

PLAY IN A COVID FRAME

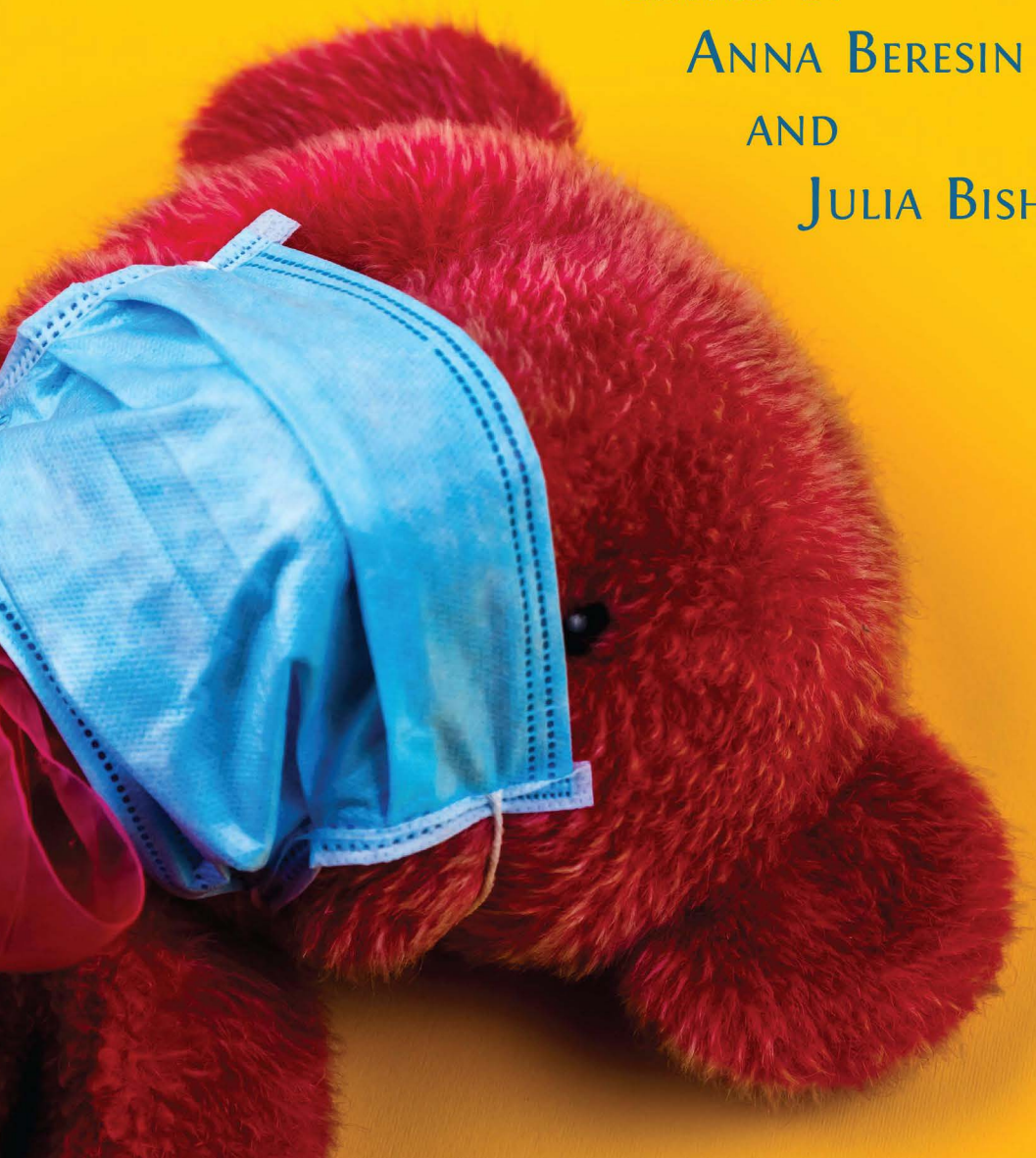
EVERYDAY PANDEMIC CREATIVITY
IN A TIME OF ISOLATION

EDITED BY

ANNA BERESIN

AND

JULIA BISHOP





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Conclusion:

