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“The Atmosphere is Permissive and Free”: The Gendering of Activism in the British Adventure Playgrounds Movement, c.1948-1970

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<Abstract>Abstract

This article explores how gender shaped activities on British adventure playgrounds, designated abandoned spaces where children engaged in free play with urban materials under loose adult supervision. It argues that as these bold experiments emerged in postwar Britain in a period when women’s traditional roles were beginning to be scrutinized and questioned they might have been expected to develop into spaces where traditional gendered norms were challenged, girls and boys were offered different forms of play, and mothers were drawn into wider community activism. This potential was limited through the emergence of the figure of the heroic playleader, a charismatic man capable of taming potentially delinquent urban youth through extreme displays of masculinity. Consequently, it was not until the late 1970s, a decade after the establishment of an autonomous Women’s Liberation Movement, that adventure playgrounds began to challenge gendered play behaviors.

In September 1961, the British anarchist journal *Anarchy* devoted its seventh edition to adventure playgrounds. Editor Colin Ward introduced the topic by explaining how they embodied

the unconscious adoption of anarchist ideas in a variety of other spheres of life.... the adventure playground is an arresting example of this living anarchy, one which is valuable both in itself and as an experimental verification of a whole social approach.¹

Ward was not alone in recognizing the anarchic qualities of adventure or “junk” playgrounds, designated abandoned spaces where children played with cast-off urban materials under loose adult supervision.² Throughout the 1950s, progressive and libertarian educationalists, social scientists and even some local authorities were all quick to endorse the claims of one promoter that adventure playgrounds represented “a democratic community....where the children’s freedom is limited only by their feeling of responsibility.”³ Author and children’s rights campaigner Leila Berg enthused about adventure playgrounds “where a child went voluntarily, experimented freely, where no distinction was made between play and work.”⁴

Commented [MK1]: I cut the final clause because this sentence was very difficult to read correctly. You situate the phenomenon chronologically and geographically in the first sentence of the next paragraph.

Another supporter, sociologist John Barron Mays, placed them “on the lunatic fringe of orthodox recreation”; the London County Council funded some early examples as a “revolutionary experiment.”⁵ Critics too acknowledged adventure playgrounds’ child-centered permissive approach, but drew different conclusions as to its effect, finding them “dirty” and “unattractive” places where children’s “freedom [was] inclined to express itself in destructive, rather than constructive play,” producing “a rising generation of vandals nurtured on a ‘rubbish dump.’”⁶

Adventure playgrounds spread across 1950s Britain. Seventeen opened between 1948 and 1960.⁷ More followed in the 1960s and 70s, becoming synonymous with the new forms of community activism that came to symbolize an emerging urban counterculture in this period.⁸ Historical accounts of early adventure playgrounds similarly position them among the “avant garde in children’s work”, at the extreme fringe of a movement towards child-centered theories of play and education in the 1950s and 60s.⁹ Architectural historian Roy Kozlovsky found them “the most radical product of the post-war investment in play” while Matthew Thomson’s study of the landscapes of postwar childhood suggested that they were the “most radical form” of a number of new urban environments designed to be more attentive to children’s needs.¹⁰

In this article, I question the radicalism of adventure playgrounds by examining the gendering of these spaces and the roles that evolved within them in their first decade.

Adventure playgrounds emerged ~~as a bold experiment in post war Britain~~ at exactly the same time that women’s traditional social roles were ~~beginning~~ to be scrutinized and questioned. The strong connection between adventure playgrounds and progressive liberal opinion in the 1950s and the importance of play to an emerging Women’s Liberation Movement by the later 1960s might thus have been expected to shape them into places for confronting gender norms through challenging the gendering of play, encouraging girls and boys to share in activities,

Commented [kc2]: Unless you think it’s really awful I’d like to keep this as it conveys a sense of wider social experimentation going on

drawing mothers into wider forms of community activism and suggesting feminine roles in the professionalizing field of playwork.¹¹

Securing safe city play space would appear to be an obvious location for what John Horton and Peter Krafti have termed “implicit activism,” activism defined by a number of “small scale, personal quotidian” acts rooted in “everyday practices.”¹² Women’s implicit activism often stems from domestic experiences including childcare, food and housing.¹³ Recent anti-austerity protests in Britain have seen women taking to the streets to safeguard their children’s play provision.¹⁴ Yet close examination ~~of the day-to-day activities of individual playgrounds in the 1950s and 1960s~~ suggests that ~~they~~ the playground activism of the 1950s and 1960s ~~were~~ was not gendered in this way. Rather than becoming a site for feminized community action, ~~the exacting nature of paid leadership on~~ adventure playgrounds in deprived urban areas ~~encouraged the emergence of~~ attended to feature paid male playleaders equipped to cope with difficult adolescent behaviors. The masculinity of this new “heroic” playleader in some ways hearkened back to that of the male settlement residents of the late nineteenth century, who won over the more difficult or “unclubbable” elements of working-class youth through the force of their charismatic personalities.¹⁵ By the 1950s, a new version of this figure had emerged who owed much to popular representations of urban teachers, was highly charismatic, tough enough to combat the most challenging situations, and quintessentially male. While the presence of such men was undoubtedly critical to the success of many adventure playgrounds, it simultaneously encouraged a gendering of these spaces in ways that owed more to social convention than to radical thought.

Understanding Play in Postwar Britain

Commented [kc3]: I'm not happy with this rewrite. The original sentence was intended to encapsulate both activism, leadership and forms of play, hence 'the day-to-day activities' so it's not just the playground activism that is gendered, it's also the leadership and the children's activities. Can you substitute 'on' rather than 'of' in the original sentence to read 'the day-to-day activities on individual playgrounds' - would that work??

Commented [MK4]: I edited this sentence to avoid the dangling modifier, but feel free to rewrite if you see a better solution.

Commented [kc5]: I'm struggling without a modifier but I think that the rewrite loses a little of the complexity of what was going on. There is something quite specific about the nature of work on adventure playgrounds which is very different from that of clubs etc -

Attitudes towards play shifted dramatically in the twentieth century. Previously viewed as “a wasteful activity, consuming time and energies which could be better devoted to work,” play was increasingly understood as essential to children’s healthy development.¹⁶ This change permeated different fields of expertise, each emphasizing the cognitive, emotional and social value of play.¹⁷ The new approaches emerged before the outbreak of the Second World War. Frederich Froebel’s influence on British pedagogy brought his ideas about the importance of play to learning into the classroom and the developing field of early years education.¹⁸ Sociologist G. H. Mead identified play as a key means whereby socialization is learned.¹⁹ Psychologists such as Groos and Freud explored its cathartic role in child development.²⁰ The destruction of urban environments in the Second World War encouraged other psychologists to explore how play might diminish the trauma provoked by such locations. Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham noted that children in London played “joyfully on bombed sites and around bomb craters” rather than becoming traumatized by the destruction.²¹ Austrian artist Marie Paneth developed this approach in her work at Branch Street where she transformed a condemned building into a play center for the children of Paddington.²² New psychological and pedagogical thinking about play combined in the postwar work of Jean Piaget, who emphasized the importance of a stimulating environment to enable learning and development through play.²³

Influenced by such varied disciplinary perspectives, postwar education policy became attentive to play. Section 53 of the 1944 Education Act charged local authorities with providing “adequate facilities for recreation and social and physical training” for children. In 1948, a Ministry of Education report urged the government to use the 1944 Act “to increase and improve ... facilities for the play and recreation of children out of school hours.”²⁴ The emphasis on play increased in later government education publications. The Newsome Report (1963) noted the importance of provision for “out-of-school ... physical activity”

especially for urban schools; the Plowden Report (1967) deemed play “vital to children’s learning.”²⁵ This new orthodoxy permeated other areas of policy in urban design. A report by the National Council of Social Services in 1961 noted “progress ... in providing playgrounds and playing space” in new housing developments, while in 1973 the Department of the Environment devoted an entire *Design Bulletin* to play, stating that it was “now widely accepted that children have a deep and urgent need for [it].”²⁶

Most play research observed children playing outdoors with minimal adult interference or organization. Where they might do this became a key question. A small number of sites, including Rachel and Margaret McMillan’s nursery school in pre- and inter-war Deptford and Susan Isaacs’ Malting House School in Cambridge, had trialed the use of gardens and allotments, but while these experiments provoked interest among educationalists and child psychologists they remained marginal to the lives of most children.²⁷ Concern about a lack of outdoor play provision in urban areas had been rising since the 1920s, driven by an increase in motor traffic and a move towards high-density housing.²⁸ The outbreak of the Second World War, when [street blackouts and a rise in inexperienced new, military drivers](#)²⁸ prompted a rise in the number of fatal road accidents involving [children](#), exacerbated this [concern](#).²⁹ There were also new worries that extraordinary wartime conditions with periodic school closures and less available adult supervision amid a devastated urban landscape might prompt a rise in juvenile delinquency.³⁰ The initiatives of Freud and Burlingham and of Paneth, referred to above, were driven by concerns about child safety and antisocial behavior. Play thus came to be seen as a means of improving children’s behavior as well as their environment.

At the end of the war, promoters of play as an antidote to delinquency learned of a pioneering scheme on the Emdrup estate near Copenhagen in 1943. Residents feared that their active participation in resistance movements during the German occupation had

Commented [MK6]: It’s not immediately obvious why the outbreak of WWI caused an increase in fatal road accidents. You might just say that the rise in such accidents in the 1940s exacerbated the concern.

