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# But First, Let's Jam

## A New Materialist Twist on the Ontology of Play

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The author follows a new materialist approach to consider the informal and collaborative creative gathering called jamming as creative play, and she makes a case for the jam as a transformative event of genuine intrasubjective dialogue. She uses Karen Barad's theory of agential realism and Hans-Georg Gadamer's ethics of play to argue for the jam as an ethico-socio-political event that supports the communal and creation-centered aspects of our collective existence and offers an opportunity for learning responsibility (or "response-ability," as Karen Barad calls it) and accountability. She concludes that jamming, like creative play, offers the kind of cooperative underpinnings essential to our relational and ontological makeup. **Key words:** agential realism; Hans-Georg Gadamer; jam session; Karen Barad; play as an ethical, social, and political activity; shared agency

### Introduction

Man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being,  
and he is only fully a human being when he plays.

—FRIEDRICH SCHILLER

**I**F PLAY, AS SCHILLER WRITES, is essential to the human condition, how can it move us toward a more profound interconnectedness with self, others, and the environment? Is play a personal experience, or is it inclusive, reminding us that existence is not an individual condition? Is there something created amid play that provides a sense of meaning?

Viewed through a relational-ontological lens, creative play can encourage an ethical response to the world and its inhabitants. However, it is more than that. "Play," according to Eugen Fink, "is always a confrontation with Being. In the plaything, the whole is concentrated in a single object. Each game is an

attempt at existence, a vital experiment that encounters in the plaything the essence of unyielding reality” (Fink, Saine, and Saine 1968, 23). In a culture that strongly embraces autonomy and largely views existence through a humanistic lens, a deeper understanding of the impact of creative play helps further the importance of collaboration and the shared conditions of the material-discursive spaces of the world. Brian Sutton-Smith asserts that play is a genetic gift, an evolutionary task with an experiential reality at its roots. He argues that “play’s positive pleasure typically transfers to our feelings about the rest of our everyday existence and makes it possible to live more fully in the world, no matter how boring or painful or even dangerous ordinary reality might seem . . . in this way play genetically refreshes or fructifies our other, more general, being” (Sutton-Smith 2008, 97).

In this article, I investigate a new materialist approach to jamming by diffractively reading the work of Karen Barad through Hans-Georg Gadamer’s ethics of play. I conclude that the jam is an ethico-socio-political event of genuine intrasubjective dialogue that supports the communal aspects of our collective existence and offers an opportunity for learning responsibility (or “responsibility,” as Barad writes) and accountability.

The term “play” has various broad definitions. Sutton-Smith’s genetic gift offers a buttress against life’s challenges, exercising “physical or mental or social adaptations that translate—directly or indirectly—into ordinary life adjustments” (Sutton-Smith 2008, 118). Play can be a type of preparation for adulthood (Dewey), an expression of exuberant energy (Schiller), a means of social and intellectual development (Piaget, Vygotsky), or a recapitulation of ancestral activities (Hegel, Ziller, Hall). Gordon Burghardt (2011) characterized play with the following five criteria; play is not fully functional in the form or context in which it is expressed; it is spontaneous, pleasurable, and voluntary; it is incomplete, exaggerated, awkward, or precocious; it contains repeatable actions that are similar, but not rigidly done; and it is done in safe and stress-free environments.

This last criterion mandates that we cannot assign a particular outcome, like winning a game, to play. In “What Exactly Is Play, and Why Is It Such a Powerful Vehicle for Learning?” Gray (2017) states, “play, at least human play, cannot be defined in terms of the motor activities involved; it must be defined in terms of the motives and attitudes that underlie the activities” (219). Gray’s statement is significant because what might look like competition to one person could be play to another and vice versa. However, the motive for play should never be competition, and it should never be stressful. Creative play may include

elements of competition, such as in a game jam, but the primary goal is to create and not to win. Thus, in keeping with Burghardt's criteria, I define creative play as noncompetitive. Burghardt's criteria allow for play as intentionally ambiguous and inherently dichotomous. It is serious, but it is not. It is unstructured, and it is bound by rules.

Play pushes the boundaries of our capabilities and aptitudes by allowing us to deal with the unknown in safe nonconsequential ways. It also reminds us that existence is not an individual condition. While on the surface, play can occur in personal solitude, there is always a human or nonhuman "other" counterpart engaged in the exchange. In using the term other, I am employing the Gadamerian term, not the contemporary definition of "otherizing" as viewing a person or group as innately different from oneself. For Gadamer, the other is self-other entwinement: "To live with the other, as the other of the other-this basic human task applies to the micro- as well as to the macro-level . . . where the highest and most elevated aim that we can strive for is to partake in the other, to share the other's alterity" (Gadamer 1989, 28–34). One cannot play alone.

