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ABSTRACT

Playing on the Margins:

Childhood and Self-Making in Twentieth-Century Ethnic U.S. Fiction

by

Delores Ayers Keller

This dissertation investigates twentieth-century African American and Chicano/a novels that privilege childhood play as a site for defining the self through or against an array of social norms and dominant ideologies. Although narratives of children at play are a neglected category in literary criticism, the playing child often functions as a central literary figure for conveying the conflicted processes of self-definition for children on society’s margins. In conversation with theories of play, I argue that a range of Chicano/a and African American texts predicate adult possibilities for either resistance or capitulation to conventional expectations on what transpires during childhood play.

The writers in this study respond, in part, to the ideology of the early twentieth-century playground movement and its aim of instilling a sense of civic duty in the children of European immigrants. While playgrounds may have been designed to integrate certain children into U.S. society, they also excluded other children—in particular, children viewed as racial others—through segregation. Even though the children of both Mexican Americans and African Americans were not included in the
play movement's goals and have continued to be excluded throughout the twentieth century, the child characters in the novels that I examine frequently contend with unsettling issues of national identity during play. Unlike the proponents of the play movement who viewed assimilation through play as a form of progress, the writers in my project often show that play is a site where capitulation to dominant values is neither progressive nor desirable for their child characters.

Chapter one investigates childhood play as a key factor in determining how Chicano masculinities will be lived in relation to women, class, ethnicity, and national identity. Chapter two examines childhood play as a stage for rehearsing gender-specific adult identities that empower Chicanos but disempower Chicanas. Chapter three foregrounds childhood play as a crucial arena for working out the tensions caused by racism and sexism in relationships between African American women and girls.
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Introduction

The Work of Play in Chicano/a and African American Coming-of-Age Narratives

Narratives of children at play are a neglected category in U.S. literary criticism, yet the playing child often functions as a central literary figure for conveying the conflicted processes of self-definition for children on society's margins. Child characters on the margins of dominant society frequently contend with varying and multiple oppressions and pressures: their disempowering status as both children and minorities; patriarchal imperatives for gendered behavior; political disenfranchisement; white racism; intragroup racism and classism; societal norms; and traditional values and constraints within their own communities and families. For the child characters in my study, play is a crucial site for experimenting with and choosing among various identities while grappling with the particular oppressions and pressures that beset them. The twentieth-century Chicano/a and African American texts that I examine in the chapters that follow—Américo Paredes's George Washington Gómez (1990), José Antonio Villarreal's Pocho (1959), Rudolfo A. Anaya's Bless Me, Ultima (1972), Sandra Cisneros's The House on Mango Street (1984), and Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye (1970) and Sula (1973)—all privilege childhood play as a site for defining the self through or against the political agendas and social norms of dominant U.S. society, the ethnic community, and the family of origin. In conversation with theories of play and with historical contexts of play, such as doll-making, I argue that the writers in my project predicate adult possibilities for either resistance or capitulation to dominant ideologies and conventional expectations on what transpires during scenes of childhood play.
Communications theorist Stephen Kline argues that, during the early years of the twentieth century, white middle-class ideology deemed play to be “the ‘work of childhood’” through adult-endorsed “activities for the properly civilized middle-class child” (100, 101). This particular “‘work of childhood’” was endorsed by the newly formed play movement and reflects the white adult world’s imprint on child play in the form of “[s]tructured game play and organized sport,” which had become “highly recommended as ways of preparing children for a competitive society and of creating a location for class mingling and negotiation” (Kline 100). In discussing the emphasis on structured play at the beginning of the twentieth-century, play historian Roberta J. Park explains that “[a] remarkably large number of the aspirations of other reforms coalesced in the rhetoric of the play movement (e.g. child welfare; education; health; morality; the inculcation of patriotism; return to nature and to rural values; the ‘Americanization’ of the immigrant; confirmation of the work ethic)” and that “[t]he number of cities which organized playgrounds in the early 1900s was remarkable” (98). As Park goes on to state, “the impetus for much of the activity as well as the theorizing which took place in the early 1900s” was “[t]he assumed potential of play—and games, sports and public festivals—for the inculcation of civic responsibility” (101). According to Park, “it was the malleable child who offered the greatest opportunities for success,” and “[n]owhere was this more evident than in the case of the children of immigrants” (101). The groups targeted for their “potential” to learn civic duty through play were the children of European “foreigners”—“children who would constitute the next generation of loyal, productive citizens” (Park 101)—not the children of the colonized and racialized African American or Mexican American populations already residing in the U.S.¹
In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison makes note of the racial segregation of parks and playgrounds when Claudia MacTeer and her sister, Frieda, go in search of Pecola Breedlove. Discovering that Pecola has walked across town to pick up the laundry from the home of the well-to-do and white Fishers where her mother is employed, Claudia and Frieda make the trek to the Fisher home. When the two girls "reach Lake Shore Park, a city park laid out with rosebuds, fountains, bowling greens, [and] picnic tables" (TBE 105), Claudia, as narrator, continues her description of this lovely park and speaks of the exclusion of African Americans from its grounds:

It was empty now, but sweetly expectant of clean, white, well-behaved children and parents who would play there above the lake in summer before half-running, half-stumbling down the slope to the welcoming water. Black people were not allowed in the park, and so it filled our dreams.

Right before the entrance to the park was the large white house with the wheelbarrow full of flowers. Short crocus blades sheathed the purple-and-white hearts that so wished to be first they endured the chill and rain of early spring. The walkway was flagged in calculated disorder, hiding the cunning symmetry. Only fear of discovery and the knowledge that we did not belong kept us from loitering. We circled the proud house and went to the back (TBE 105-06).

Through Claudia's words in this scene, Morrison highlights the way in which play or the exclusion from it can impact a child's self-image as he or she moves toward adulthood in a white-dominated society that renders certain children less valuable than others. This
observation is not limited to the writings of Morrison, but also finds expression in other coming-of-age narratives in my study. Paredes, for example, makes note of the segregated playgrounds of his protagonist’s school where the Mexican Americans and the Anglo Americans play in separate groups.

As a result of this exclusion from mainstream play areas, it is my contention that the writers in my project foreground narratives of children at play in their novels, in part, as a response to the ideology of the early twentieth-century playground movement with its aim of instilling a sense of civic duty in the children of European immigrants. While parks and playgrounds may have been designed to integrate certain children into U.S. society, they also excluded children viewed as racial others through segregation—a means of discrimination that has been sustained throughout the twentieth century. Even though the children of both Mexican Americans and African Americans were not included in the play movement’s goals, the child characters in the novels that I examine frequently contend with unsettling issues of national identity during play. While dominant society viewed assimilation through play as a form of progress for their target group of European immigrant children, the writers in my project often show that play is a site where capitulation to dominant values is neither progressive nor desirable for their Chicano/a and African American child characters.

Throughout the twentieth century, play has been viewed as a developmental arena in which children progress, and the play theory that Paredes, Villarreal, Anaya, Cisneros, and Morrison most often challenge in their novels of development is this theory of play as positive progress. In The Ambiguity of Play, play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith writes that “the field of child play is dominated by the rhetoric of progress,” which “assumes
that children’s play is about general adaptation, growth, and development” (51, 47). This play-as-progress theory “derives from the historical view, said to originate in the eighteenth century, that progress is inevitable, or at least achievable, in human society” (Sutton-Smith 18-19). However, while this prominent theory holds “that children’s play is mainly about modern conventions of growth and progress, [it] has not been strongly supported to date by the scientific evidence” (Sutton-Smith 123). Nevertheless, the play-as-progress theory remains a firmly-ingrained ideology of play’s purpose in the mind of many adults, and “most psychological play scholarship in this century has focused on the developmental stages children go through in their play” (Sutton-Smith 35). According to Sutton-Smith, “[t]he main tenet of the rhetoric of progress is that adulthood and childhood are quite separate, childhood being innocent, nonsexual, and dependent” (19). Adult “desire for children to make progress in development and schooling has led to play [as] being considered either a waste of time . . . or a form of children’s work” (Sutton-Smith 19). In other words, “[t]he one view is that play is not usefully adaptive, the other is that it is” (Sutton-Smith 19).

Significantly, the writers in my study, while often implying that “play is not usefully adaptive” for their child characters, do not construct child’s play as “a waste of time” (Sutton-Smith 19). The narratives of play in these novels indicate the serious work that play performs in the lives of Mexican American and African American child characters as they attempt to navigate the challenges of their real-life surroundings. Moreover, in the cases in which play may not be “usefully adaptive” in these novels, it is, nonetheless, a site where the child characters who acquiesce to dominant ideologies and conventional expectations may view their assimilation as a useful strategy in adapting to
the pressures of a life lived not only as a raced, classed, and/or gendered subject but also as a child subject to adult authority. Regardless of whether play becomes a source of positive or negative development for these child characters, it is a site in which much work is done toward making a self in relation to the society, community, and family that reside outside of the realm of play.

While the play-life of children has been neglected in literary criticism, “the child” as a cultural construct, a product of discourse, a citizen-in-the-making, a sacred treasure, and a product of adult desire has received attention in historical, psychological, social, and literary scholarship. As sociologists Allison James, Chris Jenks, and Alan Prout note in *Theorizing Childhood*, "children have become supremely an issue of our time" (197). Much of the current scholarly debate surrounds the social constructedness of children and childhood as posited by Philippe Ariès in *Centuries of Childhood* through his contention that “the discovery of childhood began in the thirteenth century” (47). However, as James, Jenks, and Prout point out, in “social constructionism, . . . the body and the child appear as effects of social relations, leaving little room for the body/child as a physical or corporeal entity”; thus, “the body/child becomes dissolved as a material entity and is treated as a discursive object” (146). One of James’s, Jenks’s, and Prout’s primary concerns is that the current and predominant social constructivist view of “the child” may efface children as physical beings. As a result, they caution us not to “abandon the embodied material child,” and they argue that “a refocusing on the material bodies of children could enable us to explore childhood as both a construct of discourse and an aspect of children’s lives which shapes social relations as much as it is shaped by them” (James, Jenks, and Prout 28, 146-147). What “social construction risks
undermining [is] that social action is (generally speaking) embodied action, performed not only by texts but by real, living, corporeal persons” (James, Jenks, and Prout 147).

According to James, Jenks, and Prout, “[i]n children’s own accounts of the body[,] its size, shape, gender and other characteristics loom large,” and, although “new approaches to childhood research make great play of children as active agents in social life, they often fail to appreciate the importance of embodiment in the processes through which children participate in social life” (147). Embodiment is also a significant factor in children’s play lives. As social anthropologist L.R. Goldman points out in his study of childhood pretense-play, “bodily action” and play are interlocked in Western “concepts of play” (45). “Play is something close to the body,” and, in the case of pretend play, is “both an ‘embodied’ experience and a loquacious conduit” (Goldman 45). In play, “both body and voice” may function in “the way in which play as the ‘handiwork’ of ludic agents ontologically defines the self” (Goldman 45). For the child characters in the novels in my study, the body of the self at play takes on a central role in the defining of a self both inside and outside of the playworld. The body of the playing child in these novels is frequently at risk; play can metamorphose into a violent activity or it can be disrupted by violence. In other cases, violence or the potential for violence is directed towards another child by the child protagonist at play. In many instances, this violence, whether experienced by the child or inflicted by the child, results in harm to the psyche.

Psychological damage to child characters is present, to a greater or lesser extent, in each of the novels that I examine, but this damage is never unmoored from history, culture, and politics. While this psychic harm is related to the disempowerment experienced by child characters as members of marginalized and racialized minorities,
the writers in my dissertation project also address issues of power imbalances within the context of family. Feelings of disempowerment frequently arise in these novels as the result of being a child subjected to adult constraints and expectations. Sutton-Smith states that children are a “nonpowerful segment of the population”; consequently, their play life may “represent an implicit protest against” this lack of power that constitutes “their world fate” (116). When children are allowed to play away from the gaze of powerful adults, they often “express both their special identity and their resentment at being a captive population” by enacting the “private or hidden transcript that is their play life” (Sutton-Smith 123).

Importantly, in constructing a diversity of play lives for their characters, the writers in my study demonstrate that there is no monolithic figure of the playing child. The types of play depicted in these texts cover a range of play activities—solitary play, group play, sex play, horseplay, pretend play, street play, doll play, destructive play—yet, a commonality in the use of play by these writers resides in their construction of play as an activity that is integral to the formation of youthful identities and adult possibilities. These writers insist that play has the potential for either positive self-making or destructive self-denial, and play is often the site where the violent erasure of “the disjunction of childhood innocence and adult maturity” (Sutton-Smith 115-116) occurs. Another commonality between these texts is the importance placed on the history and heritage of child and adolescent players. Literary and cultural critic Susan Willis, in commenting on Paule Marshall’s Brown Girl, Brownstones, Toni Morrison’s Sula, and Alice Walker’s Meridian, asserts that “[t]he answer to why Selina is the way she is, or why Sula is Sula, or why Meridian is Meridian involves reconstructing the development
of the character’s individual personality in relation to the historical forces that have shaped the migrations of her race, the struggles of her community, and relationships that have developed within her family” (Specifying 3). While Willis is referring to African American characters in “black women’s writing” (Specifying 3), her assertion also applies to the characters in novels by other ethnic U.S. writers. In George Washington Gómez, for instance, the child protagonist responds, during his play battles, to the colonization of Mexicans in America, to issues of classism within his own community, and to imbalances of power in parent/child relationships. In Pocho, the child protagonist, who contends with racialization as a Mexican American and with being bullied by a girl during group play, reacts by eventually dominating this girl through assuming the traditional heterosexist behavior during play that is a sign of manhood for his Mexican father. In Bless Me, Ultima, the child protagonist grapples with the traditions of Catholicism that are a part of his heritage and with the expectations of his parents that are tied to their history as Mexican Americans living in New Mexico. In The House on Mango Street, the child protagonist’s ability to rebel against the history of female oppression and entrapment that is a part of her Mexican heritage is evident through her freedom to roam and play on the streets of her Chicago barrio. In The Bluest Eye, the child protagonist resists black maternal expectations for conventional doll-play and doll-worship that can be traced back to their own histories of deprivation. Lastly, in Sula, through the unconventional act of destroying a black male child during playtime, the child protagonists work out tensions in their relationships with their mothers that are related to the history of blacks in the U.S.
Just as theories of play are embedded in “multiple broad symbolic systems—political, religious, social, and educational” (Sutton-Smith 9), the children at play in these novels are also positioned within these larger contexts. For these child characters, playing is influenced by the historical past and the political present, and the choices made during play will have an impact upon their future identities. During play, the children in these texts experiment with identities that either resist real-world political and cultural hierarchies or that mirror those real-world hierarchies. Regardless, however, of the resistance or compliance to real-world conditions, the identities that these child characters try on during play allow them to imagine societal roles that might be adopted outside of the world of play. Often, these children decide, through their play, to adopt roles and identities based on what they see as being the best means for survival in a society that denigrates them. Helen Moglen’s assertion that “Morrison’s project is to explore the ways in which those who have been systematically deprived of psychic and social identities can in fact sustain and reinvent themselves” (207) also applies to the writings of the other novelists in my study. Significantly, it is primarily during play that the child characters in *George Washington Gómez*, *Pocho*, *Bless Me, Ultima*, *The House on Mango Street*, *The Bluest Eye*, and *Sula* attempt to “sustain and reinvent themselves” (Moglen 207) in response to oppressive and often violent real-world conditions.

The chapters that follow interrogate the ways in which play is pivotal to the making and transforming of the self during childhood and to the fashioning of possible identities for adulthood. In chapter one, “The Playing Grounds of Childhood: Boyhood Battles in Américo Paredes’s *George Washington Gómez* and José Antonio Villarreal’s *Pocho.*, I investigate how gendered identities assumed during childhood play are
formative of adult masculinity. Paredes’s important coming-of-age narrative, written in
the 1930s but not published until 1990, has received little critical attention, but those
scholars who have written on this text have tended to focus on the protagonist’s
disturbing treatment as a Mexican American child in a bordertown school system. I
argue, however, that Guálinto/George Gomez’s solitary childhood play-battles form the
primary means through which he wrestles to define his masculinity in response to the
threats of emasculation that his ethnic and lower-class identities pose. Although, as an
adult, George assumes an Americanized masculinity that elevates him in class but denies
his Mexican origins, his childhood play at being a revolutionary haunts his dreams during
his adult sleep and belies his decision to betray his people and his ethnicity. Villarreal,
on the other hand, does not construct a child protagonist who sees Mexican and American
as oppositional terms. The dilemma for Villarreal’s Richard Rubio is how to respond to
the threat of emasculation from an unruly girl who dominates males during play. Richard
eventually resolves his feelings of disempowerment through a heterosexual aggression
that conforms to his father’s heterosexual view of manhood. As an adult, however,
Richard does not desire to assume the responsibilities that accompany a domestic
masculinity. Through assuming an Americanized masculinity as an enlisted man during
World War II, Richard escapes from what he perceives as female familial and sexual
baggage, and he also avoids new pressures on him to join the budding Chicano
movement. In spite of their differing views of manhood, for both Paredes’s and
Villarreal’s protagonists, the dynamics of masculinity as developed in childhood play are
key to adult choices of how gender is lived in relation to women, class, ethnicity, and
national identity.
While chapter one deals solely with masculine narratives of coming-of-age, chapter two juxtaposes a Chicano *bildungsroman* against a Chicana narrative of development. In this second chapter, “Playing With Tradition: Grotesque Destinies and Dangerous Games in Rudolfo A. Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima* and Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street,*” I examine a male character who struggles to choose between different forms of empowering masculinities and a female character who critiques the dangers that masculine domination imposes on women. For both of these child characters, childhood games and adolescent play-arenas form the central stages on which they enact possible adult roles and discover the consequences of assuming those roles. The rehearsing of gender-specific adult identities during childhood play, although dangerous for the protagonists of both novels, is ultimately morally empowering for Anaya’s male protagonist but sexually oppressive for Cisneros’s female protagonist. For Anaya’s child protagonist, Antonio Juan Márquez y Luna, maternal expectations for his future career as priest cause him great anguish. By stepping into this masculine role during play, Tony learns that the priesthood is an oppressive role that he does not want to assume in real life despite his respect for its authority. As a male, however, Tony still has access to masculine roles of power in the traditional Chicano home. For Cisneros’s child protagonist, Esperanza Cordero, play is a site for discovering the relentlessness of a masculine power that she cannot access. In playing at adulthood, Esperanza rehearses her own oppressions in a heterosexual power structure that she also learns to resist. Importantly, through the child character of Esperanza Cordero, Cisneros foregrounds modes of female resistance to the traditional power relations between men and women that remain uncritiqued in narratives such as Anaya’s, Paredes’s, and Villarreal’s.
With chapter three, "Toni Morrison’s Politics and Poetics of Girlhood Play: Dolls, Dismemberments, and Disappearing Playmates in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula,*" I move to a comparison of two female-centered *bildungsromane.* Like Cisneros, who provides an account of the lived experiences of Chicanas whose stories are slighted in Chicano narratives, Morrison’s purpose in her first two novels is to bring to life the silenced presence of black females in texts by African American males. Morrison’s focus on what is excluded by men brings to the fore the crucial role of childhood play in the dynamics of black families. While Morrison challenges the popular ideology that the right to play is a right of childhood, her most jarring use of childhood playtime shows how intersections between racism and sexism inflect relationships between women and girls. In both of these novels, black maternal attitudes are complicit in devaluing black female children, and Morrison’s girl protagonists resist this assault on their self-worth through their violent actions during play. Although many scholars have focused on Claudia MacTeer’s dismemberment of white dolls in *The Bluest Eye,* I argue that a knowledge of the history of U.S. doll-making and doll-marketing is crucial to an understanding of why the gift of white dolls forces Claudia to define herself against both white racism and the internalized racism of black women. In *Sula,* childhood friends, Sula Peace and Nel Wright, react to the way that racism deforms black families through Sula’s accidental drowning of a black male child during play and Nel’s unconscious enjoyment of his death. The playtime drowning of this male child constitutes a form of rebellion against maternal attitudes that either value black males over daughters or that shame daughters in front of black males. However, in destroying a live black child, as
opposed to a doll, Sula and Nel reenact the cycle of violence that is a part of their family histories as African Americans living in a racist and sexist U.S. society.