Commented [kc7]: The literature referenced in the footnote deals with the connection in more detail. I’ve added something in the text to expand if you think it needs it, but the piece referenced, which only deals with the Second World War, should be enough.

Commented [kc8]: We’ve now got ‘concern’ in consecutive paragraphs. Can the final use here be changed to ‘these worries’

diminished “the difference between sabotage and delinquency” in the minds of the estate’s children rendering them “unruly and antisocial.”³¹ City authorities approached Carl Theodor Sørensen, a landscape architect who was committed to providing urban children with “the same chances for creative play as” those in the countryside.³² Noting children’s joy in illicit play on his building sites, Sørensen had recommended identifying space “where [they] could create their own form of playground using old building material and other junk.”³³ He elaborated his theory in an earlier book *Park Policy* (1931) which called on planners to “set up waste material playgrounds... where children would be able to play with old cars, boxes and timber.”³⁴ Now he was invited to put it into practice.

Sørensen’s Emdrup experiment attracted international attention from visitors keen to explore the benefits of this new form of unstructured, imaginative play. One of these was Marjory Allen, pacifist widow of the Independent Labour Party leader Clifford Allen, who had spent the war engaged in a number of child-welfare projects. As a trained landscape architect, she was doubly interested in Sørensen’s work, which she described in a lavishly illustrated article in *Picture Post* on her return to Britain.³⁵ The article, “Why not use our bomb sites like this?” explained how junk playgrounds offered an opportunity to “put into practice” much of what had “been written about children’s play by psychologists and educationalists.” There would be no asphalt or static equipment but “stone, earth, bricks, wood, iron, clay, water, planks, empty petrol casks, wheelbarrows and derelict motor cars.” Under the watchful eye of an adult leader, children would be free to build and demolish their own playscapes in a “democratic community” where they could set their own priorities.³⁶ In response to the article a small number of playgrounds were set up, first on London bomb sites in Morden, Camberwell and Lambeth and then across the country. These experiments, which were widely observed and discussed by child psychologists, pedagogic theorists and local authorities, responded to “observation of what children actually did on patches of wasteland.”

By providing spaces “for doing things which are impossible amid the hazards of the street and confined space of back gardens.” the new playgrounds were meant to give urban children the same opportunities as country children were believed to enjoy.³⁷

Commented [MK9]: Is this quotation right, or is there a “the” missing?

Commented [kc10]: There’s an ‘s’ missing – back gardens

Play Provision and the Position of Women

How to provide for the child was not the only question preoccupying those who sought to interpret the mutable terrain of postwar urban Britain. Helen McCarthy’s study of how social science framed “the public meanings of the shifting female life-course” with regard to married women workers demonstrated the contribution of female researchers to opening up “new intellectual problems,” partly through placing much greater emphasis on women’s lived experiences and feelings.³⁸ Key sociological texts such as Pearl Jephcott’s *Girls Growing Up* (1942) and *Married Women Working* (1962); Viola Klein and Alva Myrdal’s *Women’s Two Roles* (1956); Nan Berger and Joan Maizels’ *Woman, Fancy or Free* (1962) and Hannah Gavron’s *The Captive Wife* (1965) all focused on women’s place in society. Even when research was studies not centered on women, investigators uncovered also became attentive to gendered differences in their subject’s social positions. Jon Lawrence’s re-investigation of argues that the affluent worker studies of the early 1960s marked a postwar shift in the focus of social science “from the marginalized and disadvantaged ... [t]o ‘ordinary’ or ‘average’ Britons.”³⁹ As this new category of “ordinary” included women, the assured centrality of masculine identity to much published sociology of the time appears less apparent when these studies are approached through their underpinning fieldwork. Research teams interviewed “working-people in their own homes,” taking evidence “from both men and women” but with “often a strong bias towards the latter” in their material.⁴⁰

Commented [kc11]: OK – your reading is sort of correct – the studies focus much more on men (although in most cases they don’t explicitly say this is their purpose) but the current vogue for re-studies by historians is revealing lots of material on women that didn’t make it into the main published findings as a separate part. I’ve slightly altered the wording of the previous sentence to try and make this clearer

Commented [MK12]: I don’t understand this point. The studies claim to be focused on masculine identity but the underlying fieldwork isn’t? If that’s what you mean, doesn’t it contradict your statement above that the studies were “attentive” to gendered differences. I think this could be clearer.

The emerging themes of post-war postwar social science thus involved a more sustained engagement with female experience. This became clear in a number of studies from the 1950s and 1960s that defined the new field of “urban sociology ... the social and human

side of housing and town and country planning.”⁴¹ More concerned with geographic than social mobility, projects such as *Living in Towns* (1953), *Neighbourhood and Community* (1954), *Societies in the Making* (1962) and *Stress and Release in an Urban Estate* (1964) considered the problems inherent in constructing entirely new communities as a consequence of postwar reconstruction and slum clearance.⁴² The research teams on these projects were aware of the postwar rise in married women’s employment but found less evidence for it in their own fieldwork. In their study of an estate outside Liverpool, for example, Mitchell and Lupton noted the distinctive effect of its new environment on housewives who spent “the greater part of the day at home ... whereas the man is at his work.”⁴³ The impact of relocation on women who spent more time on new estates thus became a key question for investigators.

Urban sociology began to connect the needs of women in new communities to those of their children. Leo Kuper’s study of a Coventry estate between 1949 and 1951 described how children’s public behavior during outdoor play impacted adults’ perceptions of each other, rendering children both “a channel of friendship, and also explosive points in the relations of neighbours.”⁴⁴ “[T]he fear of annoyance to neighbours” caused by children’s behavior was voiced repeatedly by mothers on new estates that lacked established social hierarchies based on long-term residency.⁴⁵ It was even more apparent in studies of new high rise developments, where noise was a key source of neighborhood friction. One respondent to an early government inquiry into the “social needs and problems of families living in high flats” carried out between 1951 and 1952 explained that the “lack of a safe playground” was a “major difficulty” ~~for mothers in this situation.~~⁴⁶ The inquiry determined that inadequate play provision in flats was becoming a “cause of strain and anxiety” to mothers in flats, a conclusion repeated in subsequent investigations into flat life, in which the absence of playgrounds was presented as a problem for both mothers and children.⁴⁷

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s urban play provision was more than a matter of children's welfare. There was a growing awareness that the "nervous strain" of keeping children quiet affected their mothers' mental and emotional wellbeing in flats and on new estates and that this in turn hampered community development.⁴⁸ Play thus came to be seen as a solution to several overlapping problems, as evident in the radical "action research" project based at the University of Bristol between 1953 and 1958 which sought to "establish practical means of tackling those stresses and strains which arise" in developing new communities.⁴⁹ Although juvenile delinquency was the project's "initial problem," the team quickly developed a broader approach that involved looking at "the estate *as a whole*."⁵⁰ Researchers helped local residents set up an adventure playground to combat the "strain and stress" in parenting" identified at the project's outset.⁵¹ As it unfolded, however, the wider aims for the playground diminished and the team failed to connect it to simultaneous work with a group of mothers on the estate. Consequently, while the children were seen to be "a little more" respectful of each other and of adults by the project's end, the mothers remained a challenge, unable to "contribute much to the long-term and rather complex thinking required of a playground committee" with which they had failed to engage.⁵²

Playwork: Defining a Profession

The Bristol experiment's failure to ~~connect the children's needs for play space to those of their address the needs of~~ mothers despite a broader acknowledgement of their links may be explained in part if we consider the model of an ideal playleader that developed in the 1950s. ~~The advocates of~~ adventure playgrounds were clear that having a "really sympathetic playleader", preferably paid, was essential for their success.⁵³ Lady Allen's original *Picture Post* article called for "a skilled leader, an older companion in whom the children have confidence."⁵⁴ An early National Playing Fields Association leaflet endorsed this through a rhetorical question: "But won't it be dangerous to have children doing all these different and

Commented [MK13]: I rewrote this because your sentence was unclear. I don't think we need all the extraneous material, but if you think it's necessary, please rewrite.

Commented [MK14]: I think you might clarify here that this was to be a paid position.

Commented [kc15]: I want to keep this broader sense of a connection between what are perceived as the social **needs** of particular groups. Can we go with "The Bristol experiment's failure to directly connect the children's need for playspace with the acknowledged maternal stress on the estate...."

exciting things? That is where the playleader comes in: no adventure playground will work satisfactorily without playleaders.”⁵⁵ A good playleader ought, in the words of one early playground worker, to act first and foremost as “a liberator: to show the children that the playground really is *their* domain.” The playleader should guide the children without too much direct intervention, “remain in the background, ready to step in” in case of danger while leaving children free to make mistakes and set their own boundaries.⁵⁶

This role was challenging, particularly in the movement’s early years when supporters admitted that a leader would be “learning his [sic] job as he goes along.”⁵⁷ A ten-day seminar convened by the United Nations in May 1958 to discuss “playground activities, objectives and leadership” across Europe described the play leadership profession as “a young one...insufficiently appreciated, as well as being badly paid.”⁵⁸ A training seminar, started at the Technical School for the Arts in Zurich in the mid-1950s, remained, the sole provision for several years. In 1957, John Barron Mays reported how Britain lacked an

established profession of “playground leaders.” There are no training courses. In fact little is known in this country beyond the few simple psychological principles that children like to play....⁵⁹

Play leaders, Lady Allen agreed, had “no tradition to go on” or consensus as to what they were “expected to do.” While “the hours were seen to be awkward it was often felt that the work of ‘supervision’ was light, and that leaders could be expected to work for less than a living wage.”⁶⁰ Few recognized that leaders were expected to work when the playground was shut, sourcing materials, visiting families and raising funds. Even some supporters accepted the assumption that work on adventure playgrounds was part-time. When Ruth Littlewood from Clydesdale Road Adventure Playground Committee asked London County Council for an extension of funding to support winter opening she admitted that a winter salary “must obviously be at a much lower weekly rate because of the curtailment of our activities.”⁶¹

Commented [kc16]: I'm not sure after reading your comment – my point is that at this stage nobody has officially said it can only be men (and indeed there are women too) so the gendering is an assumption. But happy to have [sic] left out if you think it is clumsy or unclear

Commented [MK17]: I don't get this [sic] – the gendering here (part of your point) is not a mistake is it?