Although we see play in nature, animals, and objects, research leans toward the opinion that the human capacity for imagination is much more developed and open to change and possibilities than that of animals (Bronowski 1967; Suddendorf and Dong 2013). Although findings have shown primates can role play, suggesting the presence of abstract thinking and imagination, there appear to be limitations to imaginative thinking in animals. Imagery is the factor that elevates the human mind over that of the animal. Given these factors, I limit my discussion on the use of imagination in this article to human beings, and I maintain that creative play must have a human element. Nevertheless, I contend that human agency is not the only agency required in creative play. Why? Because in play the inseparability of nonhuman elements such as sound, movement, animals, and material objects come to the forefront through validating the embodied dynamics of human and nonhuman factors. Shared agency is not an intentional act of human beings alone but happens through and between the participants. Nonhuman objects, claim Taguchi (2010), "also put things in motion by means of [their] own agentic force and materiality. Thus, new possibilities for *intra-action* with other matter and organisms will emerge" (64, italics added). According to Barad (2007), the neologism "intra-action" is used "in contrast to the usual 'interaction,' which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action." (33)

The poietic act of creative play reveals new possibilities and truths that enter our visual, aural, and tactile space. We do not know the significance and vitality of this play-filled moment until the participants enter a new paradigm relationship. “Play,” says Eugen Fink, “is a basic existential phenomenon, just as primordial and autonomous as death, love, work, and struggle for power, but it is not bound to these phenomena in a common ultimate purpose. Play, so to speak, confronts them all—it absorbs them by representing them. We play at being serious, we play truth, we play reality, we play work and struggle, we play love and death—and we even play play itself” (Fink, Saine, and Saine 1968, 22). Play is fundamental to existence, not an ancillary luxury reserved when nothing else is on the to-do or to-be list. It is a space to flourish, and the jam session becomes a starting point for moving us into a web of deeper intraconnectedness with humans and nonhumans.

### **Defining the Jam Session**

Jamming with other people will create energy and excitement that you can feed off, and which will help push you to do things you'd never dream of doing by yourself.

—DIMEBAG DARRELL

The jam was initially defined as a meeting of musicians, especially jazz musicians, who improvise, experiment, and play for enjoyment. Over time, the term has come to refer to an informal and collaborative creative gathering. A quick internet search for the terms “creative jam” or “jam session” reveals various jam opportunities in dance, theater, painting, photography, and corporate and religious arenas. The software company Adobe (2021) has even caught on, calling its training sessions “creative jams” and claiming that “a Creative Jam is one of the most immersive ways for people to learn Adobe tools and advance their digital literacy” (n.p.). In “Why Meetings Fail and JAM Sessions Succeed,” Jason Moccia, CEO and Founder of OneSpring, discusses why he replaced the typical business meeting with the jam and lists ten factors that make jam sessions “phenomenally successful.” These include flow, ownership, and free thought (Moccia 2011).

Jams contain a sense of shared ownership and agency where, as Belitski and Herzig (2018) describe, “the collective product rises and falls with the willingness of each [participant] to engage in this truly democratic process of trading leadership and supporting roles and contributing towards the common good at every

moment” (510). This participatory experience allows an intra-action between the participants, passing the leadership role from one player to another. Like creative play, a jam can be a genuinely egalitarian event. According to Sutton-Smith (2008), “If we accept the assumption that play emerges as an imitative mediation of the reflexive-reflective adaptive duality, then it should follow that the nature of play can be described as a dynamic duality of contending forces, that is as dialudic” (116). In a jam, players and playees, subject and object, I and thou engage in a ludic dialogue.

One of the most appealing elements of a jam is that it can involve people with varying levels of expertise and ability, making for a truly democratic experience. While some jams are for professionals, in many jam sessions, the participants need not be professional artists. Frequently, those who attend music jams, such as drum circles, or movement jams, such as Contact Improvisation sessions, have no formal training or background. The only prerequisite is the indispensable ingredient of group awareness and the ability to tune in and listen to the environment, allowing for a fluid relationship between humans and nonhuman objects such as musical instruments, visual art supplies, literature, or (as in movement) gravity and the floor. Lars Brinck (2014) states that “the process of jamming involves being flexible and open to changes and possibilities, prioritizing one’s . . . attention, relating what you [see and] hear to what you know and know you can do, and on maintaining an equilibrium of . . . tasks” (67). The collective improvisational jam is creative play at its finest, a “circular and spiral social process of iteratively changing foci, of openness to change, and of continuously reflecting and balancing one’s way of engagement” (147). In a jam session, the creative play comes from being and doing, not the result. While there may be genial rivalry, winning is not the goal, and competition is generally frowned upon in jam sessions. Jamming, like play, does not necessarily lead to a product, though it may. Instead, it is nourishing and spontaneous, allowing us to express our unique responses to a given situation.

## **Jams in Movement, Music, and More**

Now jamming—which is about collaborative improvisation—has to do with getting people together to be creative musically. But it is a very powerful metaphor for understanding the grammar of the creative process. It applies to business and to other pursuits as well.