My study expands on current literary scholarship surrounding “the child” by demonstrating the centrality of childhood play to the making of a self in ethnic U.S. fiction. While the terminology, “the child,” presupposes an abstract and universalized subject, the writers that I examine show us children for whom play reflects their diversified and embodied positions as U.S. subjects constrained by racism, classism, and sexism. For the writers in my study, childhood play is the most important arena in which ethnic children challenge a variety of limiting roles and identities in their present lives and imagine new, although sometimes conflicted, possibilities for their future positionings as adults.
Notes

1 It is interesting to note that the interaction of classes and, implicitly, the interaction of "races" during play was not fully supported by the play movement. According to Lisa Sheryl Jacobson, "the home play campaigns launched by the Playground and Recreation Association of America (PRAA) in the 1920s" encouraged parents to create "backyard playgrounds as a way to tie children's play to the safety of the home" (228-229). According to Jacobson, "[r]ecreation reformers" employed "veiled language that betrayed fears of race and class mixing in public play spaces" by emphasizing that the private "backyard playground" would offer protection from "unwholesome influences" (229). I would like to thank Dr. Allison Sneider for pointing out Jacobson's dissertation to me. See Lisa Sheryl Jacobson, Raising Consumers: Children, Childrearing, and the American Mass Market, 1890-1940 Diss. U of CA, 1997. (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1997. ATT 9721341).

Chapter One

The Playing Grounds of Childhood: Boyhood Battles in Américo Paredes's

George Washington Gómez and José Antonio Villarreal's Pocho

According to Chicano literary critic and theorist, Juan Bruce-Novoa, "by the early 1970s, the [Chicano] novel tended to fall loosely within one pattern, that of the Bildungsroman, usually featuring a boy destined to become a writer" (82). As Ted Lyon also notes, “much of contemporary Chicano prose creates a child or adolescent protagonist, narrator, or focus character” enmeshed in a turbulent “search for identity” in which “the concept of ‘loss of innocence’” serves as “a basic theme” (255). In this “search for identity,” the children of Chicano literature are often situated precariously at the crossroads of two cultures, languages, and loyalties, and they frequently struggle with dilemmas and oppositions that seem impossible to reconcile. While Chicano children have diverse experiences during childhood, Chicano writers incorporate several overriding themes into that diversity. Among the most prevalent themes are “the troubled adjustment of Mexican Americans to American culture” (Portales 69, 48) and the pressures of parental demands and familial responsibilities.

In the articulation of these positions, Chicano authors Américo Paredes and José Antonio Villarreal are among the Chicano/a writers who employ the motif of childhood play as a site of both destructive and constructive experience for their child characters. Although playing is generally viewed as a childhood universal—an expected and somewhat innocuous part of children’s lives—many Chicano/a writers particularize the universal aspect of play by constructing playing as a site in which their young characters attempt to synthesize, in an empowering manner, the opposing cultural, social, or
political categories that burden them in the real world. Thus, the site of play becomes a means for child and adolescent characters to address multiple real-world dichotomies—Mexican/American, ruling class/working class, child/adult, male/female. According to Rosaura Sánchez, it is the "general marginalization in society, on the basis of class, ethnicity, and gender, that Chicano literature has reconstructed textually" ("Discourses" 1011), and the children in Chicano literature are often acutely aware of their marginalization both as children subject to adult authority and as Chicanos subject to societal oppression.

Sánchez also asserts that "Chicano novelists and short story writers have used many literary strategies to call attention to the cultural, political, and economic constraints within which Chicanos live and work" ("Discourses" 1021). For Paredes and Villarreal, one of these literary strategies is the use of boyhood play as a site in which their young male protagonists negotiate forms of masculinity in response to the particular constraints that plague them. These fictional worlds of play in Paredes's *George Washington Gómez* (1990) and Villarreal's *Pocho* (1959) highlight, to differing degrees, the significance of ethnicity, race, and class in the processes of masculine identity formation and, as a result, the site of play becomes a complex site of multiple struggles with self-definition. Both Paredes and Villarreal recognize the pivotal role of play in human behavior, and they construct their fictional sites of playing as much more than spaces of frivolity. By alternating between situations that conflate play experiences with real world experiences and situations that place the two in opposition, Paredes elucidates his protagonist's psychological and physical struggles to define himself, in terms of his masculinity, amid the brutality, death, and discrimination of his surroundings and within
the masculine codes of bravery that reflect the violence of the South Texas border region in the early decades of the twentieth century. Villarreal, on the other hand, does not construct his young protagonist’s 1930’s Santa Clara environment as one of unremitting violence and brutality; however, he does place his protagonist in a gendered battle for masculine dominance during the text’s episodes of play. Although each of these child protagonists fight against feelings of disempowerment for different reasons, the stakes of play in both *George Washington Gómez* and *Pocho* revolve around available modes of masculinity in the context of relationships with females and in connection with issues of classism, racism, and national identity.

In *George Washington Gómez*, Paredes constructs a child character, Guálinto Gomez, whose sense of oppression stems from multiple sources—the treatment he receives from both adult and adolescent Mexican American females, the class differences within his own Mexican American community, and his sense of otherness and powerlessness within the Anglo school system—and it is Guálinto’s violent fantasies and solitary play that allow him to explore the two oppositional modes of manhood that he perceives as being his only two choices—a Mexican revolutionary or an American *rinche* (Texas Ranger). While, as a child, Guálinto chooses the pretend role of revolutionary, as an adult, his light skin color allows him to pass into the Anglo male power structure where he figuratively becomes a *rinche* when he betrays his Mexican American community by becoming a border spy for the U. S. military during World War II. Guálinto, who goes by his given name of George as an adult, also accesses masculine power and an elevated class status through marrying into the Anglo world. However, in
spite of Guálinto’s choice to renounce his Mexican heritage, his childhood play role of revolutionary and crusador for his people remains at work within his adult subconscious.

In *Pocho*, on the other hand, Villarreal constructs a young protagonist, Richard Rubio, who, while positioned at the bottom level within an ethnically diverse neighborhood due to his Mexican heritage, does not perceive his American identity and his Mexican identity as oppositional. Instead, Richard considers gender to be the primary consideration in his bid for manhood. Richard’s playtime experiences, unlike most of Guálinto’s, occur within the context of group play, and this context is defined at the outset in *Pocho* as one in which females rule. Finding this hierarchy unacceptable, Richard asserts his masculinity through the sexual dominance and dethroning of the female leader of the neighborhood play group. However, while Richard exerts his masculinity as an adolescent through sexual dominance during play, as an adult, he does not want the trappings that come with being the head of a family. Unlike the young Guálinto, who is not able to overcome his lower class status in the eyes of his upper-class Hispanic girlfriend, Richard dominates his female childhood nemesis through sexual aggression. While Guálinto manages his vulnerability to higher class Mexican American females through a flight into Anglo masculinity, replete with a submissive white wife, Richard harbors no feelings of emasculation that need to be redressed as an adult through marriage and fatherhood. As the novel closes, Richard, now an aspiring writer, joins the U.S. Navy during World War II as a means of leaving behind his family and the playmates of his youth.

Thus, in both of these coming-of-age novels, play is central to the negotiation of masculinity and is the site where each young protagonist attempts to synthesize an
acceptable sense of his own manhood. Interestingly, the dialectical nature of the conflicts that surface during play in these two texts evokes Ramón Saldivar's theory of Chicano literature. According to Saldivar, instead of "passively reproducing images of reality, the task of contemporary Chicano narrative is to deflect, deform, and thus transform reality by revealing the dialectical structures that form the base of human experience" (CN 7).

Thus, "[i]n opting for open over closed forms, for conflict over resolution and synthesis, in proclaiming its very difference, the function of Chicano narrative is thus to produce creative structures of knowledge to allow its readers to see, to feel, and to understand their social reality" (CN 7). Saldivar argues that while there is often a "subversive edge" that "effects destruction" in Chicano literature, "this destruction always implies the reconstruction of what has been undone at the site of its former presence" (CN 7).

Saldivar further explains this process as one of "duality": "This reconstruction is not simply the ordering of the chaos of reality. The ideology of difference of Chicano narrative emerges from a more complex unity of at least two formal elements: its paradoxical impulse toward revolutionary deconstruction and toward the production of meaning" (CN 7). The act of playing, too, involves a similar deconstruction and duality. According to play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith, "children's own play ... is a deconstruction of ... realistic society" (166). In play, children disassemble "the world ... in a way that suits their own emotional responses to it," and, in this way, "their play is a deconstruction of the world in which they live" (Sutton-Smith 166). Yet, at the same time, the player must retain "supreme awareness of the two levels of being, the virtual ["the unreal"] and the mundane ["the real"] and how she [or he] can interact with both of them" (Sutton-Smith 196). The "manipulation of that duality is central to the character
of ... play”; “[t]here is the mundane and there is the virtual (as thesis and antithesis) and there is a synthesis in the ongoing play transformations that this duality then produces, and so, structurally, it is a dialectic” (Sutton-Smith 196).

However, while play theory suggests that synthesis will occur during play, in Paredes’s and Villarreal’s constructions of playtime, synthesis may be disrupted or even disruptive for certain players. In George Washington Gómez, Paredes sets up a dialectical relationship in his child protagonist’s imaginary and solitary play exploits between the choices of being a rinche or being a revolutionary, and he also constructs an opposition between the classrooms of school and the playgrounds of school. Villarreal, however, focuses on neighborhood child play and creates an opposition within group play between a female leader and her male followers. Villarreal also formulates a dialectical relationship between the female-gendered hierarchical dynamics of the text’s playworld and the male-gendered hierarchical dynamics of the real world, and his protagonist will set in motion the actions that will bring the hierarchy in the realm of play in line with the male-dominated hierarchies in the realm of reality.

While both Chicano literature and the act of playing manifest “the dialectical structures that form the base of human experience” (Saldivar, CN 7), there is also a “dialectical relationship,” according to Saldivar, “that Mexican American culture develops . . . to both of its original contexts, Mexico on the one hand and the United States on the other” (CN 17). Saldivar contends “that a true dialectic necessarily involves us in negation” (CN 8), and he explains this opposition and negation in terms of his theory of the textual analysis of Chicano literature:
In a relationship between opposed terms, one annuls the other and lifts it up into a higher sphere of existence: development through opposition and conflict—neither Mexican, nor American, nor yet a naïve Mexican American, but something else. This something else is the difference of contemporary Chicano narrative, a difference not of kind, but of dialectical position; a difference that allows it to retain its special relation both to its Mexican and American contexts, while also letting it be marked by a relation to its own still-unconditioned future. (CN 8)

Chicano texts, Saldívar asserts, "must be understood as different from and in resistance to traditional American literature, yet must also be understood in their American context, for they take their oppositional stance deliberately, in order to offer readers a reformulation of historical reality and contemporary culture that is more consistent with the way reality and culture are actually experienced" (CN 8-9).

George Washington Gómez, published in 1990 but written by Paredes in the late 1930s, forwards "a reformulation of historical reality" (Saldívar, CN 9) through correctives to the historical account as rendered by the colonizer.3 This novel also resonates with contemporary relevance, for, as literary critic Marco Portales asserts, "the educational practices and attitudes revealingly dramatized by Paredes in the 1920s and 1930s still largely shape the educations that Chicanos and other Latinos and minority students experience in the United States" (83).4 As Portales notes, Paredes's child protagonist is trapped "in an education system that does not even try to understand the values and ways of Mexican American culture" (85). In George Washington Gómez, "Paredes... makes it clear that formidable social pressures everywhere force Chicanos
to choose between being Mexican or American,” and he effectively “captures the quandary of Mexican American split-allegiance” (Portales 94). According to Saldivar, “Américo Paredes has argued that this sense of ‘an in-between existence’ characterizes Mexican American border culture” and “also characterizes one aspect of the complex polarity of identity, both Mexican and American but neither one nor the other fully, that is so evident in contemporary Chicano narrative” (CN 17-18).

The “sense of ‘an in-between existence’” (Saldivar, CN 17) is forcefully depicted in Paredes’s George Washington Gómez, which “takes especially as its moment the 1915 uprising in South Texas by Mexican Americans attempting to create a Spanish-speaking republic of the Southwest” (Saldivar, “Borderlands” 276). Labeled “seditionists,” the members of this failed rebellion were struggling to free themselves from the tyranny of Anglo rule, but their efforts incited Anglos to commit increased atrocities against Mexican Americans. The Texas Rangers, in a vicious response to the seditionist revolt, murdered “hundreds of innocent Mexican-American farmers and ranchers” based on “the smallest hint of possible alliance with, or even sympathy for, the seditionists” (Saldivar, “Borderlands” 276). As Saldivar notes, “Paredes’s novel situates us in the midst of this historical scenario, taking its tone . . . from the pathos of those innocents from whom was exacted the cost of defeat” (“Borderlands” 277). However, as Monika Kaup points out, “[w]hile the hero of the seditionist prologue to the novel is Feliciano, the courageous defender of the old order,” Paredes places “[t]he focus of the main plot . . . on the next generation, and its subject is the formation of a new—dual and conflicted, Mexican and American—identity” (373).
The representative of this “next generation” in Paredes’s *George Washington Gómez* is the child protagonist who bears the same name as the title of the novel. Born in 1914 and called Guálinto by his friends and family, he and his older sisters, Carmen and Maruca, are raised by their mother, Maria, and her brother, Feliciano, after the murder of their father. Set primarily in the fictional border town of Jonesville, this narrative, which begins in the early years of the 20th century and concludes during the years of World War II, is the story of Guálinto’s struggle to come to terms with his identity as both a Mexican and an American. One of the crucial considerations in this text is that Guálinto does not know the truth about his father’s death nor does he know that his Uncle Feliciano was a part of the band of men who wanted to reclaim the lands that the gringos had stolen from the Mexican people of south Texas. Although Guálinto’s father, Gumersindo, is murdered by Texas Rangers (*rinches*) shortly after Guálinto’s birth, Gumersindo is able to make a dying wish known to Guálinto’s Uncle Feliciano:

“Gumersindo opened his eyes and looked at Feliciano with no hint of surprise. ‘Don’t tell him,’ he mumbled through bruised lips. . . . ‘My son. Mustn’t know. Ever. No hate, no hate’” (*GWG* 21). Although Feliciano is appalled by this request, he promises to abide by Gumersindo’s wishes.

Settling in Jonesville after Gumersindo’s murder, Feliciano obtains work and supports his widowed sister and her children. He regrets his promise to Gumersindo, yet remembers that “[m]any times before, Gumersindo had said that he wanted his son to have no hatred in his heart”; Guálinto “must grow up to be a great man and help his people” (*GWG* 31). Feliciano, nevertheless, reflects on the difficulty of keeping this promise:
It would be very hard to keep such a terrible truth from this male child. Never to tell him how his father died, never to give him a chance at vengeance. That was a hard task, and it was not fair to the boy either. For after all, what were men for but to live and die like men. What would he give to have a son who would avenge him if some day he were at last killed by the rinches. (GWG 31)

Yet Feliciano keeps his promise for many years, and, while he provides Maria and her family with a home that “[i]n later years George W. Gómez would remember . . . as an enchanted place” (GWG 50), 5 Feliciano, nevertheless, is unable to shelter the boy from other forms of knowledge and real world experiences that are just as capable of producing hatred and anger.

During the early years of his childhood, however, Guálinto does have a tangible shelter from the outside world in the form of the banana tree grove behind his home which his Uncle Feliciano had planted when Guálinto was an infant. Guálinto is enthralled with this grove that is his backyard retreat and playing ground of magical make-believe: “Here Guálinto hunted tigers and engaged pirates. Here he became a lone Indian tracking the wounded deer” (GWG 50). However, the banana grove possesses a dual nature for Guálinto who fears the night: “With darkness the banana grove and the trees beyond it became a haunted wood where lurked demons, skeletons and white-robed women with long long hair” (GWG 50). Guálinto’s imaginary fears parallel real world events, for his “neighborhood, being at the edge of town, had seen more than its share of [political] bloodshed”; thus, the bodies of the victims “haunted the night” for Guálinto,
whose “mother tried to calm his fears with religion” (GWG 50). Before going to bed each night, he says a prayer which ends with the lines, “If I die without the grace of God / I shall burn in Hell forever,” and these words cause him to lie in bed “hat[ing] God for being so cruel” (GWG 51). Little Guálinto, not yet old enough to begin school, is also filled with “[s]trange, terrible questions [that] surged inside him”: “Why am I, I? . . . Why are things things and how do I know that they are? Will they be the same when I die like the prayer says, and how will I know they will be the same when I am dead and can’t see them any more?” (GWG 51-52). Guálinto’s preoccupation with death, while reflecting his knowledge of the “violence and instability” (Bruce-Novoa 120) in his surroundings, also constitutes a prelude to the murder he will soon witness during playtime.

Guálinto enjoys playing at the home of Chicho and Poncho Vera, and he is “playing with Chicho out on the sidewalk” when Meno Menchaca, the Vera’s neighbor, is murdered (GWG 55). While Chicho flees the scene at the sound of “the first shot,” Guálinto, “his hands tightly clenched around the pickets of the fence, his face pressed against them” (GWG 56), sees the gruesome and cold-blooded murder of the man who, only minutes before, had been chatting with him and Chicho. As a witness to the murder, Guálinto is terrified that “the law” will “take him away, pushing him along in front of them and cursing him,” and that the policemen will “beat him to make him tell all” (GWG 57). While these thoughts run through the little boy’s mind, he races for the safety of his own house. This brutal disruption of Guálinto’s playworld emphasizes the real world violence that inhabits the barrio and foregrounds the disregard that “the law” has for the lives of the barrio’s inhabitants. Guálinto’s witnessing of Meno’s murder also
dispels the illusion of childhood as a site protected from certain kinds of knowledge. However, as Guálinto’s thoughts reveal, even as a preschooler, he already has some knowledge of the inequities and cruelties in the world around him, for his fear that “the law” will “curs[e]” and “beat” him, even though he is only a small boy who has engaged in no wrongdoing, emphasizes the fact that Guálinto knows that these particular lawmen are corrupt. The intrusion of this real-world violence and abuse into Guálinto’s playtime also blurs the opposition of Guálinto’s “enchanted” home and the “violent” neighborhood that surrounds it, and Guálinto will soon transfer the violence of the real world to the site of his home when he brings a make-believe playworld of battle into the banana grove that is “his best friend” and his “playground and playmate” (GWG 67).