Covid in a Play Frame

Anna Beresin and Julia Bishop

President Biden declares ‘the pandemic is over’.
(CBS 60 Minutes, 18 September 2022)

We wondered if people would be puzzled by a book about a deadly virus and play, although those we approached understood the concept of the book intuitively. Yet, a romanticized ‘Barneyesque’ view of play remains primary, that play is a nicety, a simple extra. Play stays with us evolutionarily because it serves as a vessel for complex ideas, a paradoxical container for the light and the heavy, for both laughter and anguish. These portraits and landscapes of Covid play reveal not just our collective creativity and community earnestness in a time of fear and potential illness, but also something about the complexity of play itself as an essential part of what it means to be human, particularly a young human.

In an essay reprinted in his posthumous book *Play for Life: Play Theory and Play as Emotional Survival* (2017 [2008]) Brian Sutton-Smith called play ‘dialudic’, his slightly tongue-in-cheek conflation of ‘ludic’ (Latin for ‘play’) and ‘dialectic’, a process of attempting to find truth through conflict and disagreement. His underutilized concept of play’s dualistic nature appeared throughout his writing and helps us see how play contains opposites inside our culture and inside our heads. To play is to have a symbolically loaded conversation, even if we are alone in our room when we do it, balancing as we attempt to solve complex problems, personally, socially, culturally, historically. Perhaps the tensions within such an activity play out through the pulsing dynamics of negotiated

exaggeration. So let us return to each chapter in *Play in a Covid Frame* and see what a dialudic lens reveals about Covid in a play frame.

Tag embodies the quintessential dialudic game—the one touched becomes the one who chases, inverting roles and shifting the narratives. Bishop's chapter on Coronavirus Tag demonstrates the paradox that this game is both unique to this time and also not unique, connecting it to other forms of Tag and noxious touch. This can be said for all play—it is both of this moment in time and built upon forms that have come before. Bishop's chapter also presents Twitter as a place for hashtagged comments relating to play, raising an implied question about where we hope to find common discursive spaces in the future. Krnjaja and Mitranić write that the pandemic has informed us about how play is pivotal for both the individual and our collective society, that programmes must balance children's needs for self-expression and also act in the child's best interest during a pandemic.

Sienkiewicz, Beideman, LeBron, Lewis, Morrison, Rivera and Faticone, and also O'Dwyer, Hannan and Neville, present the inequality of access to play spaces, both physical and virtual. Both chapters focus on the importance of cultural inclusion, in school and after school, and that play is key for pandemic mental health. In Rochester, New York, the team notes the paradox that programmes serving children need both consistency and flexibility during crises like Covid. Perhaps games are the ultimate training ground for rule-bound improvisation. O'Dwyer, Hannan and Neville make an important case for culturally specific comparative data across time.

During the pandemic, we have all had to re-examine what we feel is essential in our lives. King raises the question whether playworkers should be considered essential workers, suggesting an overall public misunderstanding of both play and play's essentially social nature. Terada, Ermilova and Shimamura describe the central paradox in playwork of interference without interference. The banner at the adventure playground in Kawasaki City reads 'No Prohibitions', yet prohibitions became necessary as the playground remained open during the height of the pandemic in order to serve the most vulnerable families. The cultural variations of health taboos during Covid within the frame of a scientific narrative of safety would be worthy of further study.

In our Portraits section, Heljakka puns with her discussion of ‘bearers of hope’. Drawing on the literature that addresses paradoxes of toys, we are reminded that the toy is not only an object of solitary play. Displayed in public spaces, the bears promoted ‘ludounity’, intergenerational collaboration and optimism in the symbol that represents both mourning and huggability in a touchless time. Beresin contrasts play opportunities in three urban communities and notes their vast differences, their common play themes, and the complexity of world-building as a pandemic folk practice in a time of limited space. Play allowed the children to use this time to create future scenarios offering escape, demonstrating that at play we time travel. We were here and elsewhere simultaneously. Carter argues that school is fundamentally social and that face-to-face play with friends was indeed irreplaceable, although some were happy at home and some not. There was a newfound joy when lockdowns were lifted.