Commented [MK18]: Who?

Commented [kc19]: Any observers really – parents, local councillors, local luminaries who were looked to for support, some local authority social workers, the children themselves

Pay was not generous. The United Nations seminar recommended parity with teachers. Lady Allen argued for adoption of the Burnham scale, between £450 and £650 ~~per annum~~ per year.⁶² London County Council (LCC) suggested a lower figure of between £182 and £145 a year pro rata.⁶³ Such salaries as were available came from a variety of sources as interest in adventure playgrounds grew. When George Burden, the driving force behind the St Luke's or Rosemary Junk Playground in Camberwell, approached the LCC's Education Department for a grant he was initially told that the playground was not covered by the 1944 Education Act as it did "not conform to the accepted pattern of play centre activities" and was unhygienic.⁶⁴ LCC's position shifted when a number of outside authorities began to express interest in the idea of junk playgrounds. In November 1947, the National Under Fourteens Council (NUFC, later part of Save the Children) set up a junk playgrounds committee. The committee organized a junk playgrounds conference the following May that called on local authorities to support their provision and heard that some London Boroughs were giving the matter serious consideration.⁶⁵ Save the Children seconded one full-time and one part-time ~~part-time~~ play workers to the Rosemary Playground for its first year, then in 1950 the LCC Education Committee (Primary and Secondary Schools Sub-Committee) agreed to provide limited financial support.⁶⁶ Rosemary was seen as "an excellent opportunity" to explore this "new development" without involving any longer-term commitment on the part of the LCC.⁶⁷

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Commented [MK21]: Unclear: what does "their" refer to?

Commented [kc22]: Refers to junk playgrounds

Commented [MK23]: Unclear: the conference "heard"?

Commented [kc24]: Yes, ref in footnote lays this out. Changed to 'was informed' if better

When the Rosemary site was claimed for redevelopment in 1951, LCC moved financial support to another playground at Clydesdale Road.⁶⁸ The national press attention given to the London experiments prompted Lord Luke of the National Playing Fields Association (NPFA) to organize a further day conference in February 1953.⁶⁹ The NPFA then set up its own Playgrounds Committee and made a grant of £800 to fund playground leaders in two experiments in the south and north of Britain, Rathbone Street in Liverpool

Commented [MK25]: Unclear: does this mean "agreed to provide"? I don't think this sentence functions well as a topic sentence.

Commented [kc26]: No, not agreed to provide. It was funding the Rosemary playground as stated in the previous paragraph. When Rosemary closed it then moved its financial support to another playground. So it's not an expansion of funding, just moving provision from one site to another. Would 'moved its' work better

(open from 1954) and Lollard Street in London (from 1955).⁷⁰ A further playground in Grimsby opened in 1956 with support from the Nuffield Foundation.⁷¹ The full-time workers were recruited via advertisements in publications such as the *New Society* and *Times Educational Supplement* which produced shortlists of candidates with varied experience of voluntary or paid youth work.⁷² Despite the lack of agreement over the scope of the role, a consensus as to the qualities required of an ideal play leader began to emerge through early recruitment processes. S/he had to be “a capable and friendly adult,” “able to win the children’s confidence and respect.”⁷³ The preferred sex was initially unclear. One information sheet stated that

Whether the leader should be a man or woman is a doubtful point. A man has obvious advantages with the older boys and may well be as successful as a woman with the younger children. Where a woman is chosen, there are two risks; that she will not find it so easy to command the respect of the big boys, or that they will keep away from the playground. In general, however, it would probably be true to say that the character and disposition of the leader is of more importance than age, sex or specific training.⁷⁴

Nevertheless, most full-time play leaders employed in the 1950s and 1960s were men.

Constructing the “Heroic” Playleader

The construction of the ideal playleader as male was not accidental. There were precedents in the late nineteenth century in urban projects such as the settlement movement and associated boys clubs. Seth Koven has described the homosocial masculinity of ventures such as Toynbee Hall where male leaders became caught up in interdependent relationships with the objects of their philanthropy, making “reformers’ self-identities” dependent on “their vision of the children whom they hoped to save.”⁷⁵ While the youth work emanating from settlements and networks of clubs and societies was aimed at all children and adolescents, much of its focus in practice was on boys whose behavior was often considered more visible, and hence more problematic.⁷⁶ By the interwar period, boys’ organizations and clubs had their female equivalents but the former were more likely to focus on physical activities

Commented [MK27]: You might consider moving the last few sentence of this paragraph to the next section, since their topic would seem to fit better there.

Commented [kc28]: OK happy to do this – can end this paragraph at note 72 and move next down. This was a bit that got deconstructed to fit in some new references, so balance probably got a bit shifted

intended to “channel adolescent male energy” in appropriate directions.⁷⁷ Kate Bradley’s study of settlement work in London suggests that these boys’ organizations prioritized finding appropriate role models who had sufficient personality to “make friends with the boys and gain their respect” despite usually coming from markedly different backgrounds.⁷⁸ Working with challenging boys required strong personalities in leaders who were able to assert their own masculinity in the face of challenging adolescent behavior. Postwar play promoters further noted that it was also felt that as the daytime population of many postwar urban areas consisted “almost entirely of women, children and the aged[. a] man is the exception” and so would be a more valuable commodity among play leaders.⁷⁹

Commented [kc29]: No, the paragraph charts precedents starting from late C19th then moving into inter war then post war. I’ve done a slight rewrite on the final sentence to bring the chronology out. I’d rather not move this. The Koven and Bradley comparisons were something the second reader was keen to see incorporated

Postwar urban adventure playgrounds were open to both sexes but were explicitly intended “to attract the rougher and more difficult children,” especially boys.⁸⁰ A contemporary belief that men were better suited to handling them reflects permeates later those assessments of 1950s working-class manliness that emphasized the persistence of “an aggressive masculinity” in contemporary popular culture.⁸¹ Although most analyses of this phenomenon cite examples from the “angry young men” literatures of the 1950s, aggressive masculinity is equally apparent in the fictional portrayals of male teachers in challenging urban schools that emerged at the same time. In their study of 1980s classroom films, Farber and Holm coined the term “educator-hero” to define “a man, some sort of renegade or outsider” who would “enter hostile territory, find a way to earn the trust and respect of students and build bonds with them which make some tangible victory possible.”⁸² Bauer’s survey of school films identifies earlier examples of educator heroes in *Blackboard Jungle* (1955) and *To Sir With Love* (1967), two films based on successful books.⁸³ One of these, E. R. Braithwaite’s autobiographical novel *To Sir With Love* (1959) is of particular relevance to the playground movement and worth discussing further here, set, as it is, in the fictional Greenslade school in the East End of London, but based on the author’s own time at

Commented [kc30]: Thanks, good point, have changed slightly

Commented [MK31]: Confusing: are you taking about contemporary, scholarly assessments (as in the one referenced in the footnote)? If so, then it doesn’t make sense to say that a 1950s belief “reflected” assessments that came 50 years later. Perhaps you want to say that the presence of this attitude lends credence to analyses that emphasize . . .

St George-in-the-East Secondary Modern School in the early 1950s when the libertarian educator Alex Bloom was Headmaster.⁸⁴ Bloom's radical philosophy of democratic education, in which pupils had a full share in designing their own curricula, echoed the child-led discourses of promoters of adventure playgrounds, and was aimed at supporting an identical group of difficult urban children.⁸⁵ As Headmaster Alec Florian (a thinly-disguised portrait of Bloom in Braithwaite's text) explains, his aim at Greenslade was "to establish disciplined freedom, that state in which the child feels free to work, play and express himself."⁸⁶

Braithwaite's novel develops several tropes replicated in adventure playground writings. The hero, Ricky Braithwaite, is an ex-RAF pilot from British Guiana. Out of uniform, Braithwaite encounters serious racism in his search for work, but he is taken on (with no apparent teaching qualification) by the Ministry of Education and sent to Greenslade. There he is given a challenging and defiant group of final-year pupils, "soiled and untidy as if too little attention were paid to washing themselves."⁸⁷ They swear freely, smoke openly and have pushed their previous teacher to the point where he runs from the school, mid-lesson. Florian allows no corporal punishment so Braithwaite, who feels superior to his pupils, first controls them with sarcasm while struggling to keep calm. Matters come to a head when he returns to the classroom one afternoon to find his class attempting to burn a used sanitary towel in the fireplace. For the first time, he loses his temper. The boys are sent out and Braithwaite

turned the full lash of my angry tongue on those girls. I told them how sickened I was by their general conduct, crude language, sluttish behaviour.... The words gushed out of me, and the girls stood there and took it.⁸⁸