Although his father’s dying wish had been that Guálinto would have no hate in his heart, Guálinto is already experiencing forceful emotions of hate and rage which erupt into fantasies and scenes of imaginary violence. Embarrassed at church when another child makes fun of him for having shortening in his hair (which his mother had decided to use when she found that they were almost out of brilliantine), Guálinto rages inwardly as he walks home: “He hated his mother, he hated everybody . . . . Why wasn’t his family rich, so sissies in fancy clothes would not laugh at him . . . . They would be sorry, all of them. He would go away and become a big bandit. Or a rinche maybe. And then he would come back and kill people” (GWG 62). Guálinto silently vows to “kill that sissy, but not his sister” and, when his thoughts settle on the murder of Meno, he declares to himself that “he would kill the chief of police who kicked Meno Menchaca after he was dead” (GWG 62-63). Guálinto’s reeling thoughts continue in vivid and violent detail.
He’d kill everybody and burn the houses down and his mother would come out crying and asking him not to kill her too. Then he’d sneer coldly and ride away on his big black horse all covered with shiny silver things. Yes, the sissy’s sister would notice him then, all dressed up like a charro in black and gold and silver. and Uncle Feliciano . . .

No. He couldn’t be a rinche, after all. Uncle Feliciano hated the rincnes and he’d have to kill him too. Guálinto did not want to do that, so he couldn’t be a rinche. But he could fight against the rincnes and get killed. That was it. Then they would bring his body home all covered with dirt and blood like Meno Menchaca’s. Guálinto shuddered deliciously. Then everybody would be sad and they would cry. And his mother would be sorry she had put shortening in his hair. Self-pity surged within him and broke out in a half-choked sob. (GWG 63)

Part imaginative imitation of real-world violence, part reaction to the taunts of others,7 and part “[s]elf-pity” (GWG 63) for himself as a child subjected to adult regulation, this passage shows the conflicting choices of subject positions at war within Guálinto. The remark that has sparked his hatred in this instance was made by Miguel Osuna, a boy of higher economic status whose “fine-looking” mother and “pretty” little sister with “her massive black curls and her white chubby face” fill Guálinto with awe (GWG 62). The sight of Miguel’s mother and sister after the church service also fills Guálinto with animosity towards his sister Maruca “because she was not pretty” and with resentment towards his mother because she has caused his anguish by using “shortening . . . on his hair” (GWG 62).
In addition to the class-based conflicts that Guálinto tries to resolve in his imaginary scenario of heroic vengeance, he also rebels against his positioning as a male child powerless to veto the wishes of his mother. Furthermore, the two conflicting roles that Guálinto fantasizes for himself as someone to be feared and admired, a revolutionary or a *rinche*, highlight the historical timing of his positioning as a Mexican American in South Texas less than a decade after the failed seditionist rebellion and the atrocious *rinche* retaliation that ensued. Guálinto’s initial fantasy desire to be a marauding *rinche* also points to his current lack of knowledge about how this Texas border history has impacted his own immediate family through the murder of his father. Moreover, Guálinto’s “delicious” hate-filled fantasy of killing and vengeance is in complete opposition to Gumersindo’s dying wish that his son should not be consumed with hatred. Requiring Feliciano to keep the circumstances of his death a secret from his son has not guaranteed, after all, that the son will be spared the lessons of life that teach hatred and violence.

Guálinto transfers his knowledge of real world hatred and violence to his playworld of the banana grove and stages a make-believe fight with a banana tree that he has imaginatively transformed into a *rinche*. In Guálinto’s make-believe fight, as in most make-believe play, “[t]he logic of play is the logic of dealing with emotions such as anger, approval, or fear, and it has to do with how these may be expressed and reacted to in any mundane or fantastic way that the players choose” (Sutton-Smith 158). Thus, “[t]he unreal worlds of play . . . are about how to react emotionally to the experience of living in the world and how to temporarily vivify that experience by transcending its usual limits” (Sutton-Smith 159). In Guálinto’s real-world role of child, he is
considerably limited in his ability to combat the multiple sources of power that confine, ridicule, and constrain him. However, although he is powerless to combat the violence perpetrated on Mexican Americans by Anglos, through his staging of make-believe combat with a make-believe Texas Ranger, Guálinto creatively transforms his position of powerlessness into one of power.

Consequently, in this imaginary battle, Guálinto is no longer a taunted child nor the helpless and terrified little boy who witnessed Meno’s murder; he is, instead, a fearless defender of his people: Pulling out “from beneath his dotted calico shirt . . . a piece of knotted pine wood whittled into a fair imitation of a dagger,” Guálinto shouts, “‘Rinche!’” as “he eye[s] the plant in front of him” (GWG 67). Challenging the banana-tree rinche, he continues the pretend confrontation: “‘Where is Apolonio Gonzalez? . . . Speak, you dog.’ His fingers clasped and unclasped the dagger’s haft. The banana trunk was silent . . . Guálinto laughed a harsh laugh. ‘A coward,’ he said. ‘A coward like all your kind.’ The object of his hate took the insult meekly, offering no resistance” (GWG 67). Guálinto then escalates his make-believe battle, and, approaching closer to the plant, he accuses the imaginary rinche, “‘You have killed another Mexican who never hurt you’” (GWG 68). With these words, Guálinto lashes out with his imitation dagger and “a thin trickle of clear fluid ooze[s] out” of the plant. Spurred on by this action, Guálinto says with a “sneer,” “‘Why don’t you try to kill me, eh? Because you shoot people in the back. Because you kill unarmed men and little children. Go back to your camp and tell old man Keene that Guálinto Gómez doesn’t kill men who won’t fight’” (GWG 68). Imagining that “the treacherous rinche” is drawing out his gun, Guálinto sinks “his dagger into the wretch’s side,” and “[a]gain and again Guálinto’s knife” pierces the
make-believe rinche (GWG 68). Guálonto then pushes "the buried dagger deeper and deeper, working it around in the wound to make it more surely fatal" (GWG 68).

Guálonto is decidedly the victor in this imaginary battle, and, as Sutton-Smith explains, one of the attractions of play is its "potential promise that one can never quite lose while still at play" (212). However, the reality of Guálonto's child position of powerlessness intrudes abruptly into his imaginary world of conquest, disrupting the psychic satisfaction of this make-believe victory. When Guálonto hears the "sound of his mother's voice . . . calling Maruca" (GWG 68), her voice brings him back from his playworld into the real world with a jolt. As he surveys the results of his violent encounter with the banana plant, Guálonto finds that "[t]he once-smooth stalk was a pulpy oozing mess, scratched, stabbed and cut, with patches of skin-like bark hanging loose" (GWG 68). Guálonto is "frightened" by "the damage" that he has inflicted on the tree; "[h]e had almost killed the plant" (GWG 68). He tries frantically "to close up the wounds" on the tree, but realizes "he could not hide everything"; even his shirt is "damp from the banana stalk sap," which he knows "no amount of scrubbing could take off" (GWG 68, 69). Back in the real world and fearful of punishment, Guálonto's "everyday self" (Sutton-Smith 159) knows that he has neither the power to kill rinches nor permission to mutilate banana trees.

It is significant that the brutal damage that Guálonto inflicts on the banana tree coincides with María's "calling Maruca" (GWG 68), for María will later brutally beat an unmarried Maruca for becoming pregnant. Just as the voice of the mother interrupts Guálonto's childhood pretend heroics and subjects him to fear of parental control, so will the power of the mother subject his sister to patriarchal ideology and ruthless parental
abuse. When, as a teenager, Guálinto watches his mother viciously attack Maruca, he is “sickened” by the “shame” that Maruca has brought on the family but “sickened” even more by the sound of his mother’s “cursing” (GWG 224) as she beats her daughter. He is not, however, repulsed by the beating itself, which leaves Maruca bleeding and unconscious. Guálinto, like his mother, has internalized the ideology of shame and blame attached to unwed mothers as well as the ideology of meting out physical punishment for behaviors deemed inappropriate. The brutal damage that Guálinto inflicted on the banana tree as a child had left him fearful of what his own punishment might be for destroying a plant, but Maruca’s actions have effects on a very different level. With the exception of Carmen, who tends to the wounded Maruca, Guálinto and his family experience “desolate feelings of cheapness and degradation” (GWG 227) as a result of Maruca’s out-of-wedlock pregnancy. 9

While the interruption of Guálinto’s play fight highlights his fear of maternal discipline and his brutal stabbing of the tree parallels his mother’s brutal beating of her daughter, Paredes’s narrative of Guálinto’s masculine play heroics against the banana tree rinche have other significant connections to family. On a symbolic level, Guálinto’s violent slaying of the imaginary rinche, whom Guálinto accuses of being a killer of innocent Mexicans, is an enactment of revenge for the slaying of his father, for, even though Guálinto does not know that rinches murdered Gumersindo, he does know that the rinches murder innocent and defenseless people. Later in the novel, however, an older Guálinto confronts not rinches in real-world battles but members of his own Mexican culture, and his childhood battle with the banana tree prefigures the real-life knife fight that Guálinto will have with Chucho for making snide comments about
Maruca’s sexual involvement with the gringo, Buddy Goodnam. The child Guálinto’s play battle also points toward the confrontation between Guálinto and the stranger that he fears he has killed near the novel’s conclusion. The stranger, however, turns out to be his exiled, seditionist Uncle Lupe whose death is the result of illness and not the blow that Guálinto deals him. Thus, the child Guálinto’s playworld battle forms an ironic opposition to the future adolescent Guálinto’s real-world altercations with both Chucho and Lupe, for in the real world it is not rinches that Guálinto fights but one of his own people and a member of his own family. Guálinto’s real-life knife fight with Chucho and his accidental wounding of Lupe, juxtaposed against his childhood play fight with a banana-tree rinche, point to the fact that Guálinto, as a Mexican American, can commit violence against certain of his own people without fear of punishment; however, he can only engage in imaginary combat with the oppressor without fear of encountering severe repercussions at the hands of the Anglo community and Anglo lawmen. Consequently, Guálinto cannot vent his fury on Buddy Goodnam, the Anglo who impregnated his sister, but he can release his fury on Chucho who, as the rumor went, “was supposed to keep a list of all the boys and men he had cut up or beaten” (GWG 239). Protected by “[t]he code of the barrio,” which condoned silence about Chucho’s violence, Chucho “had never been in jail” (GWG 239). This same barrio code will protect Guálinto from the threat of arrest for wounding Chucho when they finally engage in battle.

Guálinto’s wounding of Lupe, however, unlike his attack on Chucho, is accidental, for Guálinto believes that the stranger who approaches him in the darkness is Chucho seeking revenge. This physical confrontation with the man who turns out to be his Uncle Lupe, a man wanted by the authorities for killing a Texas ranger, leads to
Lupe’s capture and transforms Guálinto into a local “hero” (GWG 259). Far different from his childhood fantasy of heroism, however, this real-world action leaves Guálinto “dazed” and “uncomprehending” (GWG 261) when his Uncle Feliciano reveals that the man that Guálinto physically subdued was his own uncle. This revelation, in turn, leads to an even more stunning one when Feliciano at last tells Guálinto the truth about his father’s death. Shaken by this news and mistakenly thinking that his Uncle Feliciano, out of fear for his own life, had been away when Gumersindo was murdered, Guálinto rages against the fate that his family had hoped for him: “I’m not going to be a great man. I’ll just be another Mexican with the seat of his pants torn and patched up . . . And I don’t want to help my people. . . . What for? Let them help themselves, the whole lot of ragged, dirty pelados. I can’t even help myself and you want me to help a lot of people I don’t even know” (GWG 265). Not only does the adult Guálinto refuse to aid Mexican Americans, he also secretly works against them at the close of the novel when he spies, not on rinches, but on the friends of his youth.

Guálinto’s disparagement of his own people at the novel’s conclusion is foreshadowed by the quick recovery that the child Guálinto makes from his fear of punishment for fatally wounding the banana-tree rinche. While resting in the grove after his violent play combat, Guálinto hears a bee buzzing as it meanders through the flowers. Then abruptly all is quiet, until Guálinto hears “a desperate buzz that rose and rose till there was a miniature tornado under the purple leaf” (GWG 69). Watching the entangled bee at last extricate “itself from the place where it had been wedged,” Guálinto “laugh[s] out loud” as the bee first appears “silent and wobbly,” and “[t]hen getting its bearing, it floated upward, disappearing into a patch of blue sky that was surrounded by green
leaves,” once more buzzing “its soft sleepy murmur” (GWG 69). This scene functions as a metaphor for Guálinto’s own situation, for Guálinto himself is “wedged” between two cultures, and his choice of extrication will involve denying his Mexican heritage by “disappearing” into Americanization in a “desperate” rejection of his own culture and people. Only during his adult sleep will the “murmur” of his childhood dreams of fighting for his people surface.

The banana tree grove, the site of both the imaginary battle and the struggling bee, will remain a place of refuge for Guálinto throughout his childhood. At the age of seven, when Guálinto develops a crush on La Nena Osuna, he could be found “sitting on his favorite grassy patch in the banana grove, staring at the sky and thinking up beautiful adventures in which he saved La Nena from all kind of perils” (GWG 139). When he is whipped unmercifully at school by Miss Cornelia for writing a love note to La Nena, Guálinto flees to the sanctuary of his banana grove after ramming Miss Cornelia in the gut and making his escape from her clutches. After this beating from Miss Cornelia, Guálinto is transferred to another class, and upon completing “low first with Miss Josephine, Guálinto passed to high second with Miss Huff, and in so doing entered American school at last” (GWG 147). In pointed contrast to the severe and abusive disciplinarian tactics that Miss Cornelia exercises, the American teacher, Miss Huff, embodies the qualities of a kind instructor in the principles of Americanization, and it is “[u]nder Miss Huff’s guidance” that Guálinto learns to develop “an Angloamerican self” (GWG 147). However, while “[i]n the schoolroom he was an American, at home and on the playground he was a Mexican” (GWG 147). As he grows older, he becomes conscious of these “two clashing forces within him [that] produced a divided
personality”; Guálinto becomes aware that he is “many Guálinto Gómezes, each of them
double, like the images reflected on two glass surfaces of a show window” (GWG 147).
He also becomes aware that even though he may make friends with some of the “little
Anglosaxons” inside the classroom, “such friendships do not extend beyond the
classroom door,” for “on the playground” he is ostracized by these same “little
Anglosaxons”; thus, “[t]he Mexicotexan learns to stay away” (GWG 149).

According to Sutton-Smith, the playground is “an arena for learning social
adaptation” (44), and “social play can be used even as a text to ‘interpret’ the power
relationships within the culture” (74). Guálinto learns that “the power relationships” of
the playground carry over into areas outside the schoolyard when, in his teenage years,
several of his friends are turned away from a restaurant because they are Mexican. While
Guálinto could have chosen to “pass” for Spanish and gained entry, as does María Elena
in this situation, he does not. As Héctor Pérez notes, “Guálinto himself is fair-skinned,
and his complexion is an issue throughout much of the novel” (40). While the young
Guálinto stands firmly beside his Mexican American friends in the face of white
supremacist policies of segregation during the scene at the restaurant, that will not be the
case when he becomes an adult. The adult George Gomez’s “attitude toward darker-
skinned Mexicans becomes one element in his rejection of his community” (Pérez 40).
However, during his childhood and adolescence, the oppositions that were fostered in
Guálinto in the American school are a constant source of self-acknowledged conflict for
him: “Hating the Gringo one moment with an unreasoning hatred, admiring his
literature, his music, his material goods the next. Loving the Mexican with a blind
fierceness, then almost despising him for his slow progress in the world” (GWG 150).
As an adult, Guálinto represses this doubleness and outwardly opts for an Anglo identity; inwardly, however, the struggle for synthesis will continue.

Many of the conflicting emotions that Guálinto experiences revolve around his hate and anger, and he vocalizes his feelings to his close friend, El Colorado, while in the banana tree grove, where, as an adolescent, Guálinto has returned to prepare, not for an imaginary fight, but for a real one. Fearing retribution from Chucho whom he has stabbed for making unsavory remarks about Maruca, Guálinto readies himself for battle while in "the banana grove, his childhood refuge," where he "practice[s] thrusts with the knife and defensive footwork" (GWG 249). Guálinto's conversation with El Colorado during one of these practice sessions exposes Guálinto's hatred, not for Chucho, but for Anglos and for María Elena (or La Nena as Guálinto had referred to her when he was a child). María Elena, who has pretended to care for Guálinto in order to get good grades, retaliates with venom when he ceases to provide her with the correct answers during tests. Publicly mocking Guálinto at a local church festival, she insults him "loudly and clearly": "There's a peculiar odor around here, don't you think? Something smells like lard and rotten potatoes" (GWG 219).

María Elena's cruel words at the festival prompt Guálinto to think about "Miss Cornelia . . . slapping his face, Miss Cornelia . . . whipping him until he wet his pants," and "[o]ut of the edge of the pin-wheeling world floated the leering face of La India" (GWG 219), a girl who had ridiculed him in first grade. Guálinto also remembers María Elena's brother who had taunted him in church, and he "realized how far he had traveled and how little he had moved since the days when he had been a child playing in the banana grove" (GWG 219). Just as that child had turned to imaginary violence to
assuage his humiliation, so, too, does this older Guálinto, for, on hearing María Elena’s searing words at the festival, “he fought the impulse to walk over and slap her pretty face, to smash his fist into that pouting mouth until it was a bloody mess” (GWG 219). Guálinto’s linking of María Elena’s degrading words with Miss Cornelia, La India, and Miguel Osuna and his mental response of violent retribution illuminate the lingering sense of powerlessness that those childhood experiences of being publicly shamed still carry for him. Now, back in the banana grove where as a boy he had mutilated a tree, he tells El Colorado that he would like to slit La Nena’s throat and, as for the “‘Gringo[s],’” he would “‘like to kill them all, all of them!’” (GWG 254). Guálinto’s former childhood play at being either a Mexican revolutionary or a rinche merges here in a conflation of both roles as he verbally lashes out at both La Nena and Anglos.

It is significant that Guálinto’s fury in this instance is directed at both María Elena and gringos, for María Elena will become pregnant by the same gringo who is responsible for his sister’s pregnancy but with very different results, for Buddy Goodnam will be forced by the Osunas to marry María Elena whereas Uncle Feliciano’s visit to Buddy’s father had failed to produce the same outcome for Maruca. The power hierarchy in this community is clearly on the side of those like the Osunas who can “pass” into the white world, and, while Guálinto divulges to El Colorado the fear that he will never “‘love another after having loved’” María Elena, Guálinto also vocalizes his wish to cut “‘her pretty white throat’” (GWG 253). This furious desire of Guálinto’s for violence and vengeance resurfaces again near the conclusion of the novel when Feliciano finally tells Guálinto that his father was murdered by a rinche. On hearing the truth about his father’s death, Guálinto “sob[s],” “‘I would like to kill somebody. . . . Why isn’t it 1916
right now? . . . Then I could get a rifle and go into the woods and kill and kill and kill.” (GWG 264).

