

# Parks and Recreation\*

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*Slides are for sliding down, not for climbing up!*

Over the last couple of years, I have heard this thought in my head more than a few times and even said it out loud ... also more than a few times. Like many other caregivers (of, admittedly, a certain socioeconomic status), I have spent quite a bit of time with my children at playgrounds in parks during the COVID-19 pandemic. Like many other children, they do not always play with these objects and spaces in officially sanctioned ways. They like to climb up slides, they like to swing on their bellies, and they like to seesaw with their hands.

As a prescriptive rule, “slides are for sliding down, not for climbing up” is sometimes explicitly written on signs next to slides. It is also sometimes explicitly expressed by other caregivers nearby. More often, it is left implicit. Still, even when there are no signs and no other caregivers, I—and I bet many other caregivers too—hear it in our heads and tell it to our children. And we often do so relatively effortlessly, automatically, and unconsciously.

This rule is not merely prescriptive, but also constitutive. Not every sloped surface on a playground is a slide. A slide is—one might say, by definition!—a sloped surface that is to be slid down. Iris Marion Young says that “[t]he inert material things and constraints we encounter bear marks of past praxis, but we experience this praxis passively, as having objective properties of its own, which may or may not correspond to our current projects and goals” (2011: 54). A slide, however mundane, is no exception: there is this rule that’s embedded into this material thing, and we passively experience this rule as an objective property of it.

## **Theoretical Tools**

Quill R Kukla’s *City Living* (2021) exceptionally combines an innovative and insightful theoretical framework with detailed ethnographies of three cities on three continents: Washington DC, Berlin, and Johannesburg. It has given me the tools for thinking in a brand new way about my own negotiations with objects and my own movements in spaces, even when I am doing something as ordinary as bringing my children to play at the park. Kukla’s careful attention to the ways that urban environments can enable agency for some dwellers while constraining others has

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also directed my own attention to everyday environments. Now, even when I am in a place as ordinary as a playground, I can't help but think about who it enables and who it constrains.

In the two foundational theoretical chapters of *City Living*, Kukla sets out to explain how “cities and city dwellers make one another [...] at the scale of particular bodies making small movements through particular spaces” (3). They argue against two opposing views about the relationship between cities and city dwellers. A *spatial determinist* insists on the primacy of the material: the objects and spaces set the rules, and we must follow them. A *spatial voluntarist* insists on the primacy of the psychological: we set the rules, and we can do what we want with whatever objects and spaces. Instead, they argues for a novel framework on which spaces and subjects “mutually condition, constitute, and accommodate one another” (17).

To emphasize, a spatial *mutualist* like Kukla does not merely claim that there are reciprocal causal interactions between spaces and subjects. To say that “our spatial agency is enabled and shaped by city spaces, and also that through our spatial agency we remake the spaces we inhabit” is to make both a causal *and* a constitutive claim such that “neither spaces nor their dwellers can be properly understood independently of one another” (15). On this framework, there is a co-dependence between social practices and material objects (38).

Kukla centers the final chapter of *City Living* on an explicitly normative aim: “a city that is *for everyone* will also have to be made *by everyone*” (257). While spaces and subjects make one another, they do not do so equitably. The same space can enable some subjects but not others to flourish. The same space can also be more accessible for some bodies but not others, depending on the particularities of different bodies.

In some cases, such patterns are merely spatial differences. However, when they are in congruence with other patterns of social inequality, then they become spatial inequalities. Moreover, depending on the particularities of different social identities, some people are more able to reshape, repurpose, and remake the same space than others. When that happens, the reciprocal causal interactions—and mutual constitutions—between inequalities at different levels end up sustaining oppressive systems such as racism, sexism, ableism, and classism (compare Liao & Huebner 2021; Liao & Carbonell in press).

Indeed, Kukla addresses the spatial inequalities that occur in congruence with racism, sexism, ableism, and classism. But I learned the most from their discussion of spatial inequalities that occur in congruence with ageism. In particular, I was struck by their observation of how teenagers are systematically denied access to *third places*, “a place that was neither our home nor our place of business (our work or school) but that was *ours* in a communal sense” (271). Kukla's insight is that many so-called public spaces are not, in fact, for all. Through explicit and implicit markings, they are rendered more or less accessible by social identities such as race, gender, ability status, class, and—yes—age. In this respect, teenagers are often denied a *territory*, “a space in which a group of people feel at home and experience themselves as having voice and agency within and over that space” (59).

