meeny pepsadeeny," another handclapping game song, is sometimes "Eeny meeny disaleeny," and those differences could also be generational.

AJP: You link Black girl rhyming games to hip-hop and, more broadly, to Black word and linguistic play. How is cadence and rhythm meaningful in the play of Black communities, both for kids and adults?

Gaunt: Cadence and rhythm, along with a narrow range of pitches—often three tones: high, middle, and low—shape meaning just as much as do the actual meaning of the words. The period inside a parenthesis indicates a syncopated emphasis or silent beat in the phrase.

Ee-ny mee-ny, pep-sa dee-ny
Oo- pop (.) pop (.) sa-dee-ny
at-chi cat-chi, li-ber-at-chi
I love you! // Tu-tu sham-poo {{snap}}!

A finger snap by each partner serves as the final cadence closing the phrase. This timeline of phonics, handclaps, thigh slaps, and finger snaps are the rhythm section that undergirds popular musical styles as well as traditional drum-dance music making still today from points throughout Africa and the African and Afro-Latin diaspora. I could say more but it's so much better to show you if I could. It can lose something in the translation. The social ethics and the social happiness can be lost although those who have experienced this can, nostalgically, call it to mind.

AJP: Do you find a relationship between kinetic orality and the musicality of historical Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), such as stepping, Black sorority cheers, and call-and-responses?

Gaunt: I explore this briefly in my first book. Embodied music making or kinetic

orality was essential in the military cadences that were part of the earliest Black Greek organizations founded at HBCUs as a result of the emergence of ROTC programs on those campuses. I don't remember all the details but the connection from there to step shows can also be linked to gumboot dance traditions in South Africa and the tradition of stepping that is associated with cheers in Black girls' culture.

AJP: You talk about Black musical identity as a "learned place of inhabitance," although you say Black girls often cultivate this identity in play without fully being aware how such play "embodies memories" of the Black musical past. Can you elaborate on this a little?

Gaunt: Embodied music making reveals the kinship through movement that marks the African American experience for girls and boys. This is best explained through the ideas of sampling and remix culture, which are essentially extensions of orality or kinetic orality—the transmission of intangible ideas, melodies, and rhythms that do not have to change with the acquisition of a non-African language in the Western hemisphere following the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

The expression "sooky-sooky now" was evident, according to Kip Lornell's research, during the forced labor camps of our ancestors' enslavement on plantations. The colloquial expression "aw —, sooky-sooky now," which translates to something like "things are about to get real interesting right now," is still a common discourse marker for people my age and older. The rhythmic patterns of percussion instruments and the ways they fall together in a polyphonic texture often remain pretty much the same in certain social contexts. When I visited Puerto Rico and Ghana, I recognized (re-cognition) those rhythmic and metrical structures. They didn't require major translations to be performed from there to here. Of course, things change inevitably but not like the change from, say, the Ewe language to English in the seventeenth century or now.

AJP: In your recent *New York Times* piece, "The Magic of Black Girls' Play," you write, "Double Dutch regulates relationships rather than rule. . . . It is a process of negotiating musical taste making and building an imagined community of sisterhood." In what ways do spaces for Black girl play create sites of kinship? Where do you see these spaces proliferate now?

Gaunt: Since the games Black girls played are not as prominent as social interaction given the alone-together nature or disembodied connectivity of virtual or online spaces, I am unclear about how to answer that question. It may

continue but is simply not visible as viral memes and dances dominate our attention online. But double Dutch rope play is having a resurgence among adult Black women with its choreographed gestures inside the elliptical sphere of the ropes and its ever-changing chants from the latest popular or R&B songs. Any shared culture lends itself to sisterhood or kinship. Bonding stems from shared identifications with language, movement, or song.

What I meant in the *New York Times* piece was that it was not the kind of harsh regulating behavior that happens every day in public schools for Black girls and boys. It is about an emergent process. You get do-overs. You're not locked out of play unless (like me, the only child) you eliminate yourself from it. Musical play teaches you the tasteful way to make sound musical and meaningful within a Black social setting—and particularly among young people and among girls. I can bond with someone I don't even like by sharing a nostalgic handclapping game song with them or even trying to get inside the ropes.

AJP: What prompted your more recent explorations in social-media play and performance?

Gaunt: Simply put, I was searching for the games Black girls play online. YouTube was the focus of my attention because I love television. I don't have a TV anymore, but I watch what's going on on YouTube religiously every day. I was searching for a new project in 2013 and something to blog about for International Women's Day. I stumbled upon the idea of examining bedroom twerking videos by very young Black girls. The rest has been unfolding from there ever since. For the last seven years, I've been watching how people watch Black girls on the platform to reveal how play is being exploited by sexual and privacy predators—and how it primes self-objectification for online girls as well as how it perpetuates oppressive socialization, especially for non-Black people.