—JOHN KAO

Contact Improvisation (CI) is a dance and movement research practice in which participants negotiate their physical boundaries, allowing them to blur and literally entangle. CI sessions, or “contact jams,” are improvisational movement sessions involving contact, touch, and weight sharing with a partner or partners. In an interview with Curtis (1995), Steve Paxton, the creator of Contact Improvisation, describes CI as “an improvisational state of mind partially determined by another’s improvisational state of mind; the contact is not a state of mind but a physical exterior event. The two blend like double circles of ripples seen when two stones are dropped in a pond” (69). In a contact jam, there is ongoing intra-activity. Solo dancing is nonexistent; one dances with another human but can also partner with the floor or gravity. CI movers use the Stand (or the Small Dance) to understand this entangled exchange. The Stand is simply standing still, suspending your movement, and tuning into being moved by the earth’s pull under your feet. Godard and Bigé (2019) describe the Stand as a dialogue: “Through this very internal experience, what is discovered is something else than solipsism: constantly bathed in gravity, we discover that we are streaming movements that are not ours; movements through which the Earth moves us (gravity’s pull) and movements through which we respond (our anti-gravitational reflexes). . . . The micro-movements of the Small Dance are thus the signs of a force we are constantly in dialogue with, and yet we keep forgetting (or repressing) in our everyday experience” (94). Rather than looking from the individual or solely human experience, the CI jam offers a more inclusive understanding of relationships. Through the arrangements and entanglements between bodies and gravity, CI jams provide a practice of creative play as an intra-action by which one shares in the world. The bodies, gravity, and earth are no longer objects with their own boundaries and agencies but become a space for ongoing intra-actions of adaptability with the material-discursive world. In a jam, all bodies, not just human bodies, are essential through their continual intra-action.

Like a CI jam, a musical jam is an open-ended improvisational play session. Music jams happen in formal or informal settings—restaurants, clubs, schools, and pick-up events such as outdoor gatherings and private houses. The jam is where musicians can try out innovative ideas, make mistakes (which can turn into new ideas), and move through them without fearing rejection by a producer or auditioner. Analogous to the CI jam, where there is a sense of shared agency between the mover, gravity, and the earth, a musical jam has shared agency that emerges through the performative actions of the bodies of musicians, instruments, and sound. According to Showen and Mantie (2018), a musical jam is

“an aesthetics of intra-action [that] necessitates a dispersed and intrinsic notion of musical agency rather than an individualistic one; an emergent and nonteological phenomenon that involves a decentered musical agency distributed among players, samples, instruments (conceptualized broadly as any tool used in sound production), sensations, and listeners/concert-goers along with ancillary objects that accompany the concert, club, or listening experience” (397–98). All the musical bodies, tools, and ancillary objects serve as catalysts, responding to and through one another, thus offering the possibility of new musical inventions.

In a jam, all players intra-act, even the so-called observers. Audience members are active participants, sometimes finding their way into the jam circle, and are as crucial as the “creating” participants (Pinheiro 2014). Agency is always being exerted, and it is impossible to remain at a distance and spectate without entanglement. Even spectators who appear disconnected are still present, affecting the other participants simply by their physical presence as they are superposed with other agencies and slip into a stream of intra-action. This dialogic relation places the experience of a jam as embodied communication suggesting what Showen and Mantie (2018) call “a kind of reversibility of player/played and cause/effect in the musical phenomenon where the locus of agency rests not in individual players, listeners, or other musical matter but in their combined intra-activity” (398). As we will see, passivity is impossible in an agential realist view of the jam, relationships, and play.

Another example is a photo jam, a collaborative exploration where the goal is not the final product but, to quote photojam.net, to “give feedback, get feedback. Learn, inspire, grow.” In a photo jam, the photographers play off each other’s movements and positions. As one person changes positions, another responds by imitating that position, complementing it, or opposing it. Not only are the participants entangled with each other, but they are also entangled with their cameras and the environment. As shadows and light play and change, the photographers respond by altering their camera settings, position, angle, and composition. The human and nonhuman elements of the camera, participants, shadows and lights, and other environmental factors affect the photographers’ responses and perceptions. Participants in a photo jam contribute to new possibilities and reveal something about each other. They are no longer separate entities. Instead, they need each other to be complete. Furthermore, they learn about the other from this jam event. Our histories, preferences, and inherent natures all come into play during a jam.

In the increasingly popular game jam, participants create a playable video

game (usually within specific time constraints). Game jams offer an opportunity for students and professionals to experiment with game design and further their skills. While some game jams are competitive, many are not, but all emphasize a spirit of creativity, collaboration, and community. Moreover, they are spontaneous play. Similar to a musical jam session, game jams produce a product with little prior preparation. The goal is simply to develop new material and practice game coding. As with the previous two jam examples, a game jam, like play, is “valued for [its] subjective, experiential qualities (play in which one flows, for example, or is in the zone, or simply has vivid feelings)” (Sutton-Smith 2008, 118). In all these examples, the jam is one of the most distinctive ways of approaching creative collaboration. In a jam, as in creative play, we dive in and participate.