## Children's Third Places?

Where are children's third places? Kukla rightly notes: "It is important to understand how few spaces there are in the neighborhood that are comfortable territory for children—places where they can enjoy spatial agency and territory" (110).<sup>1</sup> In many cities (and suburbs, for that matter), playgrounds seem to be the exceptions—spaces that are more or less exclusively *for* children. Adults with their soccer league and adolescents with their football game might fight over who gets to use the same field in a park, but the only ones that are fighting with kids about who gets to slide, swing, or seesaw are other kids. Yet can children really claim playgrounds as their *territory*, within and over which they can exercise their agency? I am not so sure.

It might seem absurd to say that children exist in an oppressive relationship with their caregivers. However, in "Taking Children's Autonomy Seriously as a Parent" (2020), Kukla argues that many culturally dominant conceptions of parenting, in fact, do not fully acknowledge children as full moral persons. Everyone acknowledges that caregivers have immense power over children because children typically do not yet have the full capacity to satisfy their own basic needs. However, not everyone acknowledges that many caregivers also think—as culturally dominant conceptions of parenting inculcate them—that "with this power comes the right to restrict our children's mobility and their choices" (Kukla 2020: 15).

Why is it wrong to climb up slides? A typical answer that you get is that it is not safe to do so: "parents need to *protect* their children!" This is an answer backed up by a deeply-felt, almost-instinctive emotion that I, like most other caregivers, understand well. There's nothing wrong with this emotion. The danger, as Kukla points out, is when it produces behaviors that limit children's exercise of agency.

Notice that there are two assumptions that lie behind the typical answer.

First, there is the assumption that children are not very good judges of their own safety. In my experience, this is most often not actually the case. Slides are most often not actually that unsafe to climb on, and children most often refrain from seriously unsafe behaviors on the playground. Moreover, we should also be suspicious of this assumption since analogous ones have long been used to justify the attribution of mere partial agency to people in oppressed groups and, in turn, justify paternalism by people in oppressive groups. Behind many calls to protect non-white people, women, disabled people, and the working class is the assumption that they, too, are not very good judges of their own safety.

Second, there is the assumption that safety is more important than other values. Adults typically do not make this assumption about their own lives. I play basketball at the park even though I might get injured. Other adults engage in other risky behaviors too. So even if it is actually unsafe to climb up slides (which, to reiterate, most often it is not), that alone cannot justify telling children to not do so.

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<sup>1</sup> To be clear, Berlin—one of the three cities central to *City Living*—is a notable exception. Thanks to its 1979 Children Playground Law, there are about 1m<sup>2</sup> of playground space per inhabitant in Berlin (Anderson-Oliver 2019).

To take children's autonomy seriously is to allow them to engage in some risky behaviors, just like you and me and other people.

Obviously, I do not think caregivers should never set any boundaries for children. But if Kukla is right that the culturally dominant conceptions of parenting do not take seriously children's autonomy, then it is worth interrogating our emotional responses in this domain, even when—or perhaps, especially when—they are so deeply felt. Consequently, it is also worth interrogating whether the boundaries we set are really the ones we should be setting. However well-intentioned, we caregivers can sometimes restrict our children's mobility and their choices in the name of protecting them. That is, after all, the essence of paternalism.

Young says that “in the most general sense, all oppressed people suffer some inhibition of their ability to develop and exercise their capacities and express their needs, thoughts, and feelings” (1990: 40). Playgrounds may seem insignificant because play may seem insignificant. But this is not true, as so many educators who emphasize the importance of childhood play would tell you. Children very much develop as agents at playgrounds: it is through play that they learn to make decisions about their own bodies, express their own values, and negotiate with others. So when caregivers inhibit their ability to develop and exercise these capacities, what should we call that but ‘oppression’? Indeed, the apparent absurdity of saying that children exist in an oppressive relationship with their caregivers might be itself symptomatic of the fact that adults routinely discount children's testimony (Kukla 2020: 14).