AJP: During the pandemic, the online DJ battles (Verzuz) or dance parties (DJ Nice's notable Club Quarantine) on Instagram Live and other live-stream applications created far-reaching spaces for digital play. Given the close physical presence necessary for handclapping and double Dutch play, how do you conceptualize the space of digital music play?

Gaunt: Hmmm. That's a good question that seems to be primarily answered by the uptick on TikTok play. *The Journal of Adolescent Health* reported in November 2020 that about fifty-five million students joined ZOOM due to school closures during Spring 2020. With social distancing mandated

just about everywhere in the U.S.A. and abroad, the resocialization of youth play was the result of shutting down public playgrounds as well as schools. TikTok had over forty-five million active users during the 2020 pandemic. While online play is funny and can have beneficial as well as adverse social consequences, the touch and other tangible interactions in embodied forms of musical play like handclapping games or double Dutch cannot be replaced. Human connection, roughhousing play, tickling, and the incidental bumping into each others' bodies that happens among friends in face-to-face play is sorely missed, especially for kids who are isolated from same-age peers. But TikTok's Renegade dance choreographed by fourteen-year-old Jalaiah Harmon or split screen duets of TikTok dance videos will do in the meantime. I also love the mimed hand gestures that are such a persistent feature of music-related TikToks.

AJP: You have observed that the erasure of digital creativity and ingenuity of Black girls and women has been compounded by the greater "context collapse" of social media, as when, for example, TikTok "influencers" neglect to cite Jalaiah Harmon's choreography in their takes. What is context collapse, and why is it important to understanding digital Black play and performance?

Gaunt: Context collapse takes on a few different forms. We begin with the idea that in face-to-face interaction and performance, we can see who we are communicating for and with. But when girls or boys record and upload video to virtual platforms like YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, or TikTok, the context of, say, bedroom communication may get broadcast to a social workers' phone in their workplace, shared to a bully's device, or accessed and used for sexual reasons by perverts and predators. These different contexts are collapsing and colliding. The perception and purpose for the video can be misinterpreted when the gaze is one that sexualizes or stigmatizes Black girls' dance play, when culturally appropriate bedroom twerking that is part of their adolescent identity formation play gets distorted into aomething pornographic instead of literal bedroom play by girls.

AJP: Much of your work concerns the influence and importance of Black girls and women in hip-hop and rap. How do you view the candid carnality of music videos from, for example, Cardi B or Megan Thee Stallion and the swift online and offline reactions and memes to their word play and sexuality—especially in light of, say, Stuart Hall's claim that class struggle counts more than culture?

Gaunt: While sexist music has been a mainstay of the patriarchal structures that dominate the recording and entertainment business dating back long before MTV, if videos like "WAP [Wet ass p*ssy]" by Megan Thee Stallion were being broadcast on television monitored by the FCC (Federal Communications Commission), children would be shielded to a greater degree than they are on a platform like YouTube, which is not regulated by the FCC. The collapse of kids and adults in YouTube's general audience platform despite the presence of its YouTube kids platform is not a class struggle at all. It's more like the Wild West, with no police or security guards to protect children not only from sexual grooming and other harm but from reaching out to and being targeted by inappropriate adults, predators, or privacy invaders. And because YouTube seems free, free doesn't mean that its musical and playful spaces of content creation are not without consequences. It is more like an unpoliced and unprotected space for exploiting the most vulnerable youth and their "cute" tweenage and infant play for a laugh, to go viral. For me the struggle is over what is free and empowering versus what is exploitation and sexually violent for kids.

AJP: How does musical play inform your pedagogy? How do you imagine your classroom as spaces for play and learning?

Gaunt: The play is a core element and aspect of my pedagogy. I use handclapping game songs and chants to teach students to notice how experience can be systematically studied using your body as an instrument of sensational knowledge. My core research methods are ethnography, immersing one's body in situations that emulate those of the people and communities we study. So, if children's games are the focus of studies of musical blackness or bedroom twerking YouTube videos are the focus, as in my latest project on music as an instrument of online child sexploitation and sexual violence, then learning to learn as they do through play matters.