However, in spite of the desire to kill that surfaces in Guálinto’s boyhood playtime and in his youthful battle practice, Guálinto, as an adult, deals with his rage and hatred in another way altogether, for he ends up marrying a gringa whose father had been a rinche, and he turns his back on his family, his culture, and his friends. Guálinto’s decision to marry into and move into the Anglo world signifies the unresolved nature of the race, class, and gender conflicts that have plagued him since childhood. Guálinto, who opted not to pass during his youth, felt the demeaning effects of that choice through his disturbing relationship with María Elena Osuna and her public shaming of his Mexicananness.12 Pérez, noting the racial dynamics in the novel, states that “[t]he community is not entirely innocent of racial biases, for in it are people like the Osunas who deny their Mexican Indian heritage and pass as Spaniards, European and white” (40). Guálinto’s involvement with María Elena is fraught with race, class, and gender issues, and, like other conflicts in Guálinto’s life, revolves primarily around the issue of masculinity. According to Pérez, the “women in the novel internalize a gendered code of behavior as a microcosm of larger oppressive systems,” and “Guálinto’s mother and his first schoolteacher—both figures in important relationships for a person’s psychological social development—are especially pertinent cases” (39). Pérez asserts that “María, Guálinto’s mother, . . . conveys problematic patriarchal values and assumptions” by calling Guálinto “a coward” (39). Perez also maintains that, “[i]n this perhaps subtle way, María promotes a hyper-machismo that denies fear and prescribes violence as an all-purpose remedy” (39). However, Guálinto’s mother is only one of several Mexican
American female figures who have threatened his masculinity in terms of patriarchy’s
codes for defining manhood, and his mother’s beating of Maruca is certainly not the only
example of violent behavior in this novel. As we have seen, the young Guálinto
witnesses a violent murder before he is even old enough to enter the first grade. In
addition, Guálinto rejects physically, if not mentally, what Gloria Anzaldúa terms the
“false machismo” that prescribes male violence against women (105). Although
Guálinto’s rages may include thoughts of violent actions against Mexican American
females for their shaming of him, he does not carry out those actions as a form of
vindication or to prove his masculinity.

Instead, the adult Guálinto claims his masculinity through class superiority as the
husband of a gringa, the former Ellen Dell, who is pregnant with their first child when
she is introduced into the novel. Ellen’s appearance as George’s wife near the conclusion
of the novel is fleeting, and, as John Trombold notes, George’s and Ellen’s “entire
courtship” is summed up “cursorily in a brief flashback” (256). Trombold also points out
a significant subtext lurking in the few pages of George Washington Gómez that address
the relationship between George and Ellen when he states that, for George, this is a
“transgressive marriage to a romantically unsatisfying gringa” (256). The novel hints at
this subtext of discontent when the narrative voice speaks not of George’s love for his
wife but of George’s “love” for “her yellow hair” that “looked like a mass of gold coins”:
“He loved her hair, it was one of the first things that had attracted him to her. She was
rather plain, and some of her lower teeth were crooked, but she had beautiful hair. And a
wonderful disposition too” (GWG 282). Thinking of their unborn child, George, certain
that the baby will be a boy, is also convinced that their son will “be blond and blue-eyed
like his mother,” and this “thought please[s] him very much” (GWG 282). George also reflects on how “very different” his educated, “serious, gentle, and kind” Anglo wife is “from the first love of his life, María Elena Osuna,” who “was beautiful, with wavy black hair and a heart full of laughter,” yet “she did not have much in the way of brains” (GWG 283). Finding validation for his masculinity through his marriage to an “intelligent” Anglo woman, who “above all, . . . listened to him talk” (GWG 283), George now seems to harbor no rage towards the Mexican American girl whom he had unsuccessfully attempted to woo during his adolescence.

Thus, as an adult, Guálinton’s choice of vindication for his previous “amorous failures” (Trombold 254), for his troubled relationships with Mexican American females throughout his childhood and adolescence, and for his powerlessness against Anglo authority as a Mexican American is to pass into a position of masculine empowerment in the Anglo world, shored up by Anglo female submissiveness, and out of the Mexican world that he now holds in disregard. Even though Guálinto learns that his Uncle Feliciano was not a coward and, therefore, decides to attend college as Feliciano had hoped he would, Guálinto does not fulfill his family’s dreams for his destiny. Rather than becoming the “leader of his people” (GWG 40) as envisioned by his father when he had named Guálinto after George Washington, the adult George G. Gómez, as he has legally renamed himself, is employed as a spy for the American government and is assigned to “watch” the border for “infiltration by German or Japanese agents” (GWG 299). As Kaup notes, “[a]fter his university education in Austin and his residence with his Anglo wife in Washington, D.C., he returns to the Valley during World War II radically transformed into an American military counterintelligence officer willing to use
his Mexican background to inform against his former neighbors, friends, and
schoolmates” (376). In his encounter with his Uncle Feliciano after returning home,
George, confirming his uncle’s suspicions that he is now a soldier, states that he is
employed in “counter-intelligence” work, to which Feliciano pointedly retorts, “I hope
you’re smart enough not to mistake a slant-eyed Indian from southern Mexico for a
Japanese agent. That has been done before, you know” (GWG 299). When George
verifies that he is having his own former friends “watched” and calls them “a bunch of
clowns playing at politics,” Feliciano says, “Then you see no future for us” (GWG
300). George admits that he can envision “no future” for his people: “Mexicans will
always be Mexicans. A few of them, like some of those would-be politicos, could make
something of themselves if they would just do like I did. Get out of this filthy Delta, as
far away as they can, and get rid of their Mexican Greaser attitudes” (GWG 300).

George’s adult dreams, however, belie his words, for “the daydreams of his
boyhood come back to him in his sleep,” daydreams that, upon becoming an adult,
George had thought of as “[p]laying with his little wooden soldiers” (GWG 281). Now
those daydreams of his childhood, fantasies in which he leads an army of rancheros to
victory over the United States, reclaiming all of the land that had once belonged to
Mexico, have become the sleep-dreams of his adulthood. While George accuses his
former Mexican American friends of “playing at politics” (GWG 300), George, as an
adult, is playing at being an Anglo, a political identity move that conflates class
superiority and male power and that offers George freedom from a racialization that he
participates in through a racist denigration of his own people—an unexplored, on his
part, form of self-hatred. As Kaup points out, Guálinto/George has grown up in “two
opposed environments,” which “he . . . cannot remodel to fit the integrated identity his father had dreamed for him,” and “his ‘Mexicanness’ and the heroic role his parents conceived for him as a ‘great ‘man who will help his people’ . . . have receded far into his subconscious” (375, 376). Thus, for Guálinto/George Washington/G. Gómez, the world of “wooden soldier” dreams remains the field on which his own conflicted identity battles are fought. In the real world, however, George G. Gómez has learned "to play the games of the powerful colonizers" (Sutton-Smith 102).

In George Washington Gómez, the primary training grounds of childhood have been located in the world of play and the world of school. Paredes constructs the grounds of play, both at home and at school, as a space of Mexicanness and, in foregrounding the classrooms of school as a space of Americanness, he sets the two in opposition. In this novel, while the playground provides a training ground for Guálinto's sense of his Mexicanness as separateness, the schoolroom encourages a sense of his Mexicanness as worthlessness. Given the stifling "discourse that portrayed Texas Mexicans as inferior [and] which was circulated in and by ideological state apparatuses, such as the public schools and state authorized historical accounts" (Pérez 30), Paredes can envision no synthesis for Guálinto/George’s dilemma of doubleness. Through both the disrupted synthesis in the imaginary play battles of childhood and the final lack of synthesis in this coming-of-age narrative, Paredes depicts “social reality” (Saldivar, CN 7) on the border and the potential for psychic damage that resides in that reality for Americans of Mexican descent. But Paredes, while seeking both to reveal the psychological implications of border life and to uncover the historical truths about Mexican American and Anglo relations in South Texas, also highlights the effects of race and class hierarchies within
the Mexican American community as well as the gender conflicts experienced by his young protagonist. Guálinto’s rage-filled fantasies and playtime are frequently motivated by female-induced shame and fury, and they underscore the discourses of violent masculinity that are a product of both American and Mexican patriarchal cultures. Even though George does not engage in the physical brutalization of women, in opting to pass into a position of military authority in the Anglo army and in marrying into the Anglo family, George does pledge an allegiance to discourses of violence and codes of manhood that are linked to dominant U.S. ideologies and masculine privilege.

In *George Washington Gomez*, the site of play is a solitary space that is constructed as a masculine site of violent fantasy and conflicted identity formation against threats of emasculation. In José Antonio Villarreal’s *Pocho*, the site of play is a group space where female domination poses a threat of emasculation that the child protagonist, Richard Rubio, overcomes through heterosexual aggression. Villarreal’s novel opens, however, prior to Richard’s birth, with Richard’s father, Juan Manuel Rubio, a revolutionary who is forced to leave Mexico. As a migrant worker in America, Juan eventually lands in Santa Clara, California. However, the “novel is not primarily about Juan Rubio” but “about his son, Richard, the eponymous pocho (a pejorative Mexican term for an ‘Americanized’ Chicano), born in a melon field in the Imperial Valley of southern California” (Saldivar, CN 61). According to Saldivar, Richard must attempt “to create an acceptable identity for himself from the clash of these two cultures” (CN 61-62). Set during relatively the same time period as *George Washington Gómez* but in a different geographical locale, Villarreal’s text, like Paredes’s, moves quickly
from the father to the son. Thus, in Chapter Two of Pocho, we meet the now nine-year-old Richard as he walks home after his “first confession” (Pocho 32).

Richard, like Guáinto of George Washington Gómez, is constructed as an introspective and inquisitive child, full of wonder and unanswered questions about the world around him. When he reaches home, Richard discusses his first confession with his mother, Consuelo, because the priest’s reaction during this confession has given Richard pause for thought. In this conversation with his mother, play is introduced in an ironically humorous yet serious context that sexualizes the word “play” from the beginning of its use in this novel. Regarding the priest, Richard tells his mother, “‘He asked me if I liked to play with myself, and I said yes, and he was angry. . . . I could not say no, because it is true that I would rather be alone than with the Portuguese and the Spaniards. They always hit me, anyway, and make fun of me. Tell me, why should I play with the others if they do not like me?’” (Pocho 35). Richard then says, “‘There is more, Mama. He asked me also if I sometimes play with Luz. You yourself make me play with her, so I answered yes. Then he wanted to know if I ever touch her, and I said I do, and he was angrier. After a while, his voice was kind and he told me it is a mortal sin to touch a girl, and even worse to touch your own sister’” (Pocho 35). With these words, Consuelo now realizes the topic of the priest’s questions, as does Richard: “‘I know what he meant about touching Luz. I did not remember before, but right now I know’” (Pocho 36).

Consuelo is aghast at this information and asks Richard how he knows about such things. He tells her that when he was younger and they lived “‘in the other house,’” the Mangini girls “‘played’” with him in a way that they said must be kept “‘secret’”:
“‘When we were out in the fields, they took my trousers off and played with my palomas and laughed and laughed. Then they took their clothes off, and hugged me and rolled around in the grass. And they would say they wished I was older but if I was older they could not play with me like that’” (Pocho 36). Consuelo becomes incensed upon learning of this playtime activity; however, her anger is directed at Richard not at the Mangini girls: “‘Pig! Pig! Ah, what has God given me? A shameless!’” (Pocho 36). Richard, undaunted by her anger, continues his story: “‘And then, one day, the girls were starting to get dressed when the biggest one grabbed me, and she started to moan like she was crying, and she bit me on the shoulder and made me cry. I never went out with them again’” (Pocho 36). Seemingly oblivious to Consuelo’s fury, Richard muses, “‘Now I will have to make another confession, because I have never played like that with Luz and I told him I did’” (Pocho 37). Consuelo cries, “‘You are bad! Filthy!’” and shoves “him roughly into the large room that was the bedroom for the whole family” (Pocho 37). Richard, “frightened and bewildered,” begins “crying silently,” and he “wonder[s] why his parents, who were so good to him, could change so suddenly to become almost vicious” (Pocho 37).

This early scene, which introduces Richard into the novel, also introduces the theme of play as a site that involves gender, power, and sexuality. In addition, Richard’s candid discussion with his mother broaches the subject of play’s potential for turning violent and abusive as is evidenced by Richard’s admission that he “‘would rather be alone’” because the Portuguese and Spanish children “‘always hit’” him and laugh at him (Pocho 35). Richard’s words address a racial/ethnic hierarchy that is similar to that of Guálinto’s Mexican American community, where to be designated as Spanish is superior
to being designated as Mexican. Richard, like Guálinto, must face being discriminated against for his Mexicanness. However, unlike the light-skinned Guálinto, Richard’s darker skin color marks him in a physical way that Guálinto is not marked. Whatever choices Richard may have in his life, the choice of passing for either Spanish or Anglo will not be one of them.

Moreover, the playtime experiences that Richard reveals to his mother in the above-quoted conversation between Richard and Consuelo are constructed as sites of conflict between the child Richard and the Portuguese and Spanish children, not as a separation of Mexicanness and Americanness as are Guálinto’s. The child Richard does not see Mexican and American in stark oppositional terms, and his character evinces a certain amalgamation of the two that the child Guálinto’s environment does not allow and that the adult George rejects. Yet, in Richard’s world, as in Guálinto’s, to be Mexican means to be demeaned by those who claim to be Spanish or Portuguese, and, importantly, for the sexual dynamics of this text, one of the children who denigrates Richard is Zelda, a girl of Nordic and Portuguese descent who is the leader of the neighborhood play group and a cruel, “pugnacious” (Pocho 67), ten-year-old bully.

Richard, like Guálinto, negotiates his masculinity against the threat of female power during play. Richard is among the followers in Zelda’s play group, and this group functions in a hierarchical manner. According to Sutton-Smith, group play areas are sites where “[t]here are bullies, and often conflicts and scapegoating”; they are also sites where “a great variety of social subtleties—about group membership and group power—are being learned and exercised” (44). In the play group in Pocho, the bully is a female, and, for Richard, this arrangement is at odds with what he knows about the power
structure of the real world. Although Richard realizes that in the real world his ethnicity and class place him at a disadvantage as a Mexican American, he also is aware that, on the other hand, his gender does not place him in a disadvantaged position in the patriarchal family. His father has “taught” him since his early childhood to be “‘a man, . . . a macho’” and that being “‘a man . . . is good, because to a Mexican being that is the most important thing’” (Pocho 130, 131). 13 When Richard discovers that being “‘a man’” is at issue for him in the playworld, he eventually takes steps to rearrange that world’s gender politics in accordance with those of the real world’s patriarchal structure.

However, when Richard first joins the neighborhood play group, Zelda is the dominating force and principle player in this group’s hierarchy, and her question to two new children, Ronnie and Mary, is a “belligerent” “‘Whatcha want?’” (Pocho 67). When Ronnie explains that they are there “‘to play,’” Zelda agrees to let Ronnie play, but not Mary since “‘she’s a girl’” (Pocho 67). First, however, Zelda declares that Ronnie must be initiated into the group. When Ronnie asks what that “‘mean[s],’” Zelda replies, “‘We’re gonna pants ya, stoopid! . . . Hold ‘im, ya guys’” (Pocho 67). Mary begins to sob, and Richard intervenes and tells the kids to stop bothering Ronnie. This aggravates Zelda, who warns Richard, “‘You shut up, blackie, or I’ll kick ya inna ass’” (Pocho 68). The children then remove Ronnie’s pants as he “kick[s]” in protest, and Zelda now issues orders for the group to hang him, both invoking and imitative of the real world violence of lynching; we do not discover until later, however, that this would have been “‘by the legs’” (Pocho 68).

Villarreal demonstrates in this scene that “play is often nasty, brutish, and short, and at times obligatory, not free, irrational and bloody” (Sutton-Smith 202). However,
Richard does not want this initiation to continue. When he again tells Zelda to stop, she bolts for Richard, shouting, "Goddammit! We'll do the same to you!" (Pocho 68). At this threat, Richard races home with Zelda on his heels, and she stands outside of his house, "screamin[g]" for Richard to "Come out! Come on out!" (Pocho 68). When "Richard's mother... scold[s] her in Spanish," Zelda, with "tears of impotent rage stream[ing] down her dirty face," addresses Consuelo in a manner that is both extremely disrespectful and racist: "'Shut up, ya sonuvabitchen black Messican! Shut up!'" (Pocho 68). At this, Richard's father removes "his belt and beat[s] his son on the legs and buttocks," saying: "Go out there!... I'll show you what will happen to you any time you run from a girl!" (Pocho 68). Richard then goes outside and Zelda "bloody[s] his nose and split[s] his lip," and he returns to the house "thankful that his father did not beat him for losing the fight" (Pocho 68).

In this play sequence, the realized potential of cruelty to others is foregrounded alongside issues of race, ethnicity, class, and gender. While both Zelda and Richard appear to come from families of the same economic status, the racialization and demonization of Mexican Americans during this historical moment in California leads Zelda to perceive of herself as being superior to Richard and his family due to her Nordic and Portuguese origins. Juan's whipping of Richard for fleeing from Zelda and his subsequent command that Richard return to face her fury are evidence of the masculine discourses of violence that define bravery versus cowardice as well as patriarchal discourses of dominance that require the submission of women. However, it must be noted that Richard's family has been insulted and demeaned by Zelda which complicates Richard's refusal to confront the issue of Zelda's racism. Although Zelda wins both the
verbal and physical battles in this instance, when he is older, Richard will turn the tables of this domination and vindicate himself through sexual channels, for Richard’s father has trained him to believe that to be “‘a man’” he must “‘put to use . . . what [he] carr[i]es between [his] legs’” (Pocho 131).¹⁴

What is especially curious in this childhood scene of Zelda’s physical triumph and verbal abuse is Richard’s reaction or rather nonreaction to her racist slurs, and, later in life, Richard makes the interesting statement that he had not endured any discrimination as a child. When, as a teenager, Richard and the other boys in the group from his childhood are arrested for loitering beside an automobile in an incidence of ethnic profiling and are subsequently beaten by the police simply because the policemen assume all of the boys are Mexican, Richard thinks to himself that “[n]ow, for the first time in his life, he felt discriminated against” (Pocho 163). Unlike Guálinto, who knew as a child that lawmen could be corrupt, violent, and racist, Richard comes to this realization not as a child but as a youth, and, while being interrogated at the police station, Richard relates the naiveté of certain childhood playtimes in order to emphasize the corruptness of the violent abuse the boys receive from these policemen. When the officer who is questioning Richard labels Richard and his friends a “‘gang,’” Richard replies: “‘We’re not a gang . . . the way you mean, only a gang like kids’ gangs are, because we grew up together and we played cops-and-robbers, you know. And funny how we used to fight because we all wanted to be the good guys, but now I don’t think it was such a good idea, because I just got a pretty good look at the good guys’” (Pocho 161). Richard has now experienced first hand the inversion of good and bad; his innocent playworld concept of police officers as good is deconstructed and cops are now reconstructed as corrupt,
through a newly acquired knowledge of the abusive practices of real-world policemen as racist and discriminatory. As a child, however, Richard had not perceived Zelda’s racist slander to be discriminatory, and this can perhaps be explained, in part, by Saldívar’s assertion that Richard “freely accept[s]” the derogatory term *pocho* and transform[s] it into a sign of his ambiguous status as a child of two cultures—Mexican and American yet claimed by neither” (CN 61). However, it seems even more probable that Richard does not look back on Zelda’s slurs as discriminatory because it is Zelda, as a female, who is eventually constructed through the site of playing as the “other,” the outsider.