### **A New Materialist Twist on the Jam**

To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair.

—KAREN BARAD

The creative play of a jam is a material-discursive practice in which traditional notions of subject and object are questioned, making it particularly well suited to be explored through the lens of new materialism. As an interdisciplinary field of inquiry, new materialism adopts a nonanthropocentric realism, one in which binaries such as matter and meaning, nature and culture, and human and nonhuman are implicit in each other. It also recognizes the inherent activity of matter as dynamic, agentic, and active. “New materialism,” writes Dolphijn and van der Tuin (2012), “is a cultural theory that does not privilege matter over meaning or culture over nature. It explores a *monist* perspective, devoid of the dualisms that have dominated the humanities (and science) until today, by giving special attention to matter, which has been so neglected by dualist thought” (85, original italics). According to Gamble, Hanon, and Nail (2019), a performative approach to new materialism refuses “any presumption of something external to matter—including human meaning—that guides, structures, or grants meaning to its behaviors [where] the performances of humans are not external to those of the rest of the material world” (112).

At this point, I offer a brief overview of the theory of agential realism



from Karen Barad [who uses the pronouns they/theirs—eds.] and then provide an affirmative reading of Hans Georg Gadamer's ethics of play by diffractively reading it through the work of Barad. A diffractive methodology is particularly well suited for this work because it "not only appears to transcend the level of critique, ultimately based in a Self/Other identity politics, but in Barad's regard also can be regarded as a boundary-crossing, trans/disciplinary methodology" (newmaterialism.eu). I diffract notions of relational ontology, shared agency, and thirdness. On the surface, Barad's posthumanism may seem incompatible with Gadamer's theory, but a more critical examination reveals a common dynamic relational ontology. Both theorists share the concept of destabilization of cartesian dualism and the idea that agency is created between and within the dialogic relationship. Furthermore, through agential cuts, Barad allows temporary boundary making between subject and object, opening possibilities for Gadamer's to-and-fro movement to occur within the cut.

Agential realism uses quantum physics, particularly the phenomena of intra-action and quantum entanglement, to reenvision our perceptions of how we are influenced by matter, meaning, and the world around us. Barad's (2007) starting point is the philosophical foundation of quantum physicist Niels Bohr. They apply their background in quantum physics to reason that matter is not substance, but rather doing, and that agency is distributed over both humans and nonhumans as "a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something that someone or something has" (178). In applying Bohr's philosophical views, they invite us to look at our world through a performative lens "which takes account of the fact that knowing does not come from standing at a distance and representing but rather from *a direct material engagement with the world*" (49, original italics).

Through the ideas of quantum mechanics, agential realism offers us a view of society as intracconnected in contrast to the view that every human is an atom interacting externally. Barad proposes that our existence demands a codependent relationship between humans and other-than-humans. Agential realism reverses the fragmentary cartesian order that separates the world into different parts with rigid categories and subcategories. These parts have divided the world, society, and culture into us and them and ins and outs. A verticalization of structures exists in which one category exercises control over the others—oppresses the other and exploits the other. Quantum physics, in which seemingly autonomous individual particles become entangled with each other and intra-act instantly, argues against this division. As Barad (2007) says, a "quantum ontology under-

mines the strict dichotomy between discrete individuation (objects) and continuous connectivity (relations)” (77). Werner Heisenberg (1999), a pioneer of quantum mechanics, wrote, “one has now divided the world not into different groups of objects but into different groups of connections. In an earlier period of science one distinguished, for instance, as different groups, minerals, plants, animals, men. . . . Now we know that it is always the same matter, the same various chemical compounds that may belong to any object, to minerals as well as animals or plants; also the forces that act between the different parts of matter are ultimately the same in every kind of object. What can be distinguished is a kind of connection which is primarily important” (107).

Barad (2007) uses the term intra-action, “the mutual constitution of entangled agencies” (33), to explore what Heisenberg calls “a kind of connection.” Intra-actions occur whenever objects (human or nonhuman) become entangled. This creates a shared agency in which the distinction between subject and object, I and thou, player and playee is blurred. Entangled intra-relatings leave “marks” on bodies that reverberate throughout our lives. We are affected by and through the other.

### **Relational Ontology: Gadamer, Barad, and Agential Cuts**

Through others we become ourselves.  
—LEV S. VYGOTSKY

Both Barad and Gadamer argue against the view of the self and its privileged interiority of the mind common to classic Romanticism. Instead, both engage in a dynamic relational ontology where play (like jamming) exhibits a being-with-others, an intra-action that requires connectivity of participants, both human and nonhuman. The painter becomes one with the canvas, the brushes, and the paint just as the dancer does with the floor, the space, gravity, inertia, the air, the choreography, and the audience.