On the first day of my hip-hop or Black American music courses, students are immediately thrust into play and improvisation. I teach them a chant through call-and-response. In a class of seventy or one hundred students, mostly students of African descent at my current institution, I invite them to repeat a lyric to the melody and rhythm of a Motown hit song "Ain't Too Proud to Beg" by the Temptations (1966).

CALL: I know your head is nappy
THEY RESPOND: I know your head is nappy

ME: But I refuse— to lend you my comb
THEM: But I refuse— to lend you my comb
ME: If you want to *beg* and *plead*— for my Dixie Peach [a brand of hair product used by Black people]
THEM: If you want to *beg* and *plead*— for my Dixie Peach
ME: I don't mind— cuz you need it more than me!
THEM: I don't mind— cuz you need it more than me!

We learn by doing through the games Black girls once played and passed down from peer to peer, generation to generation. We fold experiential knowledge gleaned from play in an academic space right into reflective practice.

What would an African American say to a friend about the game song? What might it remind them of about their own culture? Choose the best answer and be prepared to explain why:

A. Can't get a comb through it
B. Lunch room
C. Temptations

The emphasis in my classroom is on insider knowledge, understanding how people inside the culture learn to think, act, and make music in their everyday experience.

In his *Music in the World* (2017), musicologist Timothy Taylor reminds us that ethnomusicology is about how we are made by our experiences often in nonlinear playful and meaningfully mundane contexts. There is a general tendency in many music studies, Taylor claims, to examine the people who make culture, not how they are made by culture. Play is my method of immersion in the music making of people of African descent, particularly the games Black girls play.

AJP: In the past, you have focused on what Gayatri Spivak calls "strategic essentialism" in her famous essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" to discuss the play and performance of Black girls. How can the study of play value and nurture the experiences of Black girls and women? And how can we help make Black voices essential to play history?

Gaunt: Back when I wrote *The Games Black Girls Play,* strategic essentialism was described as a tactic (or emerging process) that members of marginalized groups used to mobilize around a shared identity or practiced to represent themselves to one another. In my book, one of the women I interviewed

referred to the phenomenon of a "certain kind of kinship with movement" that was experienced through musical play.

One way researchers and scholar-teachers can make Black voices the central standpoint of thinking about the historical aspects of play is to play games and ask students to recall their own game songs and play practices. Have them circle up in groups of four to six and teach each other a chant. Then ask them to transcribe it. Begin with the words but ask them to sound them out on the page the way they hear them. Then, if they can, try to link the practice to other songs or musical experiences. Put the learner at the center of the reflective process rather than you, the teacher. You want to understand how they think of play rather than how your expertise has led you to think about play. Then and only then do you offer your insights. The educative process should be one of wonder and discovery, the core aspects of play not only for children but also adults.

AJP: What are you working on now?

Gaunt: For the last seven years or so, I've been examining the unintended costs of Black girls exposure to invisible and unknown audiences during the musical bedroom play on YouTube. This is a very different project that is not directly focused on play. Perhaps it would be better to describe it as focused on the ways audiences are impacting children's musical play when it is broadcast on global platforms. This is particularly risky for Black girls online because their very presence triggers stereotypes and stigmas among audience members who are indifferent to their humanity and their need—just like other kids—for protection.

I am examining what ecological fitness may be required to prepare girls of any ethnic background for online play when general audiences are not interested in protecting them from power-based violence and exploitation on platforms like YouTube or TikTok. This work is more about public health issues. If play is taking place in virtual spaces that leave little room for children's free expression, where experimentation could cost children their future reputation and career identity, then we close down the true benefits of play for social and emotional learning into recess.

This research involves case studies of over one thousand bedroom twerking videos featuring about an equal number of Black girls uploaded to YouTube from 2006 to 2014. The questions driving this research are about the early childhood development of the brain, the healthy self-regulation of emotions, and a healthy self-regard despite rampant forms of misogynoir

(anti-Black sexism) in the spaces where children play online. YouTube and TikTok are the top online destinations for tweens since about 2015, making digital platforms the world's largest playgrounds that go unregulated and unpoliced.

There is a phenomenon known as "weathering" that correlates chronic exposure to racism with deteriorious effects on the health of African-American women. According to Arline T. Geronimus,their health can physically deteriorate in early adulthood, as the physiological consequence of chronic exposure to sexism and misogynoir through musical play affecting the early stages of growth and human development for Black girls on platforms like YouTube or TikTok.

If what surrounds us shapes us, sexist music and online music making—particularly during online bedroom and school play—is a potentially harnful instrument of violence and online sexual exploitation of Black girls and women. The book will likely be titled *PLAYED: Music as an Instrument of Violence against Black Girls*.