The most blatant issue in this playworld, therefore, is gender, which Villarreal inserts into the site of playing through the choice of a girl as a scrapper and bully, attitudes which are typically gendered male. Villarreal, however, has carefully orchestrated this gendering of Zelda as masculine in order to make her fall from the position of leader of the playgroup a more pointedly symbolic reflection of the destined role of women in the real patriarchal world. In the playing narrative related above, Richard’s father, firmly entrenched in the ideology of patriarchy, is appalled that his son flees from Zelda, this action of cowardice being, of course, worse to Juan than Richard’s running from a fight with another boy would have been. Although it is Zelda who beats Richard in this scene and it is Zelda who displays cruel tendencies toward the other children, Richard, through the world of play, will prove later in the novel to be the dominant figure of the two and will reveal himself to be quite capable of cruelty as well.

Richard’s ability to be cruel is bound up with assuming a domineering masculinity and his cruelty becomes apparent when the children of this play-group start to move from childhood into adolescence, and “[t]he boys began to look upon Zelda
differently, although she still led them” (Pocho 117). Zelda’s body is now changing “perceptibly,” and “[o]ne rainy afternoon, they were all playing in the hayloft, pushing each other and wrestling on the molding straw, when suddenly one of the boys came out of the melee bleeding at the mouth” (Pocho 117). Zelda shouts at the boy, “‘Try coppin’ another feel and I’ll really hitcha’” (Pocho 118). Ronnie then asks Zelda to take off her clothes and when she refuses, it is Richard who taunts her, calling her “‘chicken,’” and it is Richard who “was the only one who knew she would do it” (Pocho 118). He further manipulates and dominates Zelda by saying that her “‘legs are dirty,’” which embarrasses her; however, Richard is not finished with his cruel manipulation, for when Ricky says, “‘How about lettin’ us, Zelda?,’” it is Richard who says, “‘She’s scared’: ‘His tongue felt dry, and he had difficulty in getting the words out. He was sitting on his haunches, and Zelda walked over to him and gripped his hair tightly with both hands. She cruelly pulled his face up toward hers. ‘You’re still scared,’ he said, and he was trembling’” (Pocho 118).

While the word “cruelly” is used in connection with Zelda in this passage, it is Richard who is “cruelly” daring Zelda to have sex with each of them. She takes up this dare, but after “that day, Zelda spent very little time with the boys,” for “she did not belong in the way she had, and it was only on occasions when she especially missed the old joyfulness of their camaraderie that she joined them somewhere, usually at the Rubio barn, and paid with her body for their company” (Pocho 119). Unlike the young Guálinto, who confronts, but does not resolve, issues of race, class, and gender through fantasies of killing and imaginary play, Richard synthesizes these issues, to his satisfaction, concerning his relationship with Zelda through verbal and physical
domination during group play. In this narrative of play, in which Zelda loses her
virginity and her place as leader of the group, Zelda has been cruelly manipulated
through Richard’s challenge to her self-image of bravery, her "felt definition of self"
(Denzin 20), and this playtime becomes a site of threat and danger to her body as she
attempts to retain her self-concept of courage.

Sutton-Smith asserts that oftentimes, “[c]hildren are so motivated to be accepted
in play that they make sacrifices of egocentricity for membership in the group” (44). In
this instance, however, Zelda’s “sacrifice” of her “egocentricity” leads not to continued
acceptance in this play group, but to her eventual exclusion. Paradoxically, in retaining
her self-image as fearless, she relinquishes her position of power. As noted previously,
“social play can be used even as a text to ‘interpret’ the power relationships within the
culture” (Sutton-Smith 74), and, in this narrative of playing, Richard sets in motion the
inversion of the power structure of the playgroup. Theories of play that deal with “child-
power” maintain that “taunting” is “often directed at younger children or at the opposite
sex,” and that “cruel play, mockery,” and “bullying” in the site of play are acts of
“childhood subversion” (Sutton-Smith 122, 126). In this narrative of playing, Richard’s
“cruel play,” his “taunting” of Zelda, is an act of “subversion” that reverses her previous
“bullying” of him and destroys her position as leader. No longer will a female be
allowed to retain power. Richard’s synthesis of what he perceives as male/female
oppositional positionings during this play session is both disruptive and oppressive for
Zelda, and his dominance over her in this scene provides evidence that, although Richard
is only thirteen years old, he has adopted the patriarchal ideology and sexism that have
been handed down to him by his father.
Renato Rosaldo notes the “patriarchal precedent” (86) at work in Pocho, and Richard’s thoughts concerning his mother shortly after Zelda’s downfall stand as further proof of his patriarchal values, for we are told that while “he loved his mother, Richard realized that a family could not survive when the woman desired to command” (Pocho 134). Obviously, Richard had held this same attitude toward Zelda’s command of the play-group. With Zelda’s fall from power, this “children’s own play society” no longer functions as one in which the “players unravel in some way the accepted orthodoxies of the world in which they live” (Sutton-Smith 166). Through Richard’s forced reversal of the group’s power dynamics, this group’s hierarchical structure ceases to serve as “a deconstruction of . . . realistic society” (Sutton-Smith 166). This scene also highlights the “forbidden rituals (drugs, sexual behaviors)” (Sutton-Smith 118) that these fictional children, as a separate play culture operating away from the watchful eyes of adults, incorporate into their activities. Although this scene of group sex takes place during daylight hours, Villarreal’s narrator explains that the adults in Richard’s neighborhood are not worried about the group play of the younger children even at night, for, while “[t]he older boys and girls” are expected to stay “under the street lamp, in full view of their parents” in the evening hours, “[t]he children are allowed to “play in the thickening shadows a halfblock away” (Pocho 66). The group play of children is considered harmless, as least as respects sexual activity: “The parents did not object to their being away from the light, for they were too young to get into trouble, and trouble had but one meaning to these people” (Pocho 66-67).

However, as the child Richard’s playtime with the Mangini girls and his later heterosexual exploits with Zelda reveal, sexual activities are a part of children’s playtime
experimentation, and sexual interaction once again dominates Villarreal’s narratives of play during Richard’s thirteenth year, when the group plays “a game of hideandgoseek,” even though “[t]hey had long ago outgrown such games” (Pocho 141). During this playtime, Zelda hides in a large hole in the ground and, when Richard attempts to climb in with her, she tries to fend him off. This encounter bears quoting at length in order to fully expose the gender issues that are contained in this site of playing:

For fully five minutes, they struggled in the darkness. Suddenly she began to cry. It was the first time he had heard her cry when she was not in a rage. And he understood the reason for her tears. It was the end of an era for her; her dominance was over, and her life would be a different one from now on. One of her eyes was badly bruised, and her mouth was bleeding.

‘Ya hurt my tit,’ she said, and held her left breast.

‘Let me rub it,’ he said. ‘You might get cancer.’

‘What’s that?’

‘It’s a sickness. If you get it, they’ll hafta cut it off.’

‘Jesus!’ she said, and was frightened. He opened her shirt and stroked her breast. She stared at him wide-eyed. Then he was tasting the blood in her mouth, and as they sank down together, he could hear the boy who was ‘it’ chanting, ‘Five, ten, fifteen, twenty . . .’

When it was over, she said, ‘That was different, Richard.’

‘I know.’ . . . She kissed him lightly. ‘You’re the first guy I ever kissed,’ she said. Then, ‘I guess I love ya, Richard.’ (Pocho 141)
Unlike the confrontation during childhood in which Zelda had “bloodied his nose and split his lip” (Pocho 68), Richard is the winner of this battle. The tenets of patriarchy are “particularly explicit in terms of male behavior,” and Richard has learned from his father that “[a] son must not be weak, delicate, or effeminate, but rather strong, independent, aggressive, competitive, and ambitious” (Sánchez, “Ideological” 120). Conversely, “wives,” or in this case girlfriends, “are deemed to be subordinate creatures, whose principal duties are to reproduce and nurture children and attend to the various needs of the husband” (Sánchez, “Ideological” 120). Unlike Guálinto’s character, who had not been able to devise a way to overcome the class differences between himself and his childhood sweetheart, María Elena, Richard’s character is permitted to triumph over his female childhood nemesis through sexual domination. Consequently Richard, unlike Guálinto, will harbor no feelings of emasculation based on interactions with females that will need to be redressed as an adult through marriage and fatherhood.

Richard’s adolescent entry into heterosexual relations secures his sense of manhood at an early age, and, with Zelda’s “era” of “dominance” over, Richard begins to give her instructions as to how she must behave now that she is his girlfriend: “‘You’re going to have to be different from now on. No more overhauls, and you’re going to hafta stop laying pipe with all the guys’” (Pocho 141). To this, Zelda replies, “‘Yes, Richard,’” and the narrator, in complicity with patriarchal prerogatives, tells us that “[s]he was full of happiness in her new role, and for the first time in her young life she was glad to be a woman” (Pocho 141). Consequently, in this site of playing, Zelda’s character is constructed as willing to accept the “role” that patriarchy, through Richard, assigns to her as a woman, and she is reconstructed as a sexually submissive female who
is delighted with this “new role” (Pocho 141). While the other adolescents continue to play their childhood games around her, Zelda, now cut off from the dominant position that she once held in the world of play, is relegated to the female-gendered sphere of submission.

Moreover, Zelda’s transformation in the world of play carries over into the real world and is manifested in her gradual adoption of female-gendered mannerisms. Zelda does indeed change to conform to Richard’s requests, and, “[a]s her speech and manner improved, she became aware that she was more than a little attractive,” and “at fourteen,” she was “more a beautiful young woman than a pretty girl” (Pocho 143). She begins to attract “a large following of boys,” and, as “[s]he had yet to learn the little artifices girls use to keep insistent boys at bay yet friendly,” Zelda “resorted to her fists for protection” (Pocho 143). With Richard, however, she assumes the role of a properly submissive partner:

Her relationship with Richard ripened into a deep love on her part and an indifferent one on his. It was understood between them that they would someday marry, and although he never told her he loved her, she was satisfied with the knowledge that she was his girl. She responded to his newfound and now everpresent dominance, and made token resistance to his whims only because it pleased him that she occasionally showed spirit. Yet she knew that she would have obeyed his every wish without a whimper. . . . She loved his sensitivity and the gentleness he showed her, for she had never had such attention or encouraged it, but she was aware that he was capable of great cruelty. Only her closeness to him enabled
her to see that part of his character, and she was the first to recognize it.

Richard himself was not yet objective enough to discover this fault in his makeup. (Pocho 143-144)

Zelda’s capitulation, which began in the world of play, has been wholly transferred to her relationship with Richard in the real world of patriarchally-structured heterosexual relationships. Although she was once cruel herself, Zelda is now gendered feminine and obedient, and she recognizes the cruel streak in Richard because she witnessed it first hand as his playmate when he manipulated her into having sex with the group and shamed her in front of them for having dirty legs. Zelda admits to Richard that he had made her feel “‘ashamed’: ‘[W]hen you told me my legs was dirty that day, I wanted to say something mean, but instead I was ashamed’” (Pocho 142). Beneath Zelda’s gruff exterior, there was still a vulnerable core, and Richard, perhaps in an unconscious vindication of her childhood racism, exploited that vulnerability. The future relationship of Zelda and Richard is left ambiguous in the novel, and, certainly, he does not remain faithful to her, for we are told that after he enrolls in a creative writing course, he sleeps with the wives of many of his new acquaintances.

Richard has enrolled in this course because he dreams of becoming a writer, an aspiration that originated in his childhood love of reading. From a very early age, Richard has preferred the solitary activity of reading over the company of others. During Richard’s childhood, when his mother asks him why he reads so much if he does not intend to become a “lawyer or a doctor” (Pocho 62) as his father wishes or a teacher or priest as she secretly desires for him, Richard explains to her that the only thing he wants from reading is knowledge—not to make money or to impress others or to provide for a
future family. "I do not want to be something—I am," Richard exclaims, and he adds:
"I do not care about making a lot of money and about what people think and about the
gineer in the way you speak. I have to learn as much as I can, so that I can live . . . learn
for me, for myself." Ah, but I cannot explain to you, and you would not understand me if I
could!" (Pocho 64). Family, which is so important to his mother, is also significant to
father, who later tells Richard that, as a son, his primary "responsible [is] to the
family." (Pocho 130). Juan also stresses to Richard that he, too, must do as Juan has
done and eventually marry and father children because "[t]hat is how God wants it"
(Pocho 131). However, family and religion do not have the same culturally laden values
for Richard, and the opposition between individual and family comprises a major polarity
in Richard's struggle for identity.

Richard is also confronted with the opposition between individual and
community, and this subject is broached during his enrollment in the creative writing
class. The people that Richard meets in this course want him to "dedicate his life to the
Mexican cause," and this "pain[s] him . . . because it was the same old story, and he was
quite sure he did not really believe there was a Mexican cause—at least not in the world
with which he was familiar" (Pocho 175). Too, Richard feels that these "liberals" are
somehow a "threat to his individuality, and his individuality was already in jeopardy"
(Pocho 175). Richard, who has just graduated from high school, is working to support
his mother and sisters as his dad has left to be with another woman. Richard is now the
head of the family and has settled into that role "[i]n order that the family should
survive," and, yet, the "permanency" of this "situation" was beginning to make him
"frightened" (Pocho 174). Richard realizes that if he is to leave, "he must leave in spite
of his concern and love for them—in spite of his now strong belief that he should remain” (Pocho 175). As the novel closes, Richard, who has enlisted in the Navy to fight in World War II, is on his way “to the training station,” even though “he could not believe in” war (Pocho 186). Although one of his best friends, Thomas Nakano, has been shipped off to an American “relocation center” (Pocho 182) along with his family because they are Japanese Americans, Richard, like George G. Gómez, elects "to play the games of the powerful colonizers" (Sutton-Smith 102). However, unlike George, Richard’s involvement with the military does not include spying on former friends and family, and, as Saldivar maintains, “Richard’s decision to fight for his country is made with the clear recognition that his is a country that refuses him his own measure of social justice, that imprisons his friends simply because they are Mexican Americans, and that assigns his family to subsistence labor” (CN 65). Therefore, according to Saldivar, “Richard’s decision to enlist can be seen either as a supreme contradiction, or as a preliminary step in a dialectic of developing protopolitical understanding” in light of “the fact that he sees the coming war as an event spawned by wrong and bound to create only further wrong” (CN 65).

In the end, Richard is faced with the oppositions of family versus the individual and his sense of Americanness versus his awareness of political inequities, just as he himself is inhabited by the oppositions of kindness and cruelty. While he has synthesized the gendered conflict with Zelda and reinforced his heterosexual masculinity on the training grounds of play, rather than fight any further battles with self-definition at home, Richard withdraws to the violent battlegrounds of war. According to Sánchez, he “rejects his family’s patriarchal prescription for male sons and joins the navy, not for any
patriotic reason, but simply to get away from his family, to escape and thus avoid a restrictive situation that suffocates him with expectations of domestic and filial obligations” (“Ideological” 115). As the novel concludes, Richard remembers his parents and his childhood playmates—“all the beautiful people he had known”—and he reflects “that for him there would never be a coming back” (Pocho 187).

While Richard contemplates his own future, both his family and the friends of his childhood playtime fade into the background. Richard has now been returned full circle to the solitary position that he preferred when we first met him as a nine-year-old child who would rather spend his time engrossed in the pages of a book or playing alone. Although, like George G. Gomez, Richard Rubio seems to move away from his culture of origin at the novel’s conclusion, Richard’s primary goal in joining the military is to escape the trappings that come with being the head of a family not to escape his ethnic identity. Richard, the aspiring solitary writer figure, removes himself from any familial responsibilities and expectations by sailing to the European battlefield. While Richard, albeit reluctantly, asserts a certain mode of heroic masculinity by enlisting in the Navy, given the historical time setting of the text and the fact that Richard is not light-skinned, his chances of being able to pass into the upper ranks of the Anglo military, as does George G. Gomez, are indeed remote. While George’s childhood play will plague his nighttime dreams as an adult, an overt indication that Paredes’s narrator seems to be critical of the transition that George makes in choosing Anglo masculinity and in betraying his people, Richard completely leaves behind his family and the friends of his past and looks to a future where, if he survives the war, play will involve words and the
act of writing. Thus, it seems that Villarreal’s narrator sanctions Richard’s choice to run from what he has come to perceive as female familial and sexual baggage.

In the Chicano texts that have been the focus of this chapter, the dynamics of masculinity as developed in childhood play are key to adult choices of how masculinity is lived in relation to class, ethnicity, and national identity. While Paredes and Villarreal do not construct their textual sites of playing in the same way, they each place a significant emphasis on the role that playing performs in the lives of children. Unlike many theorists of play who “focus on play as having its basis in the psychology of the individual player” (Sutton-Smith 173), both of these authors also place an emphasis on history. Although psychological implications are apparent in Paredes’s text, history is also integral to Guálinto’s struggles in his solitary playworld, on the school playground, and in the larger world around him. Like Paredes’s novel, Villarreal’s text also addresses his protagonist’s struggles to choose between opposing realities; however, Richard’s battles in the world of play center on the gendered power dynamics of group play. While there is a psychoanalytical component of “mastery through role reversal” (Sutton-Smith 173) in Richard’s dethroning of Zelda, his need to dominate is also grounded in cultural and historical precedents; Richard merely transfers the sexism of both Mexican and American patriarchal paradigms to the fields of childhood play. Richard, however, abdicates his role as family patriarch at the novel’s conclusion. Bruce-Novoa asserts that “Richard . . . feels that his mother forces him to become responsible for the family in, ironically, a very Mexican fashion, and he abandons it to escape the repression of both U.S. and Mexican traditional values in his environment” (114). In other words, as Sánchez argues, Richard enlists in the U.S. Navy in order to evade being “transform[ed] into what to him is a
nonentity, that is, into a steel mill worker, a family man" ("Ideological" 115). Richard Rubio "embrace[s] the anonymity of a military order which, though confining, [will] free him of family obligations, and if he [isn't] killed, [will] allow him to work toward his goals" (Sánchez, "Ideological" 115). Although both Richard Rubio and George G. Gómez leave their family of origin and their childhood friends behind, Richard does so with a certain amount of ambivalence, while George makes a conscious choice between two cultures, languages, and loyalties that his subconscious later rejects.