The following day, Braithwaite begins a new approach, based on reason and discussion. He bans swearing in the classroom and insists on formal forms of address, telling the pupils: "Myself you will address as "Mr Braithwaite" or "Sir" ... young ladies will be

addressed as “Miss” and the young men will be addressed by their surnames.”⁸⁹ As well as enhancing their learning experience, Braithwaite sees this approach as essential preparation for the world of work, stating; “in a little while all of you may be expected to express these courtesies as part of your jobs; it would be helpful to you to become accustomed to giving and receiving them.”⁹⁰

Following the sanitary towel incident, Braithwaite passes the more challenging feminine behaviors onto women teachers but remains direct in his dealings with the boys. The pupils fall into line save for Denham, a leader among the boys, who continues to rebel. In one physical education lesson, Braithwaite is manipulated into partnering Denham at boxing. He initially defers, but seeing that the other boys “thought I was afraid of the hulking, loutish fellow,” Braithwaite puts on gloves and floors him.⁹¹ This “marked a turning point in my relationship with the class.” Denham could “still be depended on to make a wisecrack” but not “in a spirit of rebelliousness,” while Braithwaite is secured as the alpha male of the group.⁹² With a gendered hierarchy established, the class learn mutual respect, start to challenge local racism, participate in a series of cultural outings, and finally leave school as transformed characters who demonstrate their gratitude to Braithwaite with an expensive gift, given “to Sir, with love” as a smiling Mr Florian looks on.

The benefits of assertive masculinity when dealing with troublesome adolescent boys are similarly emphasized in *Something Extraordinary*, (1961) the memoir of H. S. [Pat] Turner, leader (or “warden”) of Lollard Adventure Playground from 1956-9. Like his East End contemporary Braithwaite, Turner was a middle-class incomer to Lambeth, commuting daily from Bromley where he lived with his doctor wife. Turner too was struck by the “badly dressed and dirty” Lollard children, their smoking and bad language, and combatted this through banning swearing and demanding proper forms of address at the playground, formalities he saw as essential to establishing control:

one basic point was established. They called me “Mr Turner.” This may seem a trivial point, yet I think a lot hangs on it. Everyone is better off if the boys are expected to show a certain degree of formal respect.⁹³

He also threatened—and used—physical force to assert his masculine authority over the playground users and hangers-on. Vic and Arthur, leaders among the older boys, challenged his authority on the first day, refusing both the polite “Mr Turner” address and the no swearing rule. As Turner left the playground, they attempted to surround and intimidate him. He responded with a counterthreat designed to reveal his own toughness, warning the gang “don’t expect to start anything with me...I’m better at that sort of thing than you are.”⁹⁴ How far he will take this becomes clear when a different local gang turned up to the playground, intent on trouble. Turner single-handedly disarms their leader, “seiz[ing] him by the wrist and twist[ing] it until he dropped the knife. ‘You little runt,’ I said. ‘If you try that with me again you’ll get hurt.’”⁹⁵ This, he considered, “did something to enhance my own standing” and stop further trouble. Like Braithwaite at Greenslade, Turner was now recognized as the playground’s alpha male by his unruly boys, and derived his authority from this identity.

Turner’s self-presentation in *Something Extraordinary* shares much with the “educator-hero” of contemporary classroom memoirs and films. At one point he draws direct comparison between his experience and a scene in *Blackboard Jungle* in which the protagonist is warned of the dangers of facing up to a gang.⁹⁶ The heroic qualities of playground leadership are further emphasized in William Golding’s review of *Something Extraordinary*, reproduced on the back of its dust jacket. The author, Golding said, was

prepared, for the full hours of every working day, to be wholly there, in flesh and attention, for any child who wants him. Parents and teachers can assess the heroism involved in that simple secret.... Such a job would break most people, mentally and physically.⁹⁷

Approbation for heroic masculine qualities permeated more functional writings about adventure playground leaders in the 1950s. An early report of Lollard Street 1955 described

its first leader, Harry Killick, as being “on terms of undemanding friendship with the tough little boys and [the] faintly hostile older ones.” The report hints at how this might have been achieved by describing Killick’s relationship with Butch, a “gang leader” who in the early days stood outside jeering at Harry and the playground children through the fence. Harry subdued Butch through a direct confrontation deemed unsuitable for wider public consumption: “it’s better that nobody should know what Harry said to Butch, but it worked.” The gang dissolved, leaving Butch a valued member of the playground team.⁹⁸ Jack Lambert was less reticent when describing how he coped with challenges at Reading playground in 1964. When a group of older boys jumped onto the roof of the playground’s hut, Lambert targeted their ringleader. “I was up on the shed beside him, pushed him off, jumped down after him, twisted his arm behind his back and marched him off the playground.” After taking the boy home, he returned to the playground and reinforced the impact of his actions, warning the remaining boys “Right, that’s going to happen to every single one of you if you don’t watch it.”⁹⁹

Establishing authority was challenging in spaces that were intentionally child-led and open to misinterpretation. Assessing Clydesdale Road in its first year, the LCC’s Senior Inspector of Physical Education complained that the children “regard this as their own playground and ... are noisy and uncontrolled.”¹⁰⁰ Challenging or diminishing a leader’s masculinity was a favorite tactic of boys intent on subversion. Peter Gutkind at Clydesdale Road, was called “a ‘sissy’” by a section of difficult older boys.¹⁰¹ A leader who was seen as “hard” was better placed to manage adolescents intent on proving their own toughness. Some men invoked previous occupational identities. One *Guardian* report described another Clydesdale Road leader as a ‘young ex-sergeant in the paratroops,’ and underlined the point through the subheading “Ex-Soldier Guardian.”¹⁰² Military connections continued beyond the immediate postwar years, joined by other heavily masculine occupations. Pat Smyth, leader

at Notting Hill playground for eight years, was an “ex-paratrooper” while Jack Lambert was a “one-time lorry driver.”¹⁰³ A number of leaders managed through sheer force of their personality, a factor often mentioned in reports of early experiments in adventure play. Members of Clydesdale Road management committee noted that “Vick,” a young Cypriot student achieved “great control without any visible effort, the children are devoted to him.”¹⁰⁴ The *Schoolmaster* concurred, that “Vick was in constant demand.... The children regarded him, not just as ultimate authority, but as a friend and arbitrator: a fitting tribute to his unwearying patience.”¹⁰⁵

Leaders who failed to exert control through personality found different solutions that could cut across adventure playgrounds’ radical wider aims. They were intentionally designed to be “attractive to older children, especially the unclubbable...who may be a problem elsewhere.”¹⁰⁶ Serving this group was not always possible. At Rosemary, there was “a hard struggle to preserve the playground against local gangs” in the first year.¹⁰⁷ While the leader and the playground committee recognized that “it was often these more difficult children who most need the playground,” both decided that the “more rough element” would be removed if their behavior interfered with the play of the majority.¹⁰⁸ Exclusion became a common solution. One leader, after “some trouble with the teenagers” requested that his committee had it “recorded formally that the playground was not provided for the over fifteens” while another limited their attendance to a separate weekly “teenage night.”¹⁰⁹

Women Play Leaders: The Rathbone Example

The emerging ideal of the heroic playleader, a tough or exceptionally charismatic man who could hold his own with older teenaged boys, had wider impact on the gendering of adventure playgrounds. Its consequences were clear in the early years of the Rathbone playground in Liverpool, a city described as being “extremely playground conscious” by the end of the Second World War.¹¹⁰ The local University Settlement discussed opening an

Commented [MK32]: Unclear: do you mean “undermine”?

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adventure playground in Liverpool in November 1950, but no suitable site could be found.¹¹¹

Finally, the City Council acquired a patch of land adjacent to a bombsite on Rathbone Street, near the Anglican Cathedral, ~~was acquired which the City Council~~ leveled and fenced it, and installed some swings, a roundabout, a slide, and steel goalposts.¹¹² The playground opened in June 1953, overseen by a committee of local youth, school and church representatives and chaired by John Barron Mays, warden of the University settlement.¹¹³

Mays' committee was aware of junk playground initiatives in London but lacked sufficient funds for a leader. A subcommittee was established with members including Mays, Professor Tom Simey from the University's School of Social Science and Mary Hartley, a lecturer at Liverpool's Institute of Education who had worked on the Camberwell project.¹¹⁴

Mays wrote to the NPFA for support, explaining that the University Settlement was "particularly keen to develop part of this site for constructional play, as a Junk playground."¹¹⁵ Other committee members contacted the NPFA's Lancashire branch, and Lady Allen, who commended their proposal to the national NPFA, describing them as "the finest group that we could find anywhere to launch an experimental playground of the kind we wish to see established." Lancashire NPFA acknowledged that Rathbone was "the ideal spot for a try-out of this type of scheme" in the North, and chose it as their first "experimental Adventure Playground" outside London.¹¹⁶ Miss Joyce Ellis, a twenty-two year old art student who had worked in a residential children's reception center, was appointed Play Leader.¹¹⁷ She received £425 for an expected "average of forty working hours per week" and was to live at the University Settlement, paying a reduced rent.¹¹⁸ As Kate Bradley has

pointed out, living in was a common feature of settlement work because it enabled, ~~identified by Kate Bradley as an advantage for~~ young women ~~who could to~~ "earn money... whilst... relieving pressure on space at home and getting some independence."¹¹⁹

Ellis's s experience suggested that these arrangements did not always run smoothly.¹¹⁹

Commented [kc34]: No, sorry, I don't think the City Council did acquire it. It's not quite clear from the records who did, but what often happened is that bomb damaged land was given over temporarily (as in the case of Rosemary where the local church donated it temporarily) while awaiting redevelopment. The City Council levelled and fenced it. Can we please put this back to my original sentence??