Although Gadamer and Barad acknowledge the existence of subject and object, they hold differing perspectives on this concept. For Gadamer, the subject (“I”) is separate from the object (“Thou”), and the object exists in a relationship with the subject. In Barad’s post-Newtonian theory, both subject and object exist only in relation through each other. When Barad (2007) writes that “individuals do not pre-exist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as

part of their entangled intra-relating" (ix), they are not stating that we do not exist before a specific intra-action but that we exist because of the existence of given intra-action. Barad's concept of agential separability, which is enacted only within a particular intra-action, allows us to experience determinate boundaries and properties of entities and grants us "the possibility for differentiation without individuation" (378).

For Barad, the inseparability of subject and object can be resolved through the concept of agential cuts. As Colclough (2016) describes it, "the cognitive 'split' that constitutes the 'I' is a discursive practice called the agential cut; the conception of separability between one 'thing' and 'another' that grants the illusion of agency" (n.p.). An agential cut, says Barad (2007), is a boundary-making practice that cuts things together and apart and creates determinate boundaries "affecting a separation between 'subject' and 'object'" (334). However, they do not separate the phenomenon into independent entities, as in a cartesian cut. Neils Bohr (1963) wrote, in "classical physics, the interaction between object and apparatus can be neglected or, if necessary, compensated for, [but] in quantum physics this interaction thus forms an inseparable part of the phenomenon" (4). By applying an agential cut, we permit a correlation between Barad's and Gadamer's interpretations of subject and object, allowing us to examine their views on shared agency and nondualism.

### Shared Agency in the Jam

An agent is a being with the capacity to act, and "agency" denotes the exercise or manifestation of this capacity . . . agency is virtually everywhere. Whenever entities enter into causal relationships, they can be said to act on each other and interact with each other, bringing about changes in each other.

—MARKUS SCHLOSSER

In a traditional philosophical sense, say for Hume and Aristotle, the term agency denotes the use of intention, but not so for Gadamer and Barad. For them, agency is not an intentional act of human beings alone but happens through and between the continuously changing relationships of the participants. In the essay "Play as the Clue to Ontological Explanation," Gadamer (1985) analyzes aesthetics around the notion of play and questions the cartesian subject-object model, which has dominated much of our philosophical thinking. "Gadamer's concept," writes Vilhauer (2010) "of play carries with it an implicit attack on

the traditional conception of the human being as the independent 'subject' who observes and knows (by making properly corresponding pictures or representations of them in his mind) the alien 'objects' of the world" (26).

Barad's intra-active approach complements Gadamer's and highlights how both the material and discursive, the human and nonhuman, are constantly entangled in a cocreative process, a distributed creative agency. For Gadamer, play, by its very nature, requires a dialogic, I-Thou relationship with the other, a flow of back-and-forth movement he calls in German *Bewegung*. For instance, in a child's play with a ball, there is a dialogue between the child and the ball. Vilhauer (2010) describes Gadamer's three approaches to the I-Thou relation as the scientific approach to the other, the psychological approach to the other, and the open approach to the other. As Gadamer (1985) describes it, creative play resides in the open approach in which "each person opens himself to the other, truly accepts his point of view as valid and transposes himself into the other to such an extent that he understands not the particular individual but what he says" (347). Gadamer's view of play finds meaning and agency through others. He "teaches us to recognise how understanding itself only takes place in a dynamic, interactive, interpretive process of working through meaning with others" (Vilhauer 2010, 32). This correlates with Barad's performative matter, which is a "doing," a coalescing of agency. Gadamer's play is a Baradian intra-active process where agency and meaning unite through the relationship.

As I mentioned, for Gadamer, play is a dynamic event, a *bewegung*. He "insists that . . . we should not expect to find this process locked inside any one of the players . . . rather, we should expect to find the process developing *in between* different players as a shared experience that depends upon both player's contributions." (Vilhauer 2010, 33, original italics) For Barad, this in-between is an intra-action of flow between subject (or agentially active) and object (that which is acted upon) enacted within the phenomenon. As we saw, the boundary making of an agential cut permits a delineation, allowing us to place Gadamer's *bewegung* within the phenomenon, thus opening the possibility for a shared experience between the differentiated players. This, according to Vilhauer (2010) recognizes the importance of each participant and "grants [them] equal footing as our interlocutor and partner in the play-process of articulating truth" (83). Vilhauer's "equal footing" advances a dialogue in which participants move and react to each other, an essential element of creative play and the jam. The dialogue can be between the musicians and the groove; the photographer, the camera, and the surroundings; or the visual artist, paint, canvas, and the brush.

Each participant affects the other, and interaction (or intra-action) occurs.