Thus, both George Washington Gómez and Pocho "reveal the dialectical structures that form the base of human experience," and, in using play as one of those structures, both Paredes and Villarreal integrate a salient feature of childhood into their texts. Their young characters' negotiation of the world of play illuminates play as much more than frivolous and also reveals that play's contribution to the "moral, social, and cognitive growth" of children (Sutton-Smith 10) is not always positive and, indeed, is often questionable. While, during childhood and adolescence, play activities are key in forging masculine subjectivities in these two texts, the American masculinity assumed by the adult Richard Rubio, although not without its problems, does not include a form of self-hatred that denigrates his own people. Unlike the conflicted conclusion of Paredes's novel, the ending of Villarreal's text holds out the hope that Richard, through his decision to become a writer, will honor his heritage and his history through the play of words.
1 Marco Portales points out that George Washington Gomez was completed “in 1940, but not published until exactly half a century later, in 1990”; therefore, Chicano authors such as Villarreal “did not have the benefit of Paredes’s novel” (82).

2 According to play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith, “the word play stands for a category of very diverse happenings” (3), and, consequently, researchers posit numerous theories of play. While one of the popularly held beliefs about play is that it forms an important function in the “moral, social, and cognitive growth” of children (Sutton-Smith 10), a competing view holds that play is “frivolous” (Sutton-Smith 11). The “rhetoric” which classifies play as frivolous "takes on a much more serious purpose when we view it as an implicit form of political or scholarly denigration” (Sutton-Smith 207-208). Sutton-Smith argues that this “denigration of play in intellectual terms is shown by the absence of the key term play from the index of almost every book about the behavior of human beings” (208). Sutton-Smith does note the "increased research attention . . . to play within psychology in recent decades and within biology throughout this century"; however, he asserts that “there is still much more resistance to the subject than is justified, given its universal role in human behavior” (208). Furthermore, Sutton-Smith asserts that whenever “the spontaneous play of children, women, [and] minority groups” is classified “as trivial or frivolous,” this label serves to demean “these [already] denigrated groups” (208). Moreover, “[a]ll of these denigrated groups are generally as deadly serious . . . about their own play as are those who denigrate them; [t]hey are not frivolous in their own eyes, they are seriously at play” (Sutton-Smith 208).
3 As Bruce-Novoa states, "history was and is still written mostly by the
oppressors to justify themselves, so Chicanos must rewrite history from their own
perspective if they want to change the present and the future" (78). In the U.S., "[t]he
voice of the Chicano community has been silenced, its images distorted or erased in
mainstream cultural production," and, therefore, "Chicanos must speak and create
themselves for themselves" (Bruce-Novoa 78). One of the primary goals of "Chicano
literature," Bruce Novoa asserts, "has been an attempt to rewrite U.S. history" in order to
include the Chicano "point of view" (78).

4 Portales considers George Washington Gomez to be "the ur-Chicano text
because it carefully chronicles the spiritual, social, and psychological growth prompted
by the education received by" its protagonist (83). According to Portales, "Paredes’s
bildungroman remains unsurpassed in detailing the educational journeys of several
Mexican American students" (83).

5 This comment by the narrator is to some extent paradoxical, for, as an
adolescent, GuálINTO is also ashamed of his home. During the scene in which María
Elena (who is from a wealthy Mexican family that claims to be Spanish in an attempt to
avoid discrimination) drives down GuálINTO’s street while he is walking home, GuálINTO
walks past his own house and around the block so that María Elena will not realize that
this is where he lives. According to Portales, "[c]lass and racial distinctions have begun
to make the young GuálINTO feel ashamed of his relatives and neighborhood" (92).

6 Taking my cue from Portales, who notes that he "quote[s] extensively from the
work because Paredes's text is not generally known and deserves wider recognition" (179,
n.5), I also will quote at length from this important Chicano text.
7 Guálinto is subjected to taunts throughout the novel. Guálinto’s mother, not realizing that he has just witnessed a murder, calls him a coward when she believes he has been “frightened” by “the sound of a few shots” (GWG 54). On his first day in school, La India, one of the girls in the class, accuses him of "making dirty signs at" her and all of the girls chime in with "indignation" at this fabrication (GWG 122). La India's taunting reduces Guálinto to tears, and Miss Cornelia, upon returning to the classroom, demands to know if another one of the boys, El Colorado, caused him to cry. Guálinto "nod[s]" and El Colorado receives a resounding "whack" from Miss Cornelia in punishment (GWG 123). Instead of being angry with Guálinto, however, Colorado forgives him and becomes his closest friend. In addition to being called a coward by his mother and being taunted by La India, Guálinto is also verbally as well as physically abused by Miss Cornelia throughout his stay in her classroom.

8 Arguably, this could be a foreshadowing of the adult George’s attempt to wash his hands of his own people and his own Mexicanness. However, as an adult, George finds that he cannot totally rid himself of his loyalties to his Mexican heritage, for his boyhood fantasies of victory for Mexico surface in his adult dreamworld.

9 As Saldívar rightly points out, “[a] fully gendered reading would be concerned not only with the separate fates of Guálinto’s mother, María, and his sisters, Carmen and Maruca, as they fulfill their familial roles as mother, daughters, sisters, nieces, and wives: it would also be concerned with how that fate is legislated by Mexican-American patriarchal ideology” (“Borderlands” 287). However, as my analysis hinges on the narratives of play in Paredes’s novel, it is only possible to address the constructions of the female characters as they are evoked through those narratives without venturing far
beyond the scope of the sites of play in *George Washington Gómez*. This is not meant in any way to imply that these characters do not merit a full and extended analysis.

Héctor Pérez argues that “it is clear that Chucho is a convenient substitute for the *rinche* figure” (44), and, regarding Guálinto’s encounter with Lupe, Pérez asserts that “[w]hen Guálinto strikes Lupe, he not only fatally injures the prison escapee but strikes a deadly blow against his family and more symbolically against the earlier generation of Chicanos who resisted Anglo encroachment and fought as seditionists” (41). According to Pérez, “George Washington Gómez is an Oedipal neo-Chicano who kills his seditionist father” (41).

Portales notes that the beating that Guálinto receives from "Miss Cornelia, his Mexican American low first grade teacher . . . leads his uncle Feliciano Garcia to visit the principal with two lawyers by his side, a state of affairs that Mexican Americans have often had to resort to in Texas in order to improve the nature and the quality of education" (85).

Saldivar discusses the transformation of the term “*Mexican*” into “a pejorative stigmata” (284) with the result that “middle-class sectors, anxious to dissociate themselves from the American denigration of the word and the culture, now became *Spanish*” (284). In the world of Paredes’s bordertown in *George Washington Gómez*, “[o]ne is thus, either ‘a rich Spaniard’ or ‘a poor Mexican,’ independent of biological or historical factors, for as social constructions the terms may not cross” (Saldivar, “Borderlands” 284).

Richard’s father is not concerned about Richard’s early entry into heterosexual intercourse since Juan considers that initiation as crucial to being “‘a man.’” On the other
hand, Juan is extremely concerned, to the point of brutality, with controlling his
daughter’s conduct. Richard witnesses Juan’s beating of one of his sisters, Luz, when she
arrives home in the middle of the night. Richard, like Guálinito, does not try to stop the
violence against his sister. Only when Juan turns his physical aggression on the home
itself, trying to demolish all that “he had built or accumulated with his own hands”
(Pocho 167) does Richard intervene. Juan’s response is to strike Richard so hard that he
loses consciousness, “dripping blood from his nose and mouth” (Pocho 167). While
Juan had been unconcerned about the effects of his striking of Luz, who “did not get up”
after “he hit her in the face with his fist,” Juan lifts “his son as easily as he would a child”
and places “him on the bed” (Pocho 166, 167). As this scene demonstrates and as
Saldívar asserts, like “Paredes’s fiction, Villarreal’s novel represents by omission another
history of oppression” (CN 71).

14 While Villarreal incorporates issues of both childhood and adolescent sexuality,
Paredes constructs his child protagonist as sexually innocent or at least sexually inactive.
When the other male children tell Guálinito that he should “kiss” La Nena and “play
with her bubbies,” he is embarrassed: “He didn’t want to do those things to La Nena but
he was afraid to say so” (GWG 139). As a teen-ager, Guálinito’s relationship with María
Elena never becomes a sexually intimate one, and, when El Colorado suggests that
Guálinito go with him to “the red-light district in Morelos” (GWG 255), Guálinito
decreases. The only sexual relationship that we can be certain that Guálinito does have is
with his gringa wife who is pregnant with their first child at the close of the novel.

15 Saldívar does not address Richard’s relationship with Zelda in his explication
of Pocho. His focus is on what he sees as the dialectical relationship between Richard
and his father. For Saldívar, “the interaction between” Richard’s and Juan’s “two ways of perceiving the value of human action creates the novel’s complex dialectical force” (CN 66). My focus, on the other hand, is on the dialectics at work in narratives of play.

16 It is interesting to note that while the adolescent Richard has no qualms about engaging in group sex with a female, he had previously refused to enter into the boys’ masturbation “orgies” during which “they would release their desires, sometimes engaging in speed contests as an added incentive” (Pocho 113). The narrator tells us that Richard abstained from this group “erotic pastime” due to his feeling “that sex was too personal, too intimate, to be enjoyed in the presence of others” (Pocho 113). While this seems paradoxical considering Richard willingness to share in the group’s sexual encounters with Zelda, it also points to an undercurrent of homophobia that resides in the narrative of this text. Earlier in the novel, when Richard’s father fears that his son has been molested by an alleged pedophile, Richard knows that “he must remove the germ of doubt that was in his father’s mind,” for Juan “was fanatical about masculinity” (Pocho 90). In another scene, when Richard comments to his friend, Ricky, that the two of them “always have fun together . . . because we love each other,”’ Ricky’s response is to ask, “‘Hey, you’re not going queer, are you?’” (Pocho 112). Ricky’s question infuriates Richard, who calls Ricky a “‘stupid prick’” and says, “‘Look—haven’t you ever heard of having love for a friend, of loving people or things, without getting dirty about it?’” (Pocho 112). However, what upsets Richard most in this encounter is that “[e]verything was spoiled now” between him and Ricky: “They could be friendly, perhaps, but they could never be friends again” (Pocho 112).
17 Bruce-Novoa argues that “Richard delivers himself to war’s chaos to feel alive through the danger of death and to be able to write the text about his life” (114). Saldivar, referring to Richard as writer, asserts that “the fact that the book that he has always hoped to write is written, as semiautobiographical fiction, in the form of the novel Pocho” intimates “[t]hat Richard may turn to the politics of change” (CN 67).

18 It should be noted that Guálinto’s make-believe solitary play in George Washington Gómez invokes “the rhetorics of the self in play theory” which “has its psychological origins with Freud and the various mental mechanisms that he and his followers ascribe to the individual as explaining play, such as abreaction, repetition compulsions, compensation, wish fulfillment, mastery of anxiety, tension release, stage-related conflict resolution, [and] mastery through role reversal” (Sutton-Smith 173). Obviously, Guálinto/George’s subsequent adult repression of his boyhood wishes is psychoanalytically-based as well. However, Saldívar argues that the resurgence of Guálinto’s childhood soldier fantasies is a “return of the repressed (not of the classical unconscious but of historicity)” in which Paredes’s protagonist “rewrites history” (“Borderlands” 286, 285).
Chapter Two

Playing With Tradition: Grotesque Destinies and Dangerous Games in Rudolfo A. Anaya’s Bless Me, Ultima and Sandra Cisneros’s The House on Mango Street

This chapter moves from a comparison of two Chicano bildungsromane to a comparison of a Chicano novel of development and a Chicana coming-of-age narrative, Rudolfo A. Anaya’s Bless Me, Ultima (1972) and Sandra Cisneros’s The House on Mango Street (1984). While Paredes’s and Villarreal’s texts focus on boyhood play as the space in which their protagonists respond to the threat of emasculation and make choices for adult masculinities in terms of assimilation and escape from their ethnic communities and families, Anaya’s novel foregrounds childhood play as the means through which his child protagonist negotiates empowering manhoods that will honor his ethnicity and family. Cisneros’s novel responds to patriarchal coming-of-age narratives such as Paredes’s, Villarreal’s, and Anaya’s through a critique of the dangers that masculine empowerment poses to women and the creation of a child protagonist who chooses to define herself against that domination.

In Bless Me, Ultima, Anaya’s child protagonist, Antonio Juan Márez y Luna, strives to define himself within the traditions and expectations of both his Chicano family and the Catholic church. In The House on Mango Street, Cisneros’s child protagonist, Esperanza Cordero, wrestles not only with the traditions and gendered proscriptions of a cultural patriarchal paradigm but also contends with her marginalization as a female within her community and as a Chicana within dominant society. For both Tony Márez and Esperanza Cordero, childhood games and adolescent play-arenas are the stages on which they each enact gender-specific roles and identities, and, in the process, learn very
different lessons about possibilities for their futures. While Tony learns the morally enlightening lesson that he is not destined to become a priest, Esperanza experiences the physical and psychological trauma of sexual oppression. The site of play is a dangerous space for the protagonists of both *Bless Me, Ultima* and *The House on Mango Street*. However, while Tony undergoes danger in the form of a ritual punishment that has its roots in the patriarchal authority of the Catholic Church, Esperanza experiences sexual violence perpetrated by males in an attempt to subordinate her as a woman.

In *Bless Me, Ultima*, the child Tony spends a great deal of time agonizing over his mother’s expectation that he will choose the priesthood as his future career. When Tony assumes the role of priest during play and is pummeled by his friends for refusing to properly enact his pretend-priest identity, Tony re-evaluates his religious beliefs and learns that the priesthood is an oppressive role that he does not want to assume in real life despite his respect for its authority. Even though Tony will not become a priest, he does have access to another masculine role of power as a figure of male authority in the Chicano home. While Tony’s manhood is not predicated on real or imagined violence against females as is George Gómez’s and Richard Rubio’s, Tony does come-to-manhood over the wounded body of his female mentor, Ultima, and he exerts this newfound male authority over his mother near the novel’s conclusion. With the death of Ultima, Tony also realizes that his destiny is to become a writer, a destiny that he fulfills through the narrative of his childhood that is *Bless Me, Ultima*.

In *The House on Mango Street*, on the other hand, playing at female adulthood as a child places Esperanza at risk as a sexualized object, while attending a carnival—a space of play—as an adolescent results in her being sexually assaulted. The sexualization
of women encroaches on several of Esperanza’s play spaces, as does the masculine domination of women, and she resists, throughout her narrative, the traditional authority of the Chicano patriarchal household that Tony’s narrative reinforces. Esperanza also experiences a moral reckoning during play, but this moral understanding comes from her feelings of shame after mocking a seriously ill aunt during a game of pretend. Unlike Tony’s pretend game of priest, which offers him a power that he respects but discovers he does not want, Esperanza’s pretend game re-enacts one form of the oppressive fate that she desires to escape. Esperanza’s guilt over having played this game leads her to remember that her Aunt Lupe had been an avid audience for her writing and that it was her Aunt Lupe who had told Esperanza “to keep writing” because “[i]t will keep you free” (HOMS 61). While the ultimate destiny of both Cisneros’s Esperanza and Anaya’s Tony is to become a writer, Esperanza Cordero will write not only for herself but also for the women of her community who cannot escape either the confines of the barrio or the control of Chicano male authority.

In addressing the coming-of-age dilemmas and ultimate destinies of their protagonists, both Anaya and Cisneros embed the politics of traditional expectations within narratives of play as a means of conveying the historical, familial, cultural, and/or societal conditions that have an impact upon the lives of their main characters. Yet Anaya and Cisneros do not limit their critiques of destiny to their protagonists. While Anaya’s Tony and Cisneros’s Esperanza will eventually define themselves as writers, signifying a future of hope within struggle, the fate of other characters in these novels is starkly drawn. Much less overtly connected to either the dilemma of doubleness theme or the marginalization of Mexican Americans than are the texts of George Washington
Gómez and Pocho, the texts of Bless Me, Ultima and The House on Mango Street, nevertheless, point to the grim destinies that await many Chicanos and Chicanas within dominant white U.S. society and, for Chicanas, within their own families and communities as well.

While Cisneros explicitly delineates the destinies of despair and entrapment that entangle her cast of female characters, Anaya both explicitly and implicitly highlights the destinies of certain male characters in Bless Me, Ultima’s narrative of masculine development. Significantly, Anaya delivers his implicit messages by employing aspects of the grotesque and the carnivalesque in his depictions of childhood play and in his constructions of certain child bodies. Although Ramón Saldívar contends that Anaya “create[s] a substitute history around” the character of Tony Mérez, whose “story . . . must be read as a nostalgic projection of utopian wish-fulfillment” (CN 118) and Héctor Calderón argues that Bless Me, Ultima presents an “idealized world of the forties” (22) and “a flight from history” (39),¹ I will argue that Anaya does take history into consideration by implying that the destinies for most of the characters in Bless Me, Ultima are neither “utopian” nor “idealized.” It is my contention that Anaya forecasts those destinies through a literary revision of the liberatory and utopian nature of carnivalesque play as defined by Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin argues that “carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” and “was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal” (RW 10).

Bakhtin stresses that there is a “strong element of play” in “carnival images” along with the “festive laughter . . . of all the people,” and he highlights “the positive regenerating
power of laughter” and of the grotesque body (RW 7, 11, 45). Anaya incorporates carnival-like laughter into the text of Bless Me, Ultima, but it is not regenerating for the carnivalized characters. To underscore that his version of the carnivalesque and the grotesque is not pregnant with “becoming, change, and renewal” (Bakhtin, RW 10), Anaya juxtaposes Antonio’s seriousness, even in play, against the carnivalesque antics of the characters whose futures will not be as hopeful as that of his somber protagonist.²

Anaya’s novel, with his own special blending of magical realism and the carnivalesque-grotesque, poses dialectical dilemmas for the male child protagonist: innocence/knowledge, good/evil, birth/death, forgiveness/punishment, childhood/manhood, blessings/curses, the river/the llano, the farmer-Lunas/the vaquero-Márezes, the mythical and magical realms/the Catholic church. Anaya’s novel is set in New Mexico at the close of World War II, and his child protagonist, Antonio Juan Márez y Luna, is six years old at the text’s outset. Unlike Guálinto and Richard, Antonio Márez, who has three older brothers and two sisters, is not the only male child in his family; however, he is the male child who feels the burden of responsibility for fulfilling parental hopes and dreams. The dilemma for Tony lies in what he sees as the oppositional nature of his parents wishes for him. However, the desires of Tony’s parents and Tony’s own destiny are intimately tied to Ultima, the curandera who served as mid-wife during his birth, and it is with the arrival of Ultima, who has come to live with Tony and his family, that Tony’s first person narration begins. The first paragraph of the novel also immediately introduces the theme of “magic” which will permeate the text of this novel:

Ultima came to stay with us the summer I was almost seven. When she came the beauty of the llano unfolded before my eyes, and the gurgling
waters of the river sang to the hum of the turning earth. The magical time of childhood stood still, and the pulse of the living earth pressed its mystery into my living blood. She took my hand, and the silent, magic powers she possessed made beauty from the raw, sun-baked llano, the green river valley, and the blue bowl which was the white sun's home. (BMU 1)

This "magical time of childhood" contains for Tony not only the magic of Ultima but also "the magic in the letters" that he will learn to write as a first-grader (BMU 1, 54).