Commented [kc35]: I'm not happy with this rewrite. Bradley isn't unique in noting that living in was a common feature of settlement work, this is a widely-made observation, but it is her point that it enabled women to get money while relieving pressure on space at home. Can we revert to my original please?

Ellis produced weekly reports for the Settlement committee. Leaders' reports played an important role in playground work. Lady Allen at first hoped that social scientists from the London School of Economics would conduct a full survey at Lollard Street, recognizing that the experiment would be more useful if it produced "facts and figures" to justify the radical approach.¹²⁰ When this proved unaffordable, playground committees and external funders became reliant on leader's reports to underpin their evaluations. Although Mr. Thornton (Lancashire NPFA) critiqued their "slight bias in favor of putting the best possible construction on things," Ellis's reports (which refer to herself in the third person) describe in painful detail some of the challenges of early playground work.¹²¹

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Ellis's accounts rarely connected work difficulties to her gender. One early entry noted that "[t]he children on the whole took to the idea of a woman looking after them," aside from "the fourteen to sixteen year old boys" who "at first were cheeky," and that local parents were more likely to help "when they knew the leader was a woman."¹²² Femininity gave Ellis different contacts from male leaders. Teenage girls came to the playground "to talk about themselves, work, home and their boyfriends," although the older boys were prone to "give a little trouble" when this averted her attention.¹²³ When there was trouble, some children became very protective. On one occasion a fight broke out between two rival gangs. When Ellis broke it up and ejected the troublemakers, their leader "yelled ... derisive catcalls" and "threw a large piece of brick which struck her on the jaw."¹²⁴ The ensuing cut and bruising provoked a gallant response among the younger children who reacted with "complete amazement" at the thought that "'Miss' should be hurt" or might cry.¹²⁵ Ellis's successor, Miss Whittington, was more aware of the possible problems playground work posed for women leaders. From the outset old cars and scrap metal destined for the playground were repeatedly intercepted or stolen by local dealers. Ellis challenged the thieves, and on one occasion called in the police, but the problem persisted. Whittington's

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approach was to hand the matter over to one of the fathers, feeling that “if one of the men was to tackle him [the interceptor] all would be well.”¹²⁶

In spite of difficulties Ellis remained in post for sixteen months. Her resignation in August 1955 followed some disagreements with the local committee, particularly Mr. Thornton. Trouble flared after Ellis attended a national playleaders’ conference in the summer of 1955 where she joined in an open discussion of working hours, “saying that although I did not like Sunday work the number of children using the playground that day made it advisable for the leader to be present.”¹²⁷ When the NPFA took this up with Thornton, he replied that he had “never been wholly satisfied with the choice of Miss Ellis as the leader” and that “a person continually watching the clock for 5.30 is not in my opinion the right choice for experimental work of this kind.” Thornton took Ellis’s **alleged external complaint** to the Settlement Committee who advised her to resign.¹²⁸

When news of the resignation reached the NPFA playgrounds committee in London, Lady Allen asked Ellis to reveal confidentially what had gone wrong “behind the scenes so that [the NPFA committee] can take steps to protect future leaders.”¹²⁹ Ellis detailed a number of issues. She had become tired of “rising tension at the settlement” where she lived, and her request to live at home was turned down by Mays, leaving her with no choice but to continue residing “in close contact with one’s chairman, his wife and two other members of the committee” **and of the working hours** (with only one day a week off, usually not a Sunday). Pay was one problem where she felt gender was a factor, as she had been

continually reminded that this [£425] was a ridiculously high wage for a girl—but believe me by the time I had paid out £2 17 6 per week to live at the settlement and my home commitments and the clothes which were essential—shoes etc. on that site—it didn’t seem such a large amount.

Ellis suspected that Thornton had lined up her replacement, Miss Whittington, who he had “put forward as a candidate” and interviewed “within half an hour” of her resignation. Furthermore, she felt that there was a deeper issue here, as the committee wanted “a sort of

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Commented [kc40]: The open discussion at a national conference referenced at the start of the paragraph. It was alleged because Thornton perceived it as an external complaint whereas Ellis view was that she was at a conference.

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robot who is good with children, interested in Adventure Playgrounds, good at the office side who will give up all outside interests and devote herself (for they won't have a man!) entirely without any reserve..."¹³⁰

Ellis's opinion that her strong local committee believed that a woman playleader would be more pliable than a man may explain Whittington's selection despite the view of at least one anonymous observer that the Rathbone job was "not suitable for a young woman."¹³¹ Employing a woman in the 1950s justified a low rate of pay; Whittington, less experienced than Ellis, received just £325.¹³² The Lollard Street committee subsidized its NPFA grant to provide a higher salary for its male wardens but Liverpool, which employed women, chose not to do this. After Whittington resigned in 1956, Allen pointed out to that the Liverpool committee "seem to be unwilling or unable to pay a living salary," especially if they wanted to employ a man. She recommended Vakis Nearchou ("Vick") who had been so successful at Clydesdale Road, but pointed out that he had "recently married...[so] could not be expected to live on £400 a year."¹³³

Whether a leader was a man or a woman had implications for how boys and girls used these radical new spaces. Some observers of adventure playground behavior found girls less keen to involve themselves in the full range of activities. Rosemary Conway, LCC Youth Services Organizer, reported that while the boys at Rosemary playground "were enjoying themselves, climbing trees and swinging on ropes" the girls "seem hard pressed to find amusement."¹³⁴ Strong male leadership reinforced gendered divisions in play. A summary of work on the Cambridge playground reported that the "presence of a man as leader and the much greater number of boys...led the latter to assume that the playground was a male affair and they resented any activities of the girls which clashed with their own." Girls stopped "building and digging" to "play house in the hut. They made curtains, cleaned and tidied....and served innumerable cups of tea with biscuits to all comers."¹³⁵ At Upfield, the

playground attached to the Bristol social action project, girls similarly “disliked the den-building but enjoyed practicing home making in the completed dens, if the boys allowed it,” leaving the team to speculate whether they may have attracted more girls “had there been a female leader.”¹³⁶

The assumption that adventure playgrounds were really intended for boys permeated unexpected aspects of popular culture. A thirty-second television commercial for boys’ shoes made for the firm of Wards in 1968, opens with a close-up shot of a sign reading “Adventure Playground.” The camera moves inside the playground to show two boys armed with toy guns and engaged in a chasing game. The roughness of the playground’s terrain—unsurfaced ground and makeshift wooden towers with unfinished edges—echoes the masculinity of the boys’ play, reinforced through voice-over comments that *Supa-Dukes* are “he-man shoes,” “all action [shoes] for the all action boy.”¹³⁷ The message is clear. Tough shoes, like tough playgrounds are a matter for boys alone.

On the small number of playgrounds with women leaders, girls seemed inclined to try less obviously feminine pursuits. At Crawley, the leader, Mrs. Self, reported that “girls as well as boys build houses” and were equally keen to light bonfires.¹³⁸ Joyce Ellis found that Rathbone’s girls constructed “the most advanced “shop” so far” and that an on-site competition in house building showed them “thinking more about layout and construction” than in the first months.¹³⁹ Miss Townsend at Shoreditch described girls happily building dens alongside the boys.¹⁴⁰ To accommodate children’s preference for a leader of their own sex, some playground committees would appoint assistant wardens of the opposite sex (usually female). The Annual Report of Notting Hill playground for 1966 reported that the appointment of an “Assistant Leader (Female)” had stopped the girls being viewed as “second-class citizens” on the playground, while the Leader’s Report explained that “our girl assistant ... by her sex alone gets home to many what we males cannot.”¹⁴¹

Mixed-sex leadership teams enhanced adventure playgrounds' appeal to boys *and* girls but could simultaneously reinforce gendered dimensions of play. This was most evident in provision for the slightly older children. Despite the intended aim of fostering individual creativity, playgrounds frequently relied on team games to entertain teenagers. While the boys at Lollard Street played football, a voluntary (woman) tutor was brought in to organize a netball team for the girls.¹⁴² Extra-curricular activities were often explicitly aimed at one sex. Girls' activities organized by women assistants or volunteers on adventure playgrounds in the 1950s included make-up lessons at Lollard Street, raffia work at Clydesdale Road and embroidery and knitting at Rosemary.¹⁴³ A promotional film made for the NPFA in 1965 mainly showed girls in more passive roles such as setting out plants, while the boys took over the heavy tasks.¹⁴⁴ When British Rail donated an old railway carriage to Lollard Street in 1959, the committee decided that it would work "magnificently as self-contained flat for the girls." Projected activities included cooking, dressmaking, curtain and loose cover making and hairdressing and beauty while the boys continued with woodwork in the playground's main hut.¹⁴⁵ Attempts to challenge gendered choices could upset the fine balance leaders sought between guiding and determining activities. Joe Benjamin presented choices to the children at Grimsby playground, but rarely confronted their decisions even if they upheld the status quo. So when the nine boys on the playground's first children's committee expressed "disgust" at the presence of one girl, he "listened" but did not intervene to support her and the committee "soon became an "all boys" affair."¹⁴⁶ Although the next committee, re-activated in 1958 under the leader's "benevolent dictatorship," contained four girls, Benjamin did nothing to promote this and made no observation other than to say that the lack of opposition was "interesting."¹⁴⁷ When Benjamin's wife began a weekly sewing class the older boys were interested in the sewing machine at first but "soon returned to their usual practices."¹⁴⁸ With no "woman leader or assistant whose duties and personal interests and qualities"

matched their own, the older girls had drifted away from the playground by its second year.¹⁴⁹