In contact and music jams, indeed in all types of jams, the intersection of Gadamer's I-Thou and agential realism's entangled entities comes to the forefront through the validation of the embodied dynamics of humans and nonhumans. The jam becomes an experience in shared agency where all objects are renewed by the intra-action. To use the child and ball example, a child responds to the ball by running and jumping. A ball "responds" to a child by altering its shape because of being squeezed, bounced, moving through the air, rolling on the ground, and responding to gravitational forces, friction, and pressure. This response alters how a child catches or misses a ball, how fast or slow a game becomes, and many other variables that are intra-dependent. The participants play and are, in turn, made by play. The same is true of the jam.

By placing humans in a collaborative relationship with nonhuman participants, the jam emerges as a space for a collective agency of ludic behavior. Human beings are important participants in this process, but they are only that, participants, not the only protagonists of the entanglement. Through the decentering of the human, there is a more profound awareness of all contributors as essential to the process, allowing a more substantial likelihood for equally distributed power. Participation shifts and morphs, and—as Kimmel, Hristova, and Kussmaul (2018) observe—"the creative process is constitutively transactional and evolves through continuous perception" (21).

### **Thirdness: A New Creation**

There is no longer a vis-à-vis, an opposition between subject and object, but the constitution of a third entity: neither you, neither me, neither us, but at the interstice between these three pronouns, a third-included.

—GODARD AND BIGÉ

The genesis of creative play involves the use of imagination, and, as the name implies, something is created amid this play. In the Barad and Gadamer intra-action, we create something rather than uncovering something that is there to be discovered. While play is an unfolding of the unknown where the goal is play itself (Fink, Saine, and Saine 1968; Gadamer 1985; Schiller 1967), something else emerges during the play process: a "third entity," as Bigé and Godard (2019) wrote. This thirdness is a concept with many names: third mind, third-included, in-between, common third, and middle voice. In "Ways of the Jam: Collective

and Improvisational Perspectives on Learning,” Lars Brinck (2014) discusses Mørck’s (2006) common third as it relates to the jam: “Through the lens of social practice theory Mørck argues for the fact that the participants’ growing participation in practice is directed not towards individual development or increased cognitive or other individual capacity—neither for themselves or any other—but towards a third entity, a ‘common third.’ In the case of jamming . . . participation is directed towards the collective development of a strong groove through a collective provision of still new action possibilities” (91). In a jam session, a third could be a groove, a new perception, a creation, energy, or the interstitial space generated by the contact itself (as in CI). This thirdness cannot exist independently. It is produced through the intra-active coagencies of the participants. Additionally, thirdness always establishes a community since it is the common ground, the shared focus created by all participants. As Albright (2013) writes, “The point created by joining of two energies . . . is that which becomes the focus of their mutual attention. [This] mutual pouring creates an energetic dialogue that continuously loops between the partners” (242). The agential thirdness that occurs through the jam session offers an opportunity for connectedness and “response-ability.”

Cynthia Nielsen (2021), in “Gadamer on Play and The Play of Art,” describes his use of the middle voice in grammar to illustrate this third: “Unlike the active voice, which emphasizes the subject as the agent of the activity, and the passive voice, which emphasizes what is done to a subject, the middle voice occupies the ‘space’ between activity and passivity and gives rise to a co-constitutive event. Here the co-constitutive event that comes to presence through the players—who themselves are taken up in the spirit of the game and move in concert with its rules and practices—is the game itself” (143).

The third is a new entity, a new creation. This creation can be an event, a concept, or a real artifact. In many ways, this thirdness is what we long for when we engage in a jam. As an act of creation, it brings new consciousness and an awareness of the other. There is a delight in getting lost in play, in an atmosphere of mutual freedom with mutual dependence, in an intra-active to-and-fro movement that is not tied to an end goal. Without this intra-activity, play has no agency, purpose, or meaning. When we jam together, genuine intra-subjective dialogue leads the participants to a new cellular-level insight. In this space-matter-time of jam as creative play, a new agency appears that was never there before. The essence of the jam emerges. When we use the jam session as a metaphor for our daily life, it, like creative play, facilitates a reaction and response

to the creation-centered aspects of our collective existence.