Tony's fascination with writing first surfaced when, as an infant, he picked ""the pen and the paper"" from among ""all the objects of life"" that Ultima had ""offered him"" (BMU 51). However, as a six-year-old child, Tony does not yet realize that his destiny is to be a writer. What he does realize is that Ultima, who was midwife at his birth, holds ""the secret of [his] destiny"" (BMU 11).

While much of this story is about Tony's special relationship with Ultima, it concerns his relationships with others as well. In addition to his singular bond with Ultima, Tony's respect for his parents, his concern for his brothers, and his fondness for his friends will also affect how he defines himself as he comes to manhood in this masculine narrative of growing up. While Tony worships his three older brothers, who are overseas fighting in World War II, what is interesting in the catalog of family relationships that are central for Tony is the marginalization of Tony's sisters, whose actions he views as trivial: ""I usually spoke very little to my two sisters. They were older than I and they were very close. They usually spent the entire day in the attic, playing dolls and giggling. I did not concern myself with those things"" (BMU 6-7).
What Tony does see as a cause for “concern,” however, is the disparate nature of his parents’ hopes for him. As a son, Tony is torn between his parents’ conflicting wishes for his future. Tony tells us that his mother wants him to become a priest, while his “father’s dream was to gather his sons around him and move westward to the land of the setting sun, to the vineyards of California” (BMU 13). Tony asks his mentor, Ultima, why his mother’s people, the Lunas, “are . . . so strange and quiet,” while his “‘father’s people [are] so loud and wild’” (BMU 38). Ultima explains that the Lunas “are quiet like the moon,” and “‘only a quiet man can learn the secrets of the earth that are necessary for planting,’” while “‘it is in the blood of the Márrez to be wild, like the ocean from which they take their name, and the spaces of the llano that have become their home’” (BMU 38). Tony knows that he will be expected to choose either the way of the Lunas or the way of the Márrez, and, he says to Ultima, “‘I love them both, and yet I am of neither. I wonder which life I will choose?’” (BMU 38).

Like Guálinto’s family in George Washington Gómez, Tony’s mother, María, envisions a future for him as “‘a great leader,’” and, like Richard’s mother in Pocho, she fervently hopes that her son will become a priest: “‘I do not want you to waste your life in dreams, like your father. You must make something of yourself, you must serve the people. The people need good leaders, and the greatest leader is a priest’” (BMU 171). Education for her children, in particular for Tony, is crucial to María. As a result, Gabriel, who “had been a vaquero all his life,” had moved his family from the llano at his wife’s urging, and they now reside across the river from “the town of Guadalupe where . . . there would be opportunity and school for” the children (BMU 2). However, to earn a living, Gabriel must now “work on the highway” instead of on “the wide llano” where
"[e]ven after the big rancheros and the tejanos came and fenced the" land, "he and those like him [had] continued to work" (BMU 2). Now Gabriel dreams of going "to California where there is work" because the "'highway'" that he is helping to build "'is not for the poor man, it is for the tourist'" (BMU 3, 48). Yet, for Tony, whose family is "'poor,'" material conditions are not a negative issue, and he stresses that even though the "opposite . . . ways" of his parents "'had kept them at odds,'" as a family, they "'were happy'" (BMU 27).

Into this happiness, however, Anaya inserts the violent effects of World War II near the novel's inception through the character of Lupito, whom "'the war [had] made . . . crazy'" (BMU 15). Six-year-old Tony witnesses the hunting down and killing of Lupito by several of the town's men after Lupito murders the sheriff. As Tony hides to watch the manhunt, he finds himself only yards from the war-deranged veteran, Lupito. Unable to "move" lest the men on the bridge above him think he is their quarry, Tony can "only watch like a chained spectator" (BMU 18). After the men kill Lupito, Tony "race[s] for the safety of home," all the while "praying . . . the words of the Act of Contrition" (BMU 20). Like Paredes's Guálinto, Tony has witnessed a killing at a very young age. This killing, however, is not ethnically or racially motivated, for the men who hunted down Lupito include Tony's father and his father's friend, Narciso, both of whom had tried to stop the gunning down of Lupito. Instead, this episode serves, in part, to bring the consequences of war directly into Tony's life. The war that his brothers are away fighting has now physically entered Tony's world through the blood of Lupito, and Tony bemoans that "'[t]he river's brown waters would be stained with blood, forever and ever and ever'" (BMU 21). The killing of Lupito marks "'the first time'" that Tony has
ever “witnessed . . . the death of a man” (BMU 21), and it also marks the first signs of distress that Tony feels regarding the profession of the priesthood. His thoughts as he runs home reveal his dismay: “A priest could have saved Lupito. Oh why did my mother dream for me to be a priest! How would I ever wash away the stain of blood from the sweet waters of my river!” (BMU 21).

Death and blood have now entered and tainted Tony’s world, and Saldívar contends that Tony’s desire to believe in a “myth of pastoral stability, either in its Márquez or Luna manifestations or in some synthesis beyond them, is throughout his narrative continually assaulted by the incomprehensibility of history: World War II and its effects on those who fought it and on the communities to which they returned” (CN 113).

While Saldívar states that “Lupito,” along with Tony’s brothers, “León, Andrew, and Eugene have been touched by history and have become for Antonio ‘lost men’” (CN 113), Tony, despite his young age, does realize that war has damaging effects on these men. When his brothers return home from the war, Tony conceives of them as “lost men” because they “went and came and said nothing,” and he thinks that maybe this is “their way of forgetting the war, because we knew the war-sickness was in them” (BMU 60, 61). His brother “León had shown the sickness most,” and “[s]ometimes at night he howled and cried like a wild animal” (BMU 61). While Ultima does administer “a remedy,” León’s “eyes were still sad,” and Tony concludes that his brothers “were all sick with the war and trying to forget it” (BMU 61). Tony also comprehends that his brothers have no intention of helping his father live out the dream of going west, for “[t]he war had changed them” and “[n]ow they needed to lead their own lives” (BMU 62). Moreover, though only six years old, Tony reflects on the burdensome nature of the
parental demands that plague both his brothers and himself: “All their lives they had lived with the dreams of their father and mother haunting them, like they haunted me” (BMU 62).

His brothers, however, shake off these demands much less reflectively than their young sibling. Eugene says, “‘We’re men, . . . we’re not boys any longer. We can’t be tied down to old dreams,’” then continues with a “laugh,” “‘And they still have Tony, . . . Tony will be her priest’” (BMU 62, 63). When León chimes in with “‘Tony will be her farmer,’” Eugene yells, “‘And her dream will be complete and we will be free!’” (BMU 63). At this proclamation, Tony’s older brothers “jump and shout with joy” (BMU 63). In the narrative of horseplay that follows this declaration of freedom, Anaya positions Tony in the pretend-role of priest to his three older brothers, and this scene foreshadows the helplessness that this child protagonist will again experience in this pretend-priest role with his friends later in the text. The narrative of play and pretend between Tony and his brothers also contains elements of the carnivalesque and the grotesque which continue to surface throughout the novel in juxtaposition to Tony’s contemplative seriousness.

Tony’s brothers, in their excitement at passing the mantle of parental demands onto their little brother’s shoulders, “dance and wrestle each other, and they roll on the ground like wild animals, shouting and laughing” (BMU 63) in carnival-like glee. “‘Bless us, Tony!’” they demand of their small brother, and as they bow down before Tony, lifting “their arms up and then down,” Tony becomes “frightened at their wild actions” (BMU 63). Yet he summons the “strength to shout at them, ‘I will bless you!’” as he performs “the sign of the cross” (BMU 63). Tony’s pretend blessing causes his brothers to exclaim, “‘You little bastard!’” with “laugh[ter],” and, Tony tells us, “[t]hey
grabbed me, took off my pants and took turns spanking me. Then they tossed me on the roof of the chicken coop” (BMU 63). As his brothers, whom Tony thinks of as “three, giant figures” leave to continue this “celebration” at Rosie’s, Tony calls out again, “I will bless you!”” (BMU 63).

Although Tony does not fully understand what goes on at Rosie’s, he views “Rosie” as “evil,” he reveals, because “the priest had preached in Spanish against the women who lived in Rosie’s house and so I knew that her place was bad” (BMU 31). On hearing his brothers say that they are going visit Rosie’s, Tony recalls the time that he had seen their cow mounted by “Serrano’s bull” while his “father and Serrano” stood watching and “laughing and slapping their knees” and “talk[ing] about the girls at Rosie’s” (BMU 63). Now Tony views his brothers as “wild bulls running down the goat path towards town” to “say goodbye to the girls at Rosie’s”” (BMU 63). Although the whipping that his brothers had given him had “hurt,” Tony is left with “an empty feeling inside, not because they spanked [him], but because they would be gone again” (BMU 63). For Tony, his brothers “would be lost again,” and he wonders to himself, “Would they always be lost to me?” (BMU 64).

The above quoted narrative of horseplay and pretense is filled with carnival images, “carnival laughter” and carnival’s “strong element of play” (Bakhtin, RW 11, 7). In Tony’s brothers’ celebration of their newfound liberation from parental demands, “the top and the bottom change places” (Bakhtin, RW 403) and child becomes priest, just as in carnival where “boys [can] become bishops” (Stallybrass and White 183). Instead of joining in his brothers’ playful mood, however, Tony ardently blesses his brothers only to find himself physically dethroned through a whipping delivered in a “comic spirit”
(Bakhtin, RW 208). The “downward movement” in Tony’s “comic crowning and uncrowning” by his brothers is a dynamic that plays an integral part in “popular-festive merriment and grotesque realism” (Bakhtin, RW 370, 11). In grotesque realism, the “debasement” of “all that is sacred and exalted is rethought on the level of the material bodily stratum,” and “the accent is placed not on the upward movement but on the descent” (Bakhtin, RW 370, 371).

In this scene from Bless Me, Ultima, however, Tony’s descent from pretend priest to whipped youngster concludes with an ascent when he is “tossed . . . on the roof of the chicken coop” (BMU 63), a height from which he senses that his brothers will “be lost again” (BMU 64). Thus, in this narrative of play, the “grotesque bodily, cosmic, and carnivalesque images are combined with historic events” (Bakhtin, RW 425) through Tony’s fears that his brothers, “changed” by “the war,” will continue to be “lost men” (BMU 62, 60). His brothers are eager to leave Guadalupe—“this hick town is killing me!,”” Eugene proclaims—but Anaya’s text does not imply that there is a better future for these three young men beyond the confines of their home town. As Tey Diana Rebolledo and Eliana S. Rivero note, “young men and women from Mexican American communities everywhere joined the armed forces [during World War II] and made personal sacrifices for their country; [t]hese sacrifices, however, did not alter the social biases against them” (“Intro” 19). Yet, after having “‘fought a war’” and “‘seen half the world,’” Tony’s brothers can envision no future for themselves if they remain surrounded by family or in “the small town of Guadalupe” (BMU 61). They “do not dream the old dreams” of their parents but, instead, are anxious to “leave old connections behind” (Anaya, “Mythical Dimensions” 28).
Unlike Tony, who “look[s] back to legend and myth for direction” (Anaya, “Mythical Dimensions” 30), his brothers gaze in excitement at a future filled with dreams of moving to “‘Las Vegas, Santa Fe, maybe even Albuquerque,’” and they entertain hopes for “‘money, booze, women’” (BMU 62). Even Andrew, who initially stays behind when León and Eugene leave and who talks about completing his education, abandons “his plans for finishing high school” (BMU 178) and takes off for Santa Fe with his two brothers the next time that they come home to visit. In contrast with the high regard placed on education by Tony, Andrew’s refusal to pursue a high school diploma serves to emphasize the negative consequences that this decision will have on his future. A further clue that Andrew, who chooses to follow in León’s and Eugene’s footsteps in search of “adventure” (BMU 67), will not have a bright future resides in his inability to provide an answer to Tony’s question, “‘How will you get ahead?’” (BMU 68). Although we are not told the fates of Tony’s brothers, who so playfully express their delight at escaping familial expectations, a dim future for these “lost men” (BMU 60) is implied.

In Bless Me, Ultima, the carnivalesque jubilance of Tony’s brothers at their permanent liberation from parental authority and expectations lacks the “positive character” of “change and becoming” that is characteristic of carnival play and laughter (Bakhtin, RW 274). It is Tony, with his ever-present “sober seriousness” and absence of carnivalized traits, who is in “the very process of becoming” (Bakhtin, RW 274, 211-212). While his brothers seem destined to join other marginalized “lost men” (BMU 60) of history who have been negatively affected by the experience of war and who face uncertain futures, Tony is destined to experience a painful “process of becoming”
(Bakhtin, RW 212) that is filled with the physical deaths of people that he cares about but that will culminate in a positive rebirth for him. For Tony, who witnesses the murder of Lupito by the town’s men and the murder of Narciso by Tenorio, and who also suffers the loss of a friend who dies accidentally, it is the deaths of Ultima and her owl that finally will mark the death of his childhood. Yet, the killing of Ultima’s owl by Tenorio and the subsequent death of Ultima are followed by the birth of Tony the writer who will relate through his childhood voice the history of that “magical time of childhood,” when he learned the “remedies of the ancients” (BMU 1, 4) from Ultima, and that terrifying time of becoming, when he lost his childhood innocence and became a man. Until Tony realizes that his destiny is to be a writer, however, he is continually confronted with the dilemma of which parental tradition to follow, and he is plagued by doubts concerning the tenets and authority of the Catholic Church.

Anaya contrasts Tony’s solemn attitude toward his dilemma as a responsible son and his doubts as a devout Catholic not only against the carnivalesque glee of his playful brothers but also against the carnivalesque cavorting of several of Tony’s friends. It is through the construction of these carnivalesque-like male children that Anaya most strongly evokes the “convexities and orifices” of the grotesque body and “the life of the grotesque body”—“[e]ating, drinking, defecation and other elimination (sweating, blowing of the nose, sneezing)” (Bakhtin, RW 317). However, the grotesque body of folk humor as delineated by Bakhtin embodies a “material bodily principle [that] is contained . . . in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed”; thus, “all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable” (RW 19). In Bakhtin’s theory of grotesque realism, “[t]his exaggeration has a positive assertive
character,” and “these images of bodily life” are accompanied by “themes” of “fertility, growth, and a brimming-over abundance” (RW 19). For Bakhtin, this “material bodily principle is a triumphant, festive principle” and entails the theme of “degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract” (RW 19). Thus, “[t]o degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better”: “[d]egradation . . . has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one” (Bakhtin, RW 21). The grotesque bodily principle in Anaya, on the other hand, while certainly comedic, playful, and disparaging of the high and of the sacred, does not point to regeneration for either the characters who exhibit elements of the grotesque or for the people as a collective. Instead, the comedic degradation enacted by Tony’s friends serves to highlight their lower position in the hierarchy of this small community and the dubious futures that this positioning most probably will afford them.

Anaya invokes the grotesque-carnivalesque in a humorous degradation of the sacred Christian Christmas story during a scene in which Tony’s friends from Los Jaros—“the neighborhood across the tracks” (BMU 33)—take part in an elementary school Christmas play. In this school play, the high becomes low and tradition is debased through the antics of the actors chosen to play religious roles in the story of Christ’s birth. The boys from Los Jaros would not have been in this play at all, but an ice storm kept the girl actors and the children who lived in town from being able to attend school on the day of the play. Tony treks to school in the storm, and his friends, “Horse and Bones and the rest of the gang from Los Jaros,” also show up for school (BMU 144). Tony tells us that the boys from Los Jaros “were the dumbest kids in school, but they never missed a single day: Hell could freeze over but they would still come marching across the tracks,
wrestling, kicking at each other, stomping into the classrooms where they fidgeted nervously all day and made things miserable for their teachers” (BMU 144). When the boys arrive at school on this icy day, they find that their teacher, Miss Violet, wants them to take roles in the play so that the Christmas show can go on. As Miss Violet asks them to participate, Lloyd, who is “carefully picking at his nose,” points out that they will “have to read all the parts” since they were not originally cast in the play (BMU 145). Tony tells us that this will prove to be a difficult undertaking “because the kids from Los Jaros couldn’t read” (BMU 145). Yet the boys do agree to be actors in this play, even Florence who is an atheist yet who “remind[s]” Tony “of one of the golden angel heads with wings that hovered at the feet of the Virgin in her pictures” (BMU 33). Tony “had never seen anyone like” Florence—“tall and thin, with curly blonde hair that fell to his shoulders”—“so white and speaking Spanish” (BMU 33).

When Tony, Florence, and the rest of the cast take the stage before the play begins, Bones gets stage fright, “climb[s] up a stage rope and perch[s] on a beam near the ceiling” and “refuse[s] to come down and be in the play” (BMU 145). This action by Bones instigates the horseplay that continues throughout this sacred presentation of the Christian first Christmas story when Horse grabs a “two-by-four” and hurls it at Bones; this missile, however, misses Bones and lands on another boy, “knock[ing] him out cold” (BMU 145). The comic degradation of the sacred escalates through the grotesque and carnivalesque themes of dismemberment and bodily eliminations that take place onstage:

Someone tipped the Christ child over and it lost its head.

‘There ain’t no such thing as virgin birth,’ Florence said looking down at the decapitated doll. He looked like a madman, with his long legs sticking
out beneath the short robe and his head wound in a turban.

‘You’re all a bunch of sissies!’ Bones shouted from above. Horse aimed
the two-by-four again but Miss Violet stopped him in time.

‘Go put the head on the doll,’ she said.

‘I gotta go to the bathroom,’ Abel said. He held the front of his pants.
Miss Violet nodded her head slowly, closed her eyes and said, ‘no.’

‘You could be sued for not letting him go,’ Lloyd said in his girlish voice.
He was chewing on a Tootsie Roll. Chocolate dripped down the sides of
his mouth and made him look evil. (BMU 145-146)

The chaos of this male banter and rowdy play is rendered even more grotesquely comedic
when Horse is chosen to play the Virgin Mary. Balking at this turn of events, Horse has
to be held down while the other boys put “the beautiful blue robe on him” (BMU 146).
Miss Violet gives him “a heavy veil” to wear so that he won’t be recognized by the
audience and also promises that he’ll receive “an A” if he will play this role. This
promise “made Horse think,” since “[h]e had never gotten an A in anything in his life”
(BMU 146).