Conclusion

Colin Ward, cited above, understood adventure playgrounds as “an arresting example of ... an experimental verification of a whole social approach,” a libertarian solution to the problem of play space for urban children.¹⁵⁰ The adventure playgrounds of 1950s and 1960s Britain were a remarkable experiment in child-centered play, spaces “where children can do all manner of things that cannot be done elsewhere,” and be “free to play in natural surroundings with the elements of water, fire, earth and sand.”¹⁵¹ Their emphasis on freedom as an essential component to a child’s growth and development built on the earlier radical pedagogies of figures such as Homer Lane, Susan Isaacs and A. S. Neill and anticipated the emergence of the Free School movement and the campaigns for children’s rights in the 1970s.¹⁵² Many contemporary observers also perceived the experiment as ~~was also perceived as~~ extremely threatening. When she finally stepped down from the Notting Hill Adventure Playground Committee in 1970, Lady Allen reminded its chairman how the playgrounds’ early advocates were “freely accused of anarchy, of being communists and of undermining the morals of the young.”¹⁵³

There were limits to this radicalism, however. By emphasizing the challenging nature of the children it served, the adventure playgrounds movement encouraged a highly gendered model of play activism in which charismatic men tamed potential delinquents through force of personality underpinned by physical toughness when necessary. Raphael Samuel neatly summarized the extent of this masculine underpinning, writing that:

Even the child, the liberated child of the adventure playground and the free school—the child who in anarchist thought occupies a symbolic place somewhat equivalent to that of the worker for socialists and communists—is a boy rather than a girl.¹⁵⁴

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The normative masculinity behind playground radicalism was so pervasive that at least two successful women playleaders in the 1950s suggested that their “job would be better done by a man.”¹⁵⁵

It would take another decade for a shift to come in the gendering of adventure playgrounds in Britain. A growing recognition of playwork’s importance by the state led to a number of accredited courses.¹⁵⁶ A rise in the number of formally trained playworkers (and jobs) encouraged a more professionalized view of playwork with less room for individualism, heroically masculine or otherwise. There were also wider changes. A vital aspect of the community activism of this period was a growing, autonomous women’s movement evident from the late 1960s, which prompted a further reevaluation of the politics of play. Domestic concerns—housing, food, and particularly childcare—shaped the community politics of 1970s Britain, opening the way for the “implicit” domestic-based forms of activism that could form the basis for larger campaigns.¹⁵⁷ Play was at the center of this trend, inseparable from emergent feminist politics, as evidenced by the presence of the Harrow Women’s Liberation Group at an NPFA conference on holiday play schemes in 1972.¹⁵⁸ Speaking in 2011, Jan O’Malley, a community activist in Notting Hill, recalled the focus of 1970s activist politics centrality of on “things like play schemes—now they don’t seem radical at all.”¹⁵⁹ Women’s groups involved themselves in campaigns for playgrounds, playgroups and community crèches, implicit activism which in turn produced radical spaces that transformed the urban landscape.¹⁶⁰

In this context the scene was set for a new politics of play that would be as concerned with challenging gender as it was with critiquing conservative views of child development. By the early 1980s, some supporters were suggesting identifying Adventure Playgrounds as a key site for achieving sexual equality. A pamphlet produced by the NPFA in 1984 observed that while their early examples may have been “dominated by boys,” now “with sensitive

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leadership, an Adventure Playground can be a place where girls can join in all activities on equal terms ... without the fear of being condemned as unfeminine.” As well as benefiting individual girls, such a space might potentially “provide an all-to-rare experience of sexual equality, with enormous benefits to children of both sexes.”¹⁶¹ Sensitive professionals rather than heroic leaders could transform adventure playgrounds into spaces where gendered patterns of play were challenged rather than reinforced.

Endnotes

¹ Colin Ward, “Adventure Playground: A Parable of Anarchy,” *Anarchy* 7, September 1961, 193. At this point Ward was still working as an architect; he later became Education Officer for the Town and Country Planning Association and Professor of Housing and Social Policy at the LSE. See obituaries, *Daily Telegraph*, March 29, 2010; *Guardian*, February 22, 2010.

² “Junk” was the original term but was succeeded by “adventure” in Britain. See Krista Cowman, “Open Spaces Didn’t Pay Rates: Appropriating Urban Space for Children in England after WW2,” in *Urban Public Spaces*, ed. Christoph Bernhardt (Stuttgart, 2016), 119-140, 11-12.

³ Lady Allen, “Why Not Use Our Bombed Sites Like This?” *Picture Post*, November 16, 1948, 26-9.

⁴ Leila Berg, “Moving Towards Self-Government,” in *Children’s Rights*, ed. Paul Adams, Leila Berg, Nan Berger, Michael Duane, A.S. Neill and Robert Ollendorff (London, 1971), 9-50, 38

⁵ John Barron Mays, *Adventure in Play* (Liverpool, 1957), 5; London Metropolitan Archives (LMA) LCC/CL/PK/01/39 Report on Experimental Playgrounds by John Brown, London County Council Education Officer for the Primary and Secondary Schools Sub-Committee, April 17, 1953.

⁶ LMA ILEA/S/SB/38/004 Memos from Inspector of Further Education to Education Office, May 1949 and September 1949; Sir Graham Savage, LCC Education Officer to Elfred Thomas, Leicester Director of Education, November 30, 1950; “Lollard Street Playground,” *Times Educational Supplement*, October 30, 1950.

⁷ Joe Benjamin, *In Search of Adventure: A Study of the Junk Playground* (London, 1961), 8.

⁸ For details of the movement see e.g. Marjorie Allen, *Junk Playgrounds* (London, 1948); Roy Kozlovsky, *The Architectures of Childhood* (Farnham, 2013), 47-91; For international comparisons see Avrid Bengtsson, ed., *Adventure Playgrounds* (New York, 1972).

⁹ Benjamin, *In Search of Adventure*, 6.

¹⁰ Kozlovsky, *Architectures*, 47; Matthew Thomson, *Lost Freedom: The Landscape of the Child and the British Post-War Settlement* (Oxford, 2013), 144.

¹¹ The position of play in 1970s radical culture is suggested in e.g. Jan O'Malley, *The Politics of Community Action* (London, 1977) 75-100.

¹² John Horton and Peter Krafti, "Small Acts, Kind Words and 'Not Too Much Fuss': Implicit Activisms," *Emotion, Space and Society* 2 (2009): 14-23, 14.

¹³ See for example Eleanor Jupp, "Home Space, Gender and Activism," *Critical Social Policy* 37, no. 3 (2017): 1-19.

¹⁴ For the prominence of mothers in recent protests, see for example Ben Fishwick, "Protesters Demand Worker is Kept at Portsmouth Adventure Playground," <http://www.portsmouth.co.uk/our-region/portsmouth/protesters-demand-worker-is-kept-at-portsmouth-adventure-playground-1-7531840> accessed November 1, 2017; "Parents Accuse Wandsworth of Profiting from Children's Play," <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/the-council-playground-in-london-that-costs-20-a-time-9071437.html> accessed November 1, 2017.

¹⁵ For the concept of "unclubbable" boys see for example Kate Bradley, "Rational Recreation in the Age of Affluence: The Café and Working-Class Youth in London c.1939-1956," in Erika Rappaport, Sandra Trudgen Dawson and Mark J. Crowley, eds., *Consuming Behaviours: Identity, Politics and Pleasure in Twentieth Century Britain* (London, 2015), 71-87, 78.

¹⁶ A. Giddens, "Notes on the Concepts of Play and Leisure," *Sociological Review* 12, no. 1 (1964): 73-89, 78.

¹⁷ Three main traditions are summarized in David Cohen, *The Development of Play* (London [2nd ed.] 2006), 6-8, 16.

¹⁸ See Evelyn Lawrence, ed., *Fredrich Froebel and English Education* (London, 1969, rep. 2011).

¹⁹ G. H. Mead, *Mind, Self and Society* (Chicago, 1934).

²⁰ Karl Groos, *The Play of Animals* (London, 1898); Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (London, 1920).

²¹ Anna Freud and Dorothy T. Burlingham, *War and Children* (London, 1943). Their project is discussed in more detail in Thompson, *Lost Freedom*, 61-4.

²² Marie Paneth, *Branch Street* (London, 1944). Paneth's centre at Branch Street is seen by Kozlovsky as a precursor to adventure playgrounds. See Roy Kozlovsky, "Adventure Playgrounds and Post-War Reconstruction," in *Designing Modern Childhoods: History, Space and the Material Culture of Children. An International Reader*, eds. Marta Gutman and Ning de Connick-Smith, (New Jersey, 2007), 182-5.

²³ Jean Piaget, *Play Dreams and Imitation in Childhood* (London, 1951).

²⁴ Central Advisory Council for Education, *Out of School* (London, 1948), 6.

²⁵ Central Advisory Council for Education, *Half Our Future* [the Newsome Report] (London 1963), paragraphs 409, 411; *Children and their Primary Schools* [the Plowden Report] (London, 1967), paragraph 523.