Through shared agency as a thirdness, Barad's entanglement reemerges as a new materialist twist on Gadamer's play process, one in which "two beings who were at first separated are now in meaningful, communicative contact with each other; alienation is overcome through shared understanding" (Vilhauer 2010, 67). Barad's (2007) subject-object relationship, in which "matter and meaning are mutually constituted" (152), resonates with the Gadamerian understanding of play, in which participants are "not as fundamentally separate from the world, but primordially in contact with the things and people of the world . . . [revealing] that what we understand is not a dumb, mute 'object,' but the meaningful subject matter (*Sache*) of a shared world that is *presented, articulated and interpreted together with others*" (Vilhauer 2010, 28, original italics). Through an agential realist lens, Gadamer's concept of *sache* (or matter) expands to include the active participation of all objects, whether the objects are real (such as animals, toys, art supplies, music) or have symbolic meaning. The acknowledgment that *sache*, this matter, is in a perpetual give-and-take, cross influencing, and connecting, disrupts the traditional ideas of causality. Who is in charge no longer applies when we play creatively, and no one person or object holds all the agency or power. All the components become significant, and, through equilibrating the relationship between I-Thou, we bring our perception of reality into a more profound space, a new actuality of what it means to coexist in the world. We permit "matter its due as an active participant in the world's becoming, in its on-going 'intra-activity'" (Barad 2003, 803). Barad's actively participating matter is a playful counterpart to Gadamer's meaningful subject matter (*sache*). These concepts help us envision participants as beings-in-relation constantly echoing and complementing each other.

The jam is the ideal space for engaging in a new materialist interpretation of play and a new reading of Barad's concepts of entanglement and intra-activity through the human experience of play as expressed by Hans-Georg Gadamer. Through this diffractive practice, the jam emerges as a space where the subject-object engages in a relationship of shared discovery, inviting us to relate to the Other in more connected and supportive ways. In the entanglement of the jam, relationships are inescapably central, and the jam becomes a metaphor for what Kirby and Brolin (2016) describe as "the very process in which the world is socially structured and one affirms the sacred order of the universe itself" (13). It is not a tool for becoming human; it is becoming.



## The Jam as an Ethico-Socio-Political Response

Improvisation cultivates a self-open to possibility that can translate to other areas of life and is thus politically profound.

—SARA HOUSTON

If the jam is a cocreative process, one in which there is shared agency and power, then it also can provide an ethico-socio-political opportunity by implicating a more profound “response-ability” to the relationships around us. Through the collective jam experience, the subject-object and us-them relations collapse. Both Barad and Gadamer shatter our assumed anthropocentric view by asserting that all the elements involved are agentially intra-active through entanglement. This entangled view has both ethical and socio-political implications. Through a Gadamerian lens, “the human being is not [seen as] a spectator at a distance from the world, nor as a subject standing over and against the world, but as a dialogical creature who is engaged being-at-play-in-the-world with others” (Vilhauer 2010, 29). Again, we see common ground between Gadamer and Barad in Barad’s (2007) statement that “we don’t obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are of the world. We are part of the world in its differential becoming” (185). In reconceptualizing the role of relationships in the creative play of a jam, I suggest that, through the entanglement of our creativity, environment, and histories, we experience a change of self. The process of jamming is the process of being “re-formed” and always “re-forming.” It re-visions our conceptions of how we impact the environment and each other, necessitating an ethical response.

If the personal is political, then jams are, as Karen Nelson, a CI pioneer, wrote, “a political movement from the inside out, organizing to break the code of space and distance between people” (Kaltenbrunner and Procyk 2004, 60). This suggests that CI (and other creative jams) have sociopolitical implications, supporting its use in broader community contexts. Bigé and Godard (2019) argue that “Contact Improvisation is potentially one of the most political practices one can imagine. Why? Because it is a practice where we have the opportunity of losing ground, a practice of stepping down from our identity pedestal. It is a political space because the condition for politics is that subjectivity is not the result of subjection or subjugation . . . and this is what is experimented with through Contact Improvisation: radically, a space without subjects” (98).

The argument that play is a political space requires us to question how peo-



ple are affected and changed through this space without subjects. What impact does the abolishment of subject-object hierarchy have on questions of power and equity? How can the jam be a site for effective ethico-socio-political practice?

The truth of the matter is that inequality does exist in many jams. Like other types of communities, not everyone at a given session may have the same standing. Many dynamics are involved, including the personalities and history of the players (individually and collectively), gender, age, race, physical and mental abilities, and skill level. As with any community, boundary making and boundary maintaining are embedded into the culture of the group. While play encompasses fluidity and permeability with boundaries, parameters are always in place. As Howell (2021) comments, "A common misconception about improvisation is that it is entirely free, without boundaries. As practicing improvisers, we know that it is the creative parameters placed on the improvisation that make it an intentional creation, an articulate communication between musicians" (2).

These boundaries can include as well as exclude, as each boundary-making decision or cut we make leads to a separation that entails responsibility. But what if we were to create and apply parameters or boundaries that facilitate more equity, representation, and accessibility in jamming? Boundary-making practices can address racism, ageism, ableism, neurodiversity and gender issues, and economic power issues. They are, as Barad (2007) writes, "about taking issue with human exceptionalism while being accountable for the role we play in the differential constitution and differential positioning of the human among other creatures (both living and nonliving)" (136). If the jam session is a journey into new materialism, as previously discussed, it can allow an affirmative and nondualistic approach to power relations and ethics. This translates into jams as an opportunity to shift behaviors, challenge gender, age, disability, and race roles and engage in social, economic, and environmental "response-ability."