Renel and Thom decry the medicalization of play for disabled children and young people, and through their superhero kits sought to share positive memories of play as protection. Calling for anti-ableist resistance, they describe the unequal lifting of restrictions. The paradox here is of super resilience within spatial injustice, amplifying the importance of play for all. Le Bigre presents vulnerability as a source of fun, particularly for elderly women in their disregard of lockdown rules, noting that vulnerable play is play in its ‘most honest form’. To invert power presents a deliciousness at play; it defies death as it courts death. So, we may ‘clap for the carers’ but we take delight in chalking signs for each other in liminal places.

Egan, Pope, Beatty and Hoyne reframe portraits through data showing that, although children over seven years of age played with toys and games during the pandemic, only fifty-seven percent of them did so daily. One third of the families included in their study mentioned children directly playing with Covid as a theme—playing dead, playing doctor, pretending to wash hands or pretending to social distance. We are again reminded of the varying degrees of access to outdoor spaces in a time where outdoor spaces were initially taboo and then celebrated as the only real safe places to gather. Dong documents families’ curated photos of innovative play kits with nonspecific materials. Here digital devices connected where physical bodies could not go. Potter and Cannon’s photo essay becomes an elicitation tool for each of us,

presenting the paradox of a holistic partial view, a thematically varied sampler. Here we see outdoor cinemas, wild pets inside, and dens or forts as part of a global archive of this time.

Shifting frames are themselves dizzying and clarifying. Radice's study of Yardi Gras layers a new stable moving tradition, with 'sadmirable' improvisation with inside jokes and puns. Like the houses that together represented different characters in their themed house decorations of *Alice in Wonderland*, participants and researchers found ways to collaborate. Festive sensory bombardment was recast in a time of sensory deprivation, without sacrificing the inversion of anti-racist and anti-classist humor. McKinty, Hazleton and von der Borch note the paradox of children needing adults to remain playful at this time while celebrating children's own pandemic peer culture. Beresin writes of the complex cultural layers of trickster play as negotiated exaggeration while social events turned virtual during lockdown. The message here is: we did it ourselves, but we got by with a little help from our fam.

Olusoga and Bannister reveal another icon of paradox, the mask itself, as it protects, conceals and displays elements of culture and personal style. Children's agency emerged in their choice of fandom on display as they presented their hidden faces as a form of identity. We close with Shirey's photo essay of pandemic art by the Velvet Bandit and SudaLove. Off-the-wall humour on the wall, the work invites both the 'quick glance' of understanding and sustained hunting for new images in new places. One artist works satirically, the other exaggerates with scale and portraiture.

In the future, follow the online 'viral' pandemic slang, as older youth often point the way to new forms of children's folklore. The virus has been called the 'Miley Cyrus', the 'Pandemi Lovato', the 'Panjolina Jolie'. Are all human nicknames for the pandemic female? Other popular terms for Covid still in use include the 'Rona' and 'Boomer Remover'. The ageist snarkiness is perhaps understandable, given the fragile world we are passing along to future generations. A pandemic denier is a 'Covidiot'. Staying home is a 'Coronacation'. Outfits worn inside during quarantine? 'Infits'.

Covid emerged as a mobile global disease and the responses described in this book are themselves localized yet widespread, reminding us that illness and play are misrepresented if we only look at individual cases,

even though each one has value. We will remember this time not just for its cycles of sickness and raw emotion but as a time of adjustment to a changing social life. We learned that one park's policies were handled differently from similar ones in another country. One public school's limitations regarding play space and play time differed from another public school within the same city. Pretend play was as varied as families' stories of resourcefulness. Games had different rules and motifs within the same thematic frame. Yet, common themes of isolation and material, temporal and spatial innovation emerged cross culturally. There was a collective sense of loss and wistful opportunity as children in different parts of the world pretended to be ill, to make each other sick and to heal each other, to re-create the daily tasks of pandemic life and to practise escape.

*We hauled empty luggage
And vaccinated our eyeballs
Muzzled toys in quarantine*

*And were 'not it'
Or maybe had 'it'
Our shuttered lives flung open
By parks and internet*

*And we emerged
Unmasked
Still caped.*