²⁶ J. H. Nicholson, *New Communities* (London, 1961), 78; Department of the Environment, *Design Bulletin 27: Children at Play* (London, 1973), 1.

²⁷ For Deptford, see Carolyn Steedman, *Childhood, Culture and Class in Britain* (London, 1990). For Maltings see P. J. Graham, *Susan Isaacs* (London, 2009).

²⁸ For a brief summary of pre-war concerns see Krista Cowman, "Play Streets: Women, Children and the Problem of Urban Traffic, 1930—1970," *Social History* 42 (2017): 233-256.

²⁹ Bill Luckin and David Sheen "Defining Early Modern Automobility: The Road Traffic Accident Crisis in Manchester 1939—45," *Cultural and Social History* 6 no.2 (2009): 211-30.

³⁰ J. H. Bagot, *Juvenile Delinquency* (London, 1941), 89, 90. For more discussion see Roy Kozlovsky, "The Junk Playground: Creative Destruction as an Antidote to Delinquency," unpublished paper presented at the Threat and Youth Conference, Teachers College, April 2006. Available online at <http://threatnyouth.pbworks.com/f/Junk%20Playgrounds-Roy%20Kozlovsky.pdf> accessed May 5, 2018; Cowman, "Open Spaces," 6-8.

³¹ Lady Marjory Allen and Mary Nicholson, *Memoirs of an Uneducated Lady* (London, 1975), 196.

³² Modern Records Centre (MRC) MSS.121/AP/3/13/59 Translation of letter from C. T. Sørensen to Lady Allen, December 2, 1967.

³³ Agnete Vestereg, "Junk Playground in Denmark," *New Age*, June 1952.

³⁴ Sørensen, cited in Kozlovsky, *Architectures*, 53.

³⁵ Lady Allen, "Why Not Use our Bombed Sites Like This?" *Picture Post*, November 16, 1946, 26-9.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 26.

³⁷ Colin Ward, *The Child in the City*, (London, 1978), 73; John Spencer, Joy Tuxford and Norman Dennis, *Stress and Release in an Urban Estate* (London, 1964), 223.

³⁸ Helen McCarthy, "Social Science and Married Women's Employment in ~~Post-War~~ Postwar Britain," *Past and Present* 233 (2016): 269-305; 271, 272, 303.

³⁹ Jon Lawrence, "Social Science Encounters and the Negotiation of Difference in Early 1960s England," *History Workshop Journal* 77 (2013): 215- 239, 215. The studies referred to are John H. Goldthorpe, David Lockwood, Frank Bechhofer and Jennifer Platt, *The Affluent Worker* (Cambridge, 1968) and their earlier unpublished study of Luton.

⁴⁰ Lawrence, "Social Science," 231.

⁴¹ Leo Kuper, ed., *Living in Towns: Selected Research papers in Urban Sociology of the Faculty of Commerce and Social Science* (Birmingham, 1953), 5.

⁴² Kuper, *Living in Towns*; G. Mitchell, T. Lupton, M. Hodges and C. Smith, *Neighborhood and Community* (Liverpool, 1954); Hilda Jennings, *Societies in the Making* (London, 1962); Spencer et al, *Stress and Release*.

⁴³ Mitchell et al., *Neighborhood and Community*, 74.

⁴⁴ Leo Kuper, "Blueprint for living together," in Kuper, ed. *Living in Towns*, 74-9.

⁴⁵ Jennings, *Societies*, 200.

⁴⁶ The National Archives (TNA) HLG 37/89 Notes of interview with Mrs C. Brooker.

⁴⁷ Central Housing Advisory Committee, *Living in Flats: Report of the Flats Sub-Committee of the Central Housing Advisory Committee* (London 1952), para.6. See also Joan Maizels, *Two to Five in High Rise* (London, 1961); Ministry of Housing and Local Government, *Families Living at High Density: A Study of Estates in Leeds, Liverpool and London* (London, 1970), paragraphs 135—46.

⁴⁸ Hannah Gavron, *The Captive Wife* (London, 1966), 89; Jennings, *Societies*, 2.

⁴⁹ Roger Wilson, "Difficult Housing Estates," *Human Relations* 16 no.1 (1963): 3-43, 3. A full description of the project can be found in Spencer, *Stress and Release*.

⁵⁰ Spencer, *Stress and Release*, 24, 26.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 220.

⁵² Wilson, "Difficult Housing," 35, 39.

⁵³ Lady Allen, "Adventure Playgrounds," *The Architect*, June 24, 1954, 757.

⁵⁴ Allen, "Why Not Use," 28.

⁵⁵ MRC MSS.111/AP/1/6/95 National Playing Fields "What is an Adventure Playground?"

⁵⁶ Jack Lambert and Jenny Pearson, *Adventure Playgrounds* (Harmondsworth, 1974), 159.

⁵⁷ MRC MSS.121/AP/3/5/13/2i Lollard Adventure Playground Minutes February 10 1955.

⁵⁸ Victoria and Albert Museum Museum of Childhood (MOC) MOC/BUCK/1/12/2 *European Seminar on Playground Activities, Objectives and Leaders' Report Published by the United Nations, October 1958*, 45.

⁵⁹ Mays, *In Search of Adventure*, 7.

⁶⁰ Allen, *Memoirs*, 238.

⁶¹ LMA ILEA/S/SB/38/003 Ruth Littlewood to Miss Reid, August 6, 1952.

⁶² *Seminar on Playground Activities*, 45; MRC MSS.121/AP/1/1/3i and 4i Lollard Street minutes December 1954, January 1955.

⁶³ LMA ILEA/S/SB/38/004 Minute on Junk Playgrounds, Education Office to Mr. R M Marsh.

⁶⁴ LMA ILEA S/SB/38/004 George Burden to London County Council, May 5, 1948; minute to Chief Inspector Education Officer's Dept. LCC, May 30, 1948.

⁶⁵ LMA ILEA/S/SB/38/004 NUFC Playground meeting notes November 12, 1947; LMA ILEA/S/SB/38/004 Education Officer, London County Council Education Committee Primary and Secondary Schools Sub-Committee, Report (nd. c. June 1948).

⁶⁶ K. Markham, "St. Luke's Junk Playground," *Social Work* 5 no.3 (1948): 183-9, 185; LMA ILEA/ S/SB/38/004 London County Council Primary and Secondary Schools Sub Committee Minutes March 14 1950,

⁶⁷ LMA ILEA/S/SB/38/004 Report on Junk Playgrounds.

⁶⁸ LMA ILEA/S/SB/38/003 London County Council Education (General Purposes) Sub Committee, October 31, 1951.

⁶⁹ Lord Luke to *Times*, December 31, 1952. Lady Allen's claim that Clydesdale and Camberwell were unaware of each other is not substantiated by the archival record. Ruth Littlewood, secretary of Clydesdale Road Playground Committee, received much advice from Camberwell's George Burden. See LMA ILEA/S/SB/38/003 Ruth Littlewood to London County Council Education Office, July 27, 1951; TNA CB 3/163 Ruth Littlewood to Lord Luke, April 18 no year ?1952.

⁷⁰ Allen, *Memoirs*, 237.

⁷¹ North East Lincolnshire Archives (NELA) Benjamin Papers 1044, Grimsby Adventure Playground Annual Report 1956-7.

⁷² LMA ACC/188/161/C7 Shortlist for Leader at Notting Hill Adventure Playground, 1960. The advertisement produced a shortlist of 6 candidates including a probation hostel warden, a primary school teacher and a fireman.

⁷³ MOC/BUCK/1/12/5 Mary Nicholson, *Notes on Adventure Playgrounds*, National Association of Playing Fields leaflet 1954; MRC MSS.121/AP/3/11/24 Reading Adventure Playground Association Report 1961.

⁷⁴MOC/BUCK/1/12/3 "Notes on Adventure Playgrounds," n.d. c. 1950s.

⁷⁵ Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Policies in Victorian London* (London, 2004) chapter 5; Seth Koven, "From Rough Lads to Hooligans: Boy Life, National Culture and Social Reform," in Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer and Patricia Yaeger, eds., *Nationalisms and Sexualities* (London, 1992), 365-391, 368

⁷⁶ Kate Bradley, *Poverty, Philanthropy and the State; Charities and Working-Classes in London, 1918-1979* (Manchester, 2009), 101.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 111

⁷⁹ Bengtsson, *Environmental Planning*, 185.

⁸⁰ MRC MSS.121/AP/3/1 Report on Cambridge Holiday Experiment 1957.