If an oppressive relationship can exist between children and the caregivers who love them very much, it is unsurprising that it too can exist between children and other adults. Not only can other adults possess similar power over children, but they can also think that they know better about the safety of bodily movements that are not their own, and about the right balance of competing values that are not their own. It is not uncommon for me to observe at playgrounds other adults who restrict children's mobility and their choices, even children who are not “theirs”. They don't even have to yell, “slides are for sliding down, not for climbing up!”; a stern look or even an ominous presence can have the same effect. There is co-dependence between social practice and material object: the latent surveillance by adults enforces and reinforces the rule that has been built in.

Oppression is interlocking. So the power dynamic that exists between children and adults on playgrounds can be further exacerbated by how children are racialized, gendered, disabled, and classed. Even when adults, including primary caregivers, exhibit respect for children's autonomy, they might only selectively do so for children who fit the norm. Conversely, they might selectively enforce the rule via surveillance—and, indeed, sometimes punishment—for children who do not. While many white boys get to climb up slides, many Asian girls get told “you can't do that—it's too dangerous!”

Where are children's third places? Even though playgrounds are for children, they are not—as things stand—really places that children can call their own. As we have seen, children are often prohibited by explicit or implicit rules to reshape or repurpose the space. And so, even though children are whom playgrounds are made for, they are still denied its territorial rights because they

cannot remake it into truly theirs. If a city that is for everyone will also have to be made by everyone, then playgrounds that are for children will also have to be made by children.

Social and spatial inequalities can constitute self-amplifying feedback loops that sustain oppressive systems. Playgrounds do not merely reflect the social fact that children's autonomy is not always taken seriously, they also condition and constitute this social fact. Given that spaces and subjects make one another, playgrounds do not only shape children's agency, they also shape adults' cognition. I am convinced that we should take children's autonomy seriously. Yet, when I am at the playground, I still—relatively effortlessly, automatically, and unconsciously—hear it in my head and say it to my children, especially when I notice other caregivers' disapproving glances, “slides are for sliding down, not for climbing up!”

Maybe these ills are just symptoms of today's hyper-anxious helicopter parenting (of, admittedly, a certain socioeconomic status). I remember, as a child in Taipei, going to local parks by myself with friends. Maybe we had more freedom and autonomy back then. But I don't think the ills can be so easily explained away, at least not entirely. Just because my caregivers were not around doesn't mean that there were no adults. And insofar as there were adults around, the same power dynamics—the same stern looks and the same ominous presences—may still be around. Furthermore, even when there were no adults around, the rules that adults wrote could still often be found on the adjacent signs, or internalized by other children on the playground.

Kukla cautions against spatial libertarianism as the solution to spatial inequality (284). Building an inclusive space requires deliberate effort. The fragility of children's autonomy means that they demand active care. An inclusive playground is not one where no adults are around, but one where adults consciously check their impulses and constantly work to respect children's agency. Only then can children have third places that they can claim as their own territories.

### **Games or Toys?**

Will Wright, the legendary designer of *SimCity* and *The Sims*, has said, “People call me a game designer, but I really think of these things more as toys” (2007: 00:29). Games are structured by constitutive rules (Nguyen 2019). Games give goals to players, designate abilities for them, and place obstacles in their way (Nguyen 2020: ch. 1). In contrast, toys are environments that can *afford* different types of games. In the classic sense introduced by James J. Gibson (1979/2015: 119), “The *affordances* of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill. [...] It implies the complementarity of the animal and the environment.” There is no one right way to play *SimCity*: you can meticulously plan the layout to [maximize the population](#), or you can just turn on all the natural disasters to destroy everything. Neither the population-maximizer nor the city-destroyer is missing the point because neither population maximization nor city destruction is a constitutive rule of *SimCity*. These are simply two (among many more) ways that the player can relate to this toy, as Wright thinks of it.

A slide is a toy to children, but a game to adults. To the bureaucrats who wrote the rules on the sign or the caregivers with watchful eyes, slides are structured by a constitutive rule: they are for sliding down, not for climbing up. But this is not the case for children, who see multiple affordances in the same material things. Slides can be for sliding down, for climbing up, for hiding under, for throwing pebbles on, and for so many other playful interactions. A slide is oppressive—in the sense that it becomes a component of an oppressive system that is psychological, social, and material—when adults insist that it is a game, with a rule set by them, and not just a toy. A different reality is possible: sculptor Isamu Noguchi’s ideal playground is constituted solely of a giant public sculpture, which he calls ‘Play Mountain’, that is variously described as “a cross between a Mayan temple and a mountain” or as “an asymmetrical Egyptian step-pyramid” with no rules built in (99% Invisible 2019).

