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To part with one’s dolls

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Play, playing, toys, games: you name it, we were literally drawn into it by our interlocutors during fieldwork and we became increasingly analytically engaged with it. We were also very much interested in stories about age difference and perceptions of growing up. The following instance exemplifies the entanglement of play and coming of age - with a touch of research anonymity ethics. We have been viewing pictures of barbie-dolls, about twenty of them, that Lina, a seven-year old, has made. She explained to me that she was about to give her dolls away to homeless children, and that's why she made pictures of the dolls she was about to give away. She's been playing with dolls for so many years - and many of those were her older sister’s before they became hers and they have been very significant, although they weren’t anymore she told me, but she wanted to keep a visual record of them, something through which she could remember them.

The news about giving away her dolls made me think about the processual ‘coming(s) of age’ which go on through childhood, signified by different material and ritualistic markers. Giving away the dolls to mark passing to an age when one doesn’t need them. An age when one plays with ‘more grown-up toys’, and presumably has less time to play altogether. An age when one is expected to be able to share and give away her toys, acknowledging difference and the ethics of giving to those in need. I was wondering, are her pictures a liminal gesture in the process of separating with her dolls?

As it was around the time of the workshop, and we had been talking a lot about protecting sensitive data, she told me that I shouldn’t take the actual pictures she made, as you could see the faces of the dolls and that instead we should make a new picture
- the one I am using here and in which the doll’s face is hidden; this one I could take and I should use it too, she told me. At first I found her remark funny, and a bit playful. But in retrospect, I think that it was neither just a playful reaction nor just a serious remark - it was both. These dolls, which she was about to part with, all had names and in the ‘countless’ hours she’s been playing with them in the past they probably have been developing own personalities too.

She’s about to part with them, but she wanted to make pictures of them to keep as reminders. She’s about to share them with anonymous children, but not willing to share the photos she made of them with the potential audiences of the research - just an anonymous portrait of one of them. Somewhere in between private and public. Somewhere in between playfulness and seriousness. In between and betwixt: a space and a trope which has often been identified by anthropologists with rites of passage.

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