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- ⁸¹ Stephen Brooke, "Gender and Working-Class Identity in Britain During the 1950s," *Journal of Social History*, 34:4 (2001): 773-95, 788.
- ⁸² P. Farber and G. Holm, "A Brotherhood of Heroes: The Charismatic Educator in Recent American Movies," in, *Schooling in the Light of Popular Culture*, eds. P. Farber, E. F. Provenzo and G. Holm (New York, 1994), 167-8;
- ⁸³ Dale M. Bauer, "Indecent Proposals: Teachers in the Movies," *College English* 60 (1998): 301-317.
- ⁸⁴ On Bloom see Michael Fielding, "Alex Bloom, Pioneer of Radical State Education," *Forum* 47:2 (2005): 119-134; obituary, *Times*, September 24, 1955; Tony Gibson, *Youth for Freedom* (London, 1951); Berg, "Moving Toward Self-Government," 34-7.
- ⁸⁵ A. A. Bloom, "Self Government, Study and Choice at a Secondary Modern School," *New Era* 34: 9 (1953): 174-7.
- ⁸⁶ E. R. Braithwaite, *To Sir With Love* (London, 1959) ebook edition, 30.
- ⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 13.
- ⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 68.
- ⁸⁹ *Ibid.* 71.
- ⁹⁰ *Ibid.* 71
- ⁹¹ *Ibid.* 80.
- ⁹² *Ibid.* 82.
- ⁹³ H. W. Turner, *Something Extraordinary* (London, 1961) 11, 12, 15, 23.
- ⁹⁴ *Ibid.* 14.
- ⁹⁵ *Ibid.* 32.
- ⁹⁶ *Ibid.* 33.
- ⁹⁷ William Golding, review in *Bookman*, reproduced on cover of Turner, *Something Extraordinary*.
- ⁹⁸ Chiquita Sandilands, "I Visit the Lollard Adventure Playground," *Illustrated*, November 26, 1955, 24-5 & 27, here 24, 27.
- ⁹⁹ Lambert and Pearson, *Adventure Playgrounds*, 24.
- ¹⁰⁰ LMA ILEA/S/SB/38/003 Report by Chief Inspector of Physical Education July 16, 1952.
- ¹⁰¹ MRC MSS.121/AP/3/2/7Peter Gutkind, Report to Clydesdale Road Playground Committee, April 7, April 23.
- ¹⁰² "Junk on a Bombed Site Brings Happiness," *Guardian*, July 10, 1954.
- ¹⁰³ "Follow my Leader," *Sunday Times*, April 16, 1967.

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- ¹⁰⁴ LMA ILEA/S/SB/38/003 Ruth Littlewood to Mr Fergusson (education department) January 4, 1955.
- ¹⁰⁵ *The Schoolmaster*, September 17, 1954.
- ¹⁰⁶ MRC MSS.121/AP/1/1/2i Lollard Adventure Playground Association, Thursday December 2, 1954.
- ¹⁰⁷ LMA ILEA/S/SB/38/004 Report by Richard Palmer, Staff Inspector to Education Office, July 18, 1950.
- ¹⁰⁸ LMA ILEA/S/SB/38/004 Report on Camberwell Junk Playground during the year March-November 1949.
- ¹⁰⁹ LMA ACC/1888/161/C7 Notting Hill Executive Committee Minutes, January 9, 1962; MRC MSS.121/AP/3/4/43 Ampton Street Playground Executive Committee Minutes, February 4, 1963.
- ¹¹⁰ Mays, *Adventure in Play*, 9.
- ¹¹¹ Liverpool University Archives (LUA) D7/1/8 Pitt Street and Area Juvenile Committee (later the Rathbone Adventure Playground) Minute Book November 30, 1950.
- ¹¹² TNA CB 3/60 John Baron Mays to National Playing Fields Association, n.d. (1953).
- ¹¹³ Mays, *Adventure in Play*, 8; LUA D7/1/8Pitt Street Minute Book November 30, 1950.
- ¹¹⁴ TNA CB 3/60 C. Thornton to G. T. Eagleton, May 6, 1954.
- ¹¹⁵ TNA CB 3/60 Mays to NPFA, n.d.
- ¹¹⁶ TNA CB 3/60 Allen to Eagleton, February 19, 1954; Thornton to Admiral Norman, March 19, 1954; NPFA grants secretary to Thornton, July 2, 1954.
- ¹¹⁷ TNA CB 3/60 M. Cianter, report to NPFA on visit to Liverpool Adventure Playground, October 5, 1954.
- ¹¹⁸ TNA CB 3/60 Vera Swift to Mr Eagleton, July 30, 1956; copy of letter of appointment n.d. c. June 1954.
- ¹¹⁹ Bradley, *Poverty, Philanthropy and the State*, 39.
- ¹²⁰ LMA ILEA/S/SB/38/005 Mary Nicholson and Lady Allen to London County Council Education Office, February 12, 1954; Elsie M. Smith, "Now London is to get an Adventure Playground," *Sheils Daily News*, June 1, 1955.
- ¹²¹ TNA CB 3/60 Thornton to Vice Admiral H. G. Norman, February 24, 1955.
- ¹²² TNA CB 3/60 Rathbone Playground Leader's Report, w/e June 26, 1954.
- ¹²³ TNA CB 3/60 Rathbone Playground Leader's Report, w/e July 17, 1954.
- ¹²⁴ TNA CB 3/60 Rathbone Playground Leader's Report, w/e May 19, 1955.
- ¹²⁵ TNA CB 3/60 Rathbone Playground Leader's Report, w/e May 10, 1955.

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- ¹²⁶ TNA CB 3/60 Rathbone Playground Leader's Report, w/e March 18, 1956.
- ¹²⁷ MRC MSS.121/AP/3/11/6 Joyce Ellis to Lady Allen, October 18 [1955].
- ¹²⁸ LUA D7/1/8 Rathbone Adventure Playground Committee Minute Book, August 6, 1955.
- ¹²⁹ MRC MSS.121/AP/3/11/5.
- ¹³⁰ MRC MSS.121/AP/3/11/6. This runs contrary to Bradley's findings that women workers were 'gaining some independence' from settlement life. Bradley, *Poverty, Philanthropy and the State*, 39.
- ¹³¹ TNA CB 3/60 Extracts from letter from E. H. Clynes, October 4, 1955,.
- ¹³² TNA CB 3/60 Liverpool Youth Organisation to Mr Eagleton, July 30, 1956.
- ¹³³ TNA CB 3/60 Lady Allen to Mr Eagleton, August 1, 1956.
- ¹³⁴ LMA ILEA/ S/SB/38/004 Rosemary Conway to London County Council Education Officers Department, n.d.
- ¹³⁵ MRC MSS.121/AP/3/1 Report on Cambridge Holiday Experiment 1957.
- ¹³⁶ Spencer, *Stress and Release*, 239-40.
- ¹³⁷ Television Commercial for Wards' *Supa Dukes* Shoes for Boys, 1968, Media Archive of Central England (available at <http://www.macearchive.org/films/wards-shoes-supadukes-commercial-adventure-playground>, accessed October 1, 2017).
- ¹³⁸ MRC MSS. 121/AP/3/11/1 Crawley Adventure Playground Leader's Report, August 10, 1954.
- ¹³⁹ TNA CB/3/60 Rathbone Leader's Report w/e 14 August 1954, w/e October 3, 1954.
- ¹⁴⁰ MRC MSS.121/ AP/3/8/10 Shoreditch Adventure Playground Report April 3—May 9 1956.
- ¹⁴¹ MOC/BUCK/2/3/2 Notting Hill Adventure Playground Annual Report 1966 and Leader's Report 1966.
- ¹⁴² MRC MSS.121/AP/3/5/29 Lollard Adventure Playground Annual Report 1959.
- ¹⁴³ MRC MSS.121/ AP/1/1/51 Lollard Adventure Playground EC Minutes November 17, 1958; LMA ILEA/S/SB/38/004 L. Hobbs report on visit to Clydesdale Road August 15, 1951; TNA CB/3/163 Miss Cianter to Mr Gooch, October 15, 1954.
- ¹⁴⁴ Stanley Schofield Productions/National Playing Fields Association, *Adventure Playgrounds* (1965).
- ¹⁴⁵ MRC MSS.121/AP/1/1/56 Lollard Street Adventure Playground Report, May 10, 1959.
- ¹⁴⁶ Benjamin, *In Search of Adventure*, 59.
- ¹⁴⁷ NELA 1044/3 Playground Diary, August 29, 1958.

¹⁴⁸ NELA 1044/3 Playground Diary, February 28, 1959.

¹⁴⁹ Benjamin, *In Search of Adventure*, 70.

¹⁵⁰ Ward, "Adventure Playground," 193.

¹⁵¹ MRC MSS.121/AP/3/5 Foreward, *Lollard Adventure Magazine* no. 1 (1957); LMA ILEA/S/SD/38/008 "Adventure Playgrounds" notes.

¹⁵² For the connections between these strands of thought see Adams, Berg, Berger, Duane, Neill and Ollendorff, *Children's Rights*.

¹⁵³ MRC MSS.121/AP/3/15/7 Lady Allen to Lance Thirkell, May 12, 1970.

¹⁵⁴ Raphael Samuel, "Utopian Sociology,": *New Society* October 2, 1987, 32-4, 33.

¹⁵⁵ LMA ILEA/S/SB/38/008 Report on the Running of Shoreditch 25 July—30 September 1955.

¹⁵⁶ The NPFA ran short courses from 1958. London Adventure Playgrounds Association, which formed in 1968, initiated a trainee scheme the following year, and Thurrock College in Essex started a one-year full-time playleaders' course 1970.

¹⁵⁷ On this point see for example Jupp, "Home Space."

¹⁵⁸ MOC/Buck/1/12/4 Holiday Action Co-Operative March 1, 1972.

¹⁵⁹ Interview with Jan O'Malley by Dave Welsh, August 18, 2011, TUC History Online available at <http://www.unionhistory.info/Display.php?irn=932&QueryPage=AdvSearch.php>, accessed November 1, 2017.

¹⁶⁰ See, for example, the description of playwork at the Centerprise co-operative in Hackney in R. Schling, *The Lime Green Mystery: An Oral History of the Centerprise Co-Operative* (London, 71-81). On this broader point see Daphne Spain, *Constructive Feminism: Women's Spaces and Women's Rights in the American City* (New York, 2016).

¹⁶¹ Harry Sheir, *Adventure Playgrounds* (London, 1984), 16.