To be clear, I am not arguing that toys are always better than games. While there are those who systematically champion free play over structured games, C. Thi Nguyen (2020: ch. 4) persuasively argues that games are valuable in fostering different modes of agency precisely because they impose restrictions and specifications. By communicating different modes of agency, they “offer a special path to enriching our long-term freedom and autonomy” (Nguyen 2020: 76). My point is only that games can only do so when playing is the player’s choice. Games might be agency yoga, but yoga only works when *you* move your body, and not someone else. A slide, as a game, is not exactly freely chosen when it is situated against the backdrop of an oppressive relationship between children and adults. By trying too hard to sculpt children’s agency, traditional conceptions of parenting end up limiting children’s freedom and autonomy.

Over the last few years, playgrounds in Taiwanese cities have undergone a dramatic change. The replacement of cookie-cutter playground equipment with multimodal ones came about because a grassroots organization called [Parks and Playgrounds for Children by Children](#) has worked to defend children’s right to play, which is traditionally neglected everywhere, but arguably especially in Taiwan.<sup>2</sup> As the name indicates, the organization’s guiding philosophy is that playgrounds are not only to be made for children, but also to be made by them. Although the implementation of this guiding philosophy is uneven in practice, in the best cases—exemplified by the design and construction of the playground at Huashan 1914 Creative Park in Taipei—children are consulted in the initial design of the park through multiple workshopping processes.<sup>3</sup>

The involvement in the remaking of playgrounds surely improves the status quo. Yet it still seems to fall short of Kukla’s requirement that a space is only an agent’s territory if they can reshape or repurpose it. Perhaps the worlds of *Minecraft* are especially popular among children as virtual third places because they enable

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<sup>2</sup> Disclosure: I provide a tiny amount of funding to this organization.

<sup>3</sup> In 《公園遊戲力：22個精彩案例×一群幕後推手，與孩子一起翻轉全台兒童遊戲場》(2020), the members of Parks and Playgrounds for Children by Children provide 22 case studies of their efforts to remake playgrounds across Taiwan. In 《遊戲場發生什麼事？》(2020), the children in the preschool “Super Cute Moon” class illustrate their design ideas, some of which eventually went into the playground at Huashan 1914 Creative Park.

what the real world mostly cannot: the capacity to constantly “reshape space to [...] suit our needs and desires of the moment” (20). As things stand, playgrounds remain available only for children’s recreation, but not re-creation. Even at the Huashan 1914 Creative Park playground, slides are still for sliding down, not for climbing up.

Again, a different reality is possible: adventure playgrounds—sometimes also called ‘natural playgrounds’ or ‘junk playgrounds’—do enable children to reshape, repurpose, and even remake the objects and spaces of play (Chilton 2018). Designated adults, called playworkers, are present but refrain from saying or doing things that might unduly constrain children’s mobility and their choices. Although the idea behind adventure playgrounds is nearly a century old, they remain hard to find in the real world. There are currently none in Taiwan, and not even Parks and Playgrounds for Children by Children are vocally advocating for them yet.<sup>4</sup>

In the meantime, caregivers like myself can bring the adventure spirit to the playgrounds that we do have. Unlike spatial voluntarists, we should recognize that our environments can shape us. Unlike spatial determinists, we should also recognize that we can shape our environments. We do not have to tear down every slide to modify its objective property; we caregivers can reshape the material environment, and invite our children to do so too, by reshaping our social practices.

Slides are for sliding down, *and* for climbing up!

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<sup>4</sup> There are discussions of alternative playground models and cases at the end of 《公園遊戲力：22 個精彩案例 × 一群幕後推手，與孩子一起翻轉全台兒童遊戲場》. While some adventure playgrounds have existed in Taiwan, existing legal regulations—and perhaps the dominant parenting philosophy they embody—pose a challenge to their continuing operation.

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