In Barad's agential realism, "we are responsible for the world within which we live, not because it is an arbitrary construction of our choosing, but because it is sedimented out of particular practices that we have a role in shaping" (203). Much like the open approach to the Other in Gadamer's play, there is a "response-ability" and accountability for the relationalities we share. Indeed, "the entanglements we are a part of reconfigure our beings, our psyches, our imaginations, our institutions, our societies" (Barad 2007, 383). Baradian and Gadamerian understandings of relationships (and thus play) advocate shifting our behavior to a more open, listening, and respectful approach toward the Other.

Perhaps we can approach the conversation of behavioral shifts in the same

way we come to a jam session; as an experimental playing field for ideas. As a woman involved in Western theater dance, a feminization of dance genres has allowed me to be in the majority. But as a mature-aged dancer, I have experienced an ageism engendering prejudice. However, in the world of music (another arena in which I live), the mature musicians' embodied knowledge and artistic talent is admired and revered. In the dance world (as in other body-based art forms), there tends to be an inequitable treatment for those who do not conform to body typicity or those who are nonneurotypical. Furthermore, sexism and gender-based inequity exist in many creative settings across genres, conditions, or play spaces. In my experience, the jam asks us to play experimentally and find an entangled ground that permeates with the other. This opens us up to learning in conversation. "Not only subjects but also objects are permeated through and through with their entangled kin; the other is not just in one's skin, but in one's bones, in one's belly, in one's heart, in one's nucleus, in one's past and future. This is as true for electrons as it is . . . for the differentially constituted human" (Barad 2007, 393). We must let go of our ego, listen, and process the ideas of others as we work together to achieve a common goal. By setting our ego aside and becoming "permeated through and through with [our] entangled kin" (393), we learn to listen.

We are capable of being listeners and actors and allowing these roles to change in the intraplay of play. Perhaps this is the most important lesson we can take from a jam session—listening as "a means of grasping the agencies of inclusion and exclusion that already necessarily inhere in the act" (Fairbairn 2022, 90). Our theory needs to become practiced through an intraplay of listening that allows for an antioppressive lens through which the exchange is about open willingness. Unless we develop this open willingness, we will never fully realize the inclusion of those historically excluded. We will experience what Gadamer calls a "closedness to the Other" (Vilhauer 2010, 136), and our jam becomes an exercise in dominating another person, a group, a team, an object, or the environment. In contrast, when we engage in listening and acting from a position fully immersed with the other, we focus on openness toward the other and accept what they can creatively bestow. The jam becomes a restorative process where we can contribute and be more fully responsible for shaping the world and all its participants. The jam, as a way of being in the world, can cultivate renewed equity and offer what Sutton-Smith (2008) calls a "form of human salvation in our earthly box [by serving as] a healing function . . . a major method of becoming reconciled with our being within our present universe" (124).

## Conclusion

Play does not have its being in the player's consciousness or attitude, but on the contrary, play draws him into its dominion and fills him with its spirit.

—HANS GEORG GADAMER

This article argues for creative play and jam sessions as opportunities to challenge the individualistic world view and find an intradependent connection that enables us to relate to nature and society in more cohesive and supportive ways. A diffractive reading of Gadamer through Barad unearths onto-epistemological similarities between these two theorists. Both offer relational, as opposed to individualistic approaches, acknowledging the fundamental condition that we are related to the other. In our jam, we reimagine our everyday space as communal. Both agree that the “Other” must be recognized, teaching us to see ourselves as beings in the process and not the sole beings of the process. In our jam, we rely on others to complete our existence. Both promote a case for the role of the nonhuman and its centrality to the process. Through the jam, we shatter the boundaries of mind-and-body, nonhuman-and-human, and us-and-them dualisms. Finally, both see the collaborative intraaction between all participants as a place where a shared agency and a new creation arise, encouraging an ethical and sociopolitical response.

Through shared agency and entanglement, we are called to listen to the other, paying attention to those oppressed and discarded by dualist thought. Jamming is an ethico-socio-political response that raises questions about our response-ability to the relationships around us and helps us better understand humans as embedded in and dependent on those relationships. Undeniably, play has the capacity for change and transformation through dialogue. “In order to enter this dialogue, we need to approach the Other with openness, stand ‘ready’ to hear something new, ‘listen’ to the Other’s claims with seriousness, and ‘allow’ that Other’s claim to challenge and enrich our own thinking” (Vilhauer 2010, 94). The jam, indeed, all creative play, is a transformational process that challenges anthropocentric individualism and serves as a catalyst for “listening for the response of the other and an obligation to be responsive to the other” (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012, 69). As a framework for dynamic change, the jam offers us an opportunity to grasp agencies of inclusion and exclusion as we explore what really matters.

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