

The Loss of Playfulness

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Abstract

How does social distancing affect our sense of self? Our ability to create ourselves? In this article, I explore the value of interacting with strangers for our sense of self and the impact of COVID-19 safety measures on our relationships with others. Specifically, I suggest that strangers can offer us opportunities to try on new identities but that this opportunity is lost as the public realm erodes because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

To ask me to stay at home during the pandemic isn't to ask for much. I'm an introvert. I enjoy working from home and love the company I keep. My partner isn't an academic—far from it. He works in the fitness and health industry, so we don't talk shop extensively. Mostly, we get to be a more personal version of ourselves at home. We talk about books, TV, our friends and family. I am lucky that my home is filled with laughter.

If I think about the nature of my life at home, I am inclined to put it into the words of María Lugones: home is where I am lovingly playful. In her paper "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception," Lugones suggests that we can construct ourselves and our worlds when we are with others who allow us to be playful. For her, playfulness is an attitude that "involves openness to surprise, openness to being a fool, openness to self-construction or reconstruction."¹ Loving playfulness thus arises when we aren't bound by expectations or rules and no norms dictate our behavior. We are lovingly playful when we are with others who love us and who, because of that love, create a space that is safe and comfortable enough for us to try on new identities. Home, then, is where we are likely to be lovingly playful. It is a private place, where uninvited guests are rarely found. Safe from the gaze of judgmental others, it is where most of us can be as silly or as serious as we want. It is where we are free.

The value of loving playfulness for our sense of self and identity is an established part of

feminist literature. Theorists such as Seyla Benhabib and Hilde Lindemann Nelson argue for the value of narratives in identity building. According to their theories, our sense of identity is constituted through the stories we tell about ourselves, and our identities are either affirmed or torn apart when others support or reject our stories. Relationships of love and solidarity, then, are central to identity building because they encourage storytelling and foster identities that we ourselves choose to endorse. When it is filled with supportive others, home is fruitful for identity work.

Yet, not all homes are the same. Indeed, for those who live with a cruel and dominating family or partner, home isn't a place of freedom. In a pandemic, it can be the site of isolation-induced oppression. If we are trapped with those who see us only as they want, we may find ourselves stuck in roles that we don't want and can't escape. According to twentieth-century philosopher Hannah Arendt, home, or as she puts it "the private realm," is a realm of necessity;² it is where we take care of those biological needs that we can never permanently escape and which, therefore, always keep us busy and, subsequently, unfree.³ As such, Arendt permits inequality and violence at home because attempting to maintain equality in the home results in inefficiency, which drains the time we could be spending in the public realm, where we are free to be free.⁴

1. María Lugones, "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception," *Hypatia* 2, no. 2 (1987): 17.

2. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1958), 30.

3. *Ibid.*, 32.

4. *Ibid.*, 31.

For Arendt, it is in public, away from home, where we are free to discover who we are. It is when we speak and act with others, as equals, that we disclose ourselves. Different aspects of our identities are developed and revealed when the presence of others or new situations give us the opportunity to try on new identities. To put it in the terms of Benhabib and Lindemann Nelson, for Arendt, we are free to develop our identities, not when we are home but rather, in public. And, in Lugones's terms, we are most playful not when we are at home but rather in public with strangers.

For, strangers provide a kind of spontaneity that isn't possible at home. Family and friends, because they know us—our likes, dislikes, our hopes and dreams—can't provide the same kind of creative potential that strangers can. By definition, our relationships with strangers are short, so the rules that bind us to fixed roles are few and lax. Thus, when we engage strangers, we can abandon the roles we have been pushed into or built up for ourselves, even if we endorse them. As an introvert, for example, I can become a social butterfly for the few minutes I'm in a coffee shop. The barista doesn't know me and so doesn't hold any ideas about who I am or who I am likely to be. Of course, she could hold prejudice about some aspect of my identity, but, if she doesn't, we're just two strangers passing by who present each other with the opportunity to be playful—to see our own lives from uniquely liberating perspectives—precisely because we don't know each other. Homelife, in comparison, is a bit predictable and routine. Until recently, I hadn't had a chance to really appreciate the playfulness that can arise when we are out in public. But it's been weeks now since I've had a passing conversation with someone on the street or shared jokes with a cashier at a store, and I am finally starting to miss it. I miss the feeling of being surprised and delighted, of encountering new worlds where I can be a "new" me. Arendt talked about the public realm as a place where we appear to others, that is, as a place where we disclose who we are by acting and speaking with different people.⁵ For her, the public realm is valuable because it facilitates political action.⁶ But, I think, in light of the potential playfulness

of strangers, we could also say that the public realm is valuable because it is a place where we can explore different aspects of ourselves with different people. Being *lovingly* playful, at home, is predicated on the existence of a loving relationship in which the other knows me and cares for me. The playfulness of strangers, however, is predicated on the very lack of a relationship. Strangers in the public realm don't know us and may never know us, so they give us a chance to explore who we might (want to) be. The public realm is thus a place of freedom not only because we are liberated in the Arendtian sense but also because it can become a place of playful experimentation that might open truly novel ways to be together. By simply remaining open to each other and engaging with others respectfully, we make the public realm into a space of individual and community possibilities.

Unfortunately, social distancing jeopardizes this emancipatory space. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to evolve, there are fewer and fewer opportunities for us to be with strangers. We can't be out and about in public and, even when we are, everything is done with an almost militant efficiency. *Stand two meters apart. Follow the blue tape lines. Wear masks and gloves.* The freedom that the public realm provides is lost when strict rules govern our behavior; it takes away our ability to be playful with strangers. There's no time to talk to one another, to explore the possibility of narrative solidarity, if we are scared to be in each other's presence. Yet, this is precisely what the coronavirus lockdowns foster: fear of the other's presence and proximity to us. This is especially evident in the Canadian province of Ontario, where municipalities are opening up "snitch lines," dedicated phone numbers and emails to contact if one witnesses a violation of physical distancing measures.⁷ The fact that reports are being made daily to these centers exemplifies the loss of playfulness in the public realm because now, instead of being open to others, we are policing one another. Others don't represent opportunities for freedom and growth; they are strangers to be watched, in case they act in a way that could hurt us.

5. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1958), 179.

6. *Ibid.*, 182-83.

7. Cillian O'Brien, "People are Reporting on Their Neighbours over COVID-19 Concerns," CTV News, 28 March 2020; Last updated 29 March 2020, https://beta.ctvnews.ca/national/2020/3/28/1_4872683.html/.

This sort of fear-based surveillance is especially troubling because it mimics the conditions that make a home unsafe. Recall that homes can become a place of isolation-induced oppression when the people at home are dominating or cruel. In these cases, we lose the sense of safety and trust required to be playful because others force us to accept their ideas of us. These narratives of “intimate terrorism” and the domestic abuse that usually accompanies them push us into roles we despise and force us to be someone we don’t want to be.⁸ As sociologist Marianne Hester puts it, if “people have got to be at home ... that gives [the abuser] an opportunity, suddenly, to call the shots around that. To say what [the victim] should be doing or shouldn’t.”⁹ A parallel argument can be made for the public realm. If we allow fears about the coronavirus to cloud our perceptions of strangers and we replace our lack of a relationship with them with a sort of active distrust or wariness, then we risk losing the creativity that comes from the diversity of the public realm. In other words, we will lose the spontaneity needed to be playful with strangers and, in so doing, destroy the creative potential that they can provide for identity work.

For this reason, the physical distancing that is imperative to mitigating the spread of the novel coronavirus presents a unique challenge for identity work. I have heard people say that crises can bring people together, that new communities can be built across existing communities when something like a pandemic shows us the need to work together. But identity work is different from merely working together for some common cause because it requires equal parts safety and diversity. In other words, we need to be able to play at home *and* out in public. Playfulness exclusively in one realm isn’t enough. We need both the support of those who love us and the solidarity of those who may never know us to fully experience all that we want to be and all of who we might be.

So, how can we keep being playful, despite the fear in the public realm and the terror in the private realm? The answer, I think, lies in an observation that Lindemann Nelson, Benhab-

ib, Lugones, and Arendt all had in common: We need to remember that isolation always breeds violence and that freedom always requires others. We need each other, even when it seems like we would be better off alone. We need to find ways to be together, despite the physical distances between us. Togetherness will offer a reprieve to those whose homes are unsafe and new opportunities for solidarity to those whose homes are safe.

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9. Ibid.

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The Loss of Playfulness

A Public Holistic Response

Laetitia Ramelet



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Thanks to the PPJ for including me in the discussion of this thought-provoking piece. Two of the things that strike me as particularly important are the awareness of the very different psychological consequences these months at home will have for each of us, depending on how safe home is, as well as the value of informal interactions with strangers, that we may well come to consider as an important component of our (moral and political) communities once we can participate in such interactions lightheartedly again. I also like the way the academic literature is introduced, in a very accessible way.

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Laetitia Ramelet is currently finishing her PhD thesis entitled "Decrypting Political Consent: Back to the Roots with Grotius, Hobbes, and Pufendorf" at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland.

The Loss of Playfulness

A Public Holistic Response

Christopher P. Long



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Loss can be revealing. As Janet Jones suggests in her investigation of the loss of playfulness in a time of distancing, an ominous pall of anxiety has descended upon our public encounters with one another. This anxiety is conditioned by the ubiquitous feeling of being under constant threat by an unseen virus that can quite literally hang in the air between us, making even the most innocuous meeting potentially noxious. The loss of spontaneity and play in the public realm has uncovered for Jones the emancipatory possibilities for a deeper sense of solidarity.

Bringing the transformative power of playfulness in the work of María Lugones into dialogue with Hannah Arendt's existential analysis of the public and private spheres, Jones invites us to consider what the COVID-19 pandemic has to teach us about the realities of isolation and the possibilities of community.

Her essay establishes a connection between domestic abuse in the private sphere and the practices of surveillance and policing found in a public realm riven by fear. To this, however, she contrasts the emancipatory possibilities that emerge in private spaces animated by loving playfulness and in public spaces shaped by playful experimentation. Cycles of abuse, surveillance, and fear chart a future conditioned by terror and destitution, those of playfulness

and experimentation open possibilities for a future of solidarity, hope, and even justice.

This essay invites us to consider where we might find the courage to reach out across the veil of anxiety that separates us; how we might cultivate liberating habits of solidarity resistant to the debilitating forces of fear. What structures of institutional support would we need to empower such courage? What shared commitments would we require to create the conditions of loving playfulness and experimentation that would establish a more just future?

The answers to these questions remain shrouded in uncertainty. An apocalypse, however, is an uncovering. How we respond to what we discover about ourselves and the world we knew will shape the realities of the world we create.

Contributor Information

Christopher P. Long (cplong@msu.edu) is Professor of philosophy and Dean of the College of Arts and Letters at Michigan State University. His extensive publications in Ancient Greek and Contemporary Continental Philosophy include four books: *The Ethics of Ontology: Rethinking an Aristotelian Legacy* (SUNY 2004), *Aristotle On the Nature of Truth* (Cambridge 2010), an enhanced digital book entitled *Socratic and Platonic Political Philosophy: Practicing a Politics of Reading* (Cambridge 2014), and *Reiner Schürmann and the Poetics of Politics* (Punctum 2018). He is co-founder and editor of the [Public Philosophy Journal](https://doi.org/10.25335/PPJ).