The players then assume their places on the stage with Horse as the mother of
Christ, “kneel[ing] by the manger,” and Tony as Joseph positioned beside him (BMU
147). At this point, the “kids stationed behind the cardboard animals to keep them up”
begin “a spit-wad game,” and Bones emits a Tarzan yell from his seat on the rafters
(BMU 147). When Miss Violet threatens to send Bones “to the principal,” he
“laugh[s]” because “[h]e had been spanked so many times by the principal that it didn’t
mean anything anymore” (BMU 147). When the audience of elementary students comes
rushing into the auditorium and the play opens with Red, who “always tried to help the teacher” (BMU 145), as narrator, the carnivalesque-grotesque prevails. The play is barely underway when Bones shouts from on high, “Abel peed!,” as “a golden pool” appears “at Abel’s feet” (BMU 149). “How nasty,’ Lloyd scoff[s]” from behind his cardboard cow, and “[h]e turn[s] and spit[s] a mouthful of chewed-up Tootsie Roll. . . on Maxie, who was holding up a cardboard donkey” (BMU 149). As both boys “topple over” their respective animals, “Horse’s head [is] tossing at the excitement,” and, when Tony tries to quiet him, Horse bites him on the hand (BMU 149). In spite of the antics unfolding onstage, Red continues his narration of the first Christmas story and motions for Tony as Joseph “to speak”:

‘I am Joseph!’ I said as loud as I could, trying to ignore the sting of the horse-bite, ‘and this is the baby’s mother.’

‘Damn you!’ Horse cursed when I said that. He jumped up and let me have a hard fist in the face.’

‘It’s Horse!’ The audience squealed. He had dropped his veil, and he stood there trembling, like a trapped animal.

‘Horse the virgin!’ Bones called.

‘Boys, Bowoooo-oizz!’ Miss Violet pleaded.

‘AndthethreekingsbroughtgiftstothetheChristchild’ —Red was reading very fast to try to get through the play, because everything was really falling apart on stage.

The audience wasn’t helping either, because they kept shouting, ‘Is that you, Horse?’ or ‘Is that you, Tony?’
The Kid stepped up with the first gift. ‘I bring, I bring’— He looked at his script but he couldn’t read.

‘Incense,’ I whispered. . . . ‘In-sense,’ the Kid said and he threw the crayon box we were using for incense right into the manger and busted the doll’s head again. The round head just rolled out into the center of the stage near where Red stood. . . . Then the Kid stepped back and slipped on Abel’s pee. He tried to get up and run, but that only made it worse. He kept slipping and getting up, and slipping and getting up and all the while the audience had gone wild with laughter and hysteria. . . . Florence stepped forward, bowed low and handed an empty cigar box to Horse, ‘For the virgin,’ he grinned. . . . The Horse jumped up and shoved Florence across the stage, and at the same time a blood-curdling scream filled the air and Bones came sailing through the air and landed on Horse. ‘For the verrrrrr-gin!’ Bones cried. . . . ‘—And that’s how it was on the first Christmas!’ I heard brave Red call out above the confusion and free-for-all on stage and the howling of the audience. And the bell rang and everybody ran out shouting, ‘Merry Christmas!’ (BMU 149-150).

In this hilarious rendition of the Christian sacred drama, the carnivalesque-grotesque is apparent through the “[o]aths, curses, and various abusive expressions [that] are a source of considerable importance for the grotesque body” (Bakhtin, RW 352). Also included in the “comic” and “grotesque concept of the body” are “debasing parodies . . . and dismembered parts” (Bakhtin, RW 354). The head of the baby Jesus thudding across the stage floor, the urine and the gooey Tootsie Roll, the atheistic yet “angelic” Florence
(BMU 148) as one of the wise men, the cursing Horse as the Virgin Mary, "the combination of human and animal traits" (Bakhtin, RW 316) used to describe actions and bodies all merge to create the topsy-turvy world of carnivalesque play with its laughter and grotesque images.

Bakhtin asserts that "carnival images closely resemble certain artistic forms, namely the spectacle" due to "their strong element of play" (RW 7). However, "carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators" (Bakhtin, RW 7). According to Bakhtin, "[fo]otlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance" (RW 7). Thus, "carnival [is] vividly felt by all its participants" (Bakhtin, RW 7). In the case of the school play in Bless Me, Ultima, while the boys from Los Jaros make a degrading spectacle of the Christian Christmas story, they are not separated from the audience as actors. The interaction of the audience members calling out "‘Is that you, Horse?’ or ‘Is that you, Tony?’" (BMU 149) obliterates the distance "between actors and spectators" (Bakhtin, RW 7). The "free-for-all on stage and the howling of the audience" (BMU 150) merge in carnivalesque-like "merriment" and produce "an atmosphere of unbridled carnivalesque freedom" (Bakhtin, RW 266, 370).

As in carnival's inversion of the world for a short time, the boys from Los Jaros, the other side of the tracks (the low), become high for a brief time and debase Catholicism and the traditional Christian story of the first Christmas through laughter and play. In this case, these boys, along with the audience members, are freed temporarily from the official graveness of this story and the reverent worship that this tradition requires. However, with the exception of Florence, the boys from Los Jaros hold an
uncritical and blind belief in officially sanctioned religious discourse, and, in their everyday lives, they adamantly defend the traditions of Catholicism even though they are not devout practitioners. Their usual routine on Sundays before the mass service starts is to wait outside the church wrestling, cursing, holding spitting contests, and urinating “against the church wall” (BMU 35). Thus, their carnivalesque play during the sacred drama of Christmas is not an intentional “debasement . . . [of] all that is sacred and exalted,” nor is it an “opposition to the official world and all its prohibitions and limitations” (Bakhtin, RW 370, 412). In Bakhtin’s analysis, “[t]he principle of laughter and the carnival spirit on which grotesque is based . . . frees human consciousness, thought, and imagination for new potentialities” (RW 49). In Anaya’s novel, however, “potentialities” reside not in his carnivalized characters but in his protagonist who is studious and self-reflective and who will come to question unconditional acceptance of Christian doctrines.

While the scene of the Christmas play in Bless Me, Ultima is presented comically, it is also the scene in which we discover that the boys from Los Jaros cannot read even though they are in the third grade. This revelation seems to imply, in contrast with Tony’s attentiveness to study, that these friends of his will not have promising futures. As it turns out, Florence, the child who is constructed as “angelic” in appearance rather than grotesque and who is the only child who does not believe in a god, will have no future at all. Interestingly, after the play is over and the other children have gone home for the day, Tony reflects on “how everything had been so full of life and funny and in a way sad” (BMU 151). Tony’s feeling of sadness after the school play is similar to his feelings after playing pretend priest to his brothers who “would be lost again” (BMU
64). Perhaps Tony believes that his friends who live “across the tracks” are destined to become “lost men,” too (BMU 33, 60), even though he recounts their playful on-stage rebellion with an attitude of affection. Tony, on the other hand, who neither displays carnivalesque behavior nor is constructed through images of the comic and the grotesque, will have a future destiny that is filled with potential, although he does not yet realize what that destiny will be. At this point in the novel, he is a seven-year-old child who is concerned about pleasing his parents and who is fearful of the responsibilities that being a priest would place on his shoulders.

Tony, however, will learn that the priesthood is not the proper vocation for him, and he will learn this through a game of pretend with his friends. Prior to this game, though, Tony has a conversation with Florence, who explains to Tony that he does not believe in God anymore because of the things that have happened in his life: his mother has been dead since he was three years old, his alcoholic father is also dead, and his sisters are prostitutes. Florence asks, “‘Why? What did I ever do to Him to deserve this, huh?’” (BMU 188). Tony is unable to reply immediately for he also has many unanswered questions about God. After all, he has witnessed the killing of two men and the evil of Tenorio and Tenorio’s bruja daughters who put a curse on Tony’s uncle. Eventually Tony suggests to Florence that perhaps God gives us trials in order to make us better Christians, but Florence has already considered and discarded that ideology as false, for, as she asks Tony, “‘Look, how do you test a three-year-old kid who doesn’t know anything. God is supposed to know everything, all right, then why didn’t he make this earth without bad or evil things in it? Why didn’t he make us so that we would always be kind to each other?’” (BMU 188). Tony does not have answers for
Florence’s questions about God, but he does not “want to give Him up like Florence had” (BMU 189); Tony will, however, decide to give up the intention of becoming a priest.

It is through a narrative of pretend play that Tony realizes that he will not enter the priesthood. Outside the church where they are waiting to go to their first confession, Tony’s friends want Tony to pretend to be a priest and hear their confessions because he “knows more about religion and stuff like that than anyone”: “‘Tony be the priest! Tony be the priest!’ they . . . chant” (BMU 200). Tony does not want to participate in this game of make-believe, but is drawn into the game against his will as the others rally around him. One of the boys wraps Tony in a “sweater,” yelling, “‘His priest’s dress,’” and the rest of the kids remove “their jackets and sweaters and tie them around [his] waist and neck” (BMU 200). Tony reluctantly agrees to go along with the game, but, when he tells the crowd of children that they should not listen to someone else’s confession, they pummel him. Acquiescing to the other children’s demands, Tony listens as Horse confesses that he had looked into the “‘girls bathroom’” through “‘a hole in the wall’” and as Bones tries to trump Horses’s confession by admitting that he “‘saw a high school boy and a girl fucking in the grass by the Blue Lake’” (BMU 201, 202).

As required by the pretend-role of priest, Tony gives both Horse and Bones penances to serve, but the children who have gathered around him are not ready to quit playing this “sacriligious [sic] game” (BMU 202). The crowd wants Florence to go next since they think he could use some practice “‘because he doesn’t believe’” (BMU 203). The children grab Florence and force him onto his knees before Tony. When Tony asks, “‘What are your sins?’,” Florence answers “softly, ‘I don’t have any,’” to which Agnes
screams, "Everybody has sins!" (BMU 203). Ernie and Agnes then grab Florence by the hair, and Tony, who sees that Florence is in "pain," begs him to confess at least "one sin" (BMU 203). When Florence remains silent, Tony is aghast as he realizes the conviction behind Florence's refusal:

His face was very close to mine now, and when he shook his head to tell me again that he didn't have sins I saw a frightening truth in his eyes. He was telling the truth! He did not believe that he had ever sinned against God! 'Oh my God!' I heard myself gasp.

'Confess! Confess!' they cried. Then with one powerful heave and a groan Florence shook off his tormentors... 'I have not sinned!' he shouted, looking me square in the eyes, challenging me, the priest... 'it is God who has sinned against me!' his voice thundered, and we fell back in horror at the blasphemy he uttered... 'I say God has sinned against me because he took my father and mother from me when I most needed them, and he made my sisters whores—He has punished all of us without just cause, Tony.' (BMU 203, 204)

The children want Tony to give Florence a harsh penance for his "blasphemy": "'Make him kneel and we'll all beat him,'" "'Stone him!,'" "'Beat him!,','" "'Kill him!,','" "'Make him do penance! That's the law!,','" they yell, "their eyes flashing with the thought of the punishment they would impose on the non-believer" (BMU 204). Tony, however, decides that he will exact no punishment, deliver no penance: "'Go in peace, my son,'),' he says "to Florence" (BMU 204).

The children, still thirsty "for vengeance," turn on Tony, shouting "'You are a bad
priest, Tony!,” “We do not want you for our priest!,” “Punish the priest!” (BMU 205). They jump on him, “clawing, kicking, tearing off the jackets, defrocking” him, and they hold him down while Horse gives him “the Indian torture” (BMU 205). The “laughing and pointing” children have no “pity” for Tony, and Horse’s “knuckles coming down again and again on [his] breastbone were unbearable” (BMU 205). These children have fully absorbed the ideology of punishment for sin that the Church instills in its congregants, and, significantly, they have already seen Florence punished during catechism instruction. Although an atheist, Florence had attended the catechism classes because he did not “want to feel left out”: “I wanna be with you guys,” he had explained to Tony. When Florence does not arrive on time for catechism class one day, he is disciplined by the priest and made “to stand in the middle of the aisle with his arms outspread” (BMU 190). Even though “his arms . . . would become numb like lead before catechism” ended, he “stood very straight and quiet, almost smiling” (BMU 191, 190). While the priest who is teaching the catechism class expounds on the never-ending nature of “eternal damnation” and “[t]he fires of hell [that] burn forever and ever,” Tony envisions “Florence holding his arms outstretched for eternity” (BMU 193).

As a pretend priest to the other children who desire harsh punishment for Florence during play, Tony’s refusal to exact punishment as required by the priesthood entails an epiphany for him: “I had stood my ground for what I felt to be right and I was not afraid. I thought that perhaps it was this kind of strength that had allowed Florence to say he did not believe in God” (BMU 205). Tony has played with “the authoritativeness of tradition,” with an “authoritative discourse” that “demands . . . unconditional allegiance” and that “permits no play with the context framing it, no play with its borders, no gradual
and flexible transitions, no spontaneously creative stylizing variants on it” (Bakhtin, DI 344, 343). Taking a stand against punishment as an incontestable and unmodifiable doctrine of Christianity, Tony suffers the consequences in the form of a physical beating.

Punished for not being a punisher, Tony discovers, through the site of play, that the meting out of harsh and unfair punishments is oppressive, and he decides to reject assuming the role of priest as a future identity. Tony, in refusing to punish Florence, stands in vivid contrast to the other child players who want to use this game as a means to exact the punishments that they are powerless to impose outside the world of play. When Tony is finally released from Horse’s beating, through the call of the priest for the children to come inside for their real-world confessions, Florence says to Tony, “‘You should have given me a penance,’” but Tony replies, “‘You don’t have to do any penance’” (BMU 205). Florence, with a mature perception for his young age, then says, “‘You could never be their priest’” (BMU 206). Tony signals his agreement, yet he feels no animosity towards his friends for their violent reactions during the priest game; Tony has been one of them since the time that Horse and Bones, who are slightly older than Tony, had welcomed him into their group prior to Tony’s promotion from first grade to third grade. For Tony, who had been made to feel like an “outcast” by the town children who had made fun of his homemade lunch “of hot beans and some good, green chile wrapped in tortillas” when he was in the first grade, the friendship of the boys from Los Jaros plays an important role (BMU 55, 54). “They were good friends,” Tony tells us, “even though they sometimes said bad words” (BMU 35).

The anger of Tony’s friends during the pretend-priest game and the deterioration of this pretend game into violence does not disrupt Tony’s friendship with his close
friends. What this game does disrupt is Tony’s mother’s dream for him, for this play experience teaches Tony that the priest role that his mother envisions for him is not in alliance with his own definitions of self and religion. According to L. R. Goldman, in pretend play, “the mind . . . is interpretative rather than replicative,” and the “play is transformative not just simulative of reality” (20). Playing the game of priest has allowed Tony to interpret his consideration of becoming a priest in a new light. This make-believe staging of confession has transformed Tony’s previously held belief that he might enter the priesthood and, at the same time, caused him to reinterpret his own view of sin and penance. Through this make-believe game, Tony comes to the realization that his Catholic friends will not tolerate his interpretation of how a priest should behave. Tony’s pretend actions as priest do not agree with anything that these children know about priests in the real world, and the play disintegrates when Tony will not give in to their demands that he respect real world protocol. According to Greta G. Fein, when “children . . . negate one another’s pretend proposals,” the “play will be disrupted if these negations involve an insistence upon adherence to real-world standards” (290). The fun for Tony’s Catholic friends in this game is the re-enactment of real-world punishments, but Tony “negates” their “pretend proposals.” Even in a pretend-play scenario, blind adherence to the sanctioned discourse of the Catholic Church prevents Tony’s friends from allowing any behavior that strays from the traditions of their religious upbringings. These children hold an unquestioning belief in the Catholic church’s authority and doctrines of punishment, and, other than Florence, Tony is the only one of this group of children to question the opposition of merciful forgiveness and eternal punishment that lies at the heart of the Christian ideology of good versus evil.
Tony, however, unlike Florence, does not give up his belief in God, even though he has given up the idea of becoming a priest. Yet Tony continues to have questions about God, and God's silence perplexes Tony. This sense of confusion is compounded by the myth of the golden carp which Tony learns about when he and his friend, Samuel, decide to go fishing one afternoon. According to Samuel, whose "father" had heard the legend from "Jasón's Indian" (BMU 73), the carp in the nearby river were once people, but were turned into carp by the gods because as people they had eaten the one food forbidden to them—carp. They would have been killed had not "one kind god who truly loved the people argued against it," and this god also asked "to be turned into a carp and swim in the river where he could take care of his people" (BMU 74). The other gods granted his request and "they made him the lord of all the waters of the valley" and "colored him the color of gold" (BMU 74). This is a story that Tony "could not believe . . . and yet [he] could not disbelieve Samuel" (BMU 75). When Tony's friend, Cico, takes him to see the golden carp swimming in the river, Tony is awed by its beauty: "The sun glittered off his golden scales. . . . The golden fish swam by gracefully, cautiously, as if testing the water after a long sleep in his subterranean waters. . . . The white sun reflected off his bright orange scales and the glistening glorious light blinded us" (BMU 227). Tony is eager to share the news of this "god of beauty" with Florence: "Florence needed at least one god, and I was sure he would believe in the golden carp. I could almost hear him say as he peered into the waters, 'at last, a god who does not punish, a god who can bring beauty into my life'" (BMU 228).

As an important component of Tony's struggle with the punitive doctrines of traditional Catholicism, the existence of the golden carp signals the attention that must be
paid to “the history, myths, spiritual thought, legends, and symbols from Native America” that comprise a “part of the Chicano’s collective history” (Anaya, “Aztlán” 234). As Anaya asserts, “the Catholic faith was imposed on the indigenous faith” (“Aztlán” 239), and Tony must learn to “claim” the “indigenous myths and stories” that are an integral element in his “inheritance” (Anaya, “What Good” 476). Tony is beginning to comprehend that Christian discourse has supplanted the authority of the indigenous myths that preceded the introduction of Catholicism into New Mexico. Although Tony hopes to share the indigenous “Native American legend” (Anaya, “Aztlán” 233) of the golden carp with Florence, the last time that Tony sees the golden carp is also the last day of Florence’s life.

While Tony and Cico have been waiting for the golden carp to appear, Florence and the rest of the boys have gone for a playful swim in the lake. They have chosen a part of the lake, however, that is a no-swimming zone. Returning from viewing the golden carp, Tony and Cico hear their friends yelling and realize that something is not right. They race to the swimming hole, but it is too late; Florence had “‘dived . . . into the deep water,’” and now they “saw the body come up through the water, rolling over and over in a slow motion, reflecting the sunlight. The long blonde hair swirled softly, like golden seaweed, as the lake released its grip and the body tumbled up” (BMU 229). In language that is much like that in the passage describing the golden carp, Florence’s body surfaces. Too, in a manner that is also much like the kind god who wanted to be with his people, kind Florence had gone to catechism because he wanted to be with the rest of the group even though he did not believe in their God. Florence was a “mild manner[ed]” (BMU 203) and sensitive boy in spite of the hardships of his life. He had
told Tony earlier that “if there is a hell it’s just a place where you’re left all alone, with nobody around you” (BMU 187).

According to Sutton-Smith, “a good case might be made that play is a primordial form of what later is represented as allegory” (143), and Anaya narratively links play and allegory through Florence’s drowning while at play and his resemblance to both the Christ figure and the golden carp. According to Frederick S. Holton, the myth of the golden carp is an allegory of Christianity—“the story of the Golden Carp and the central mystery of Christianity are the same” (36). Yet Florence’s playtime death leaves unanswered questions for the reader concerning this “angelic” (BMU 148) and lonely boy. Why does Florence have to die? Does his senseless death confirm Florence’s own statements about the senselessness of life and the unfairness of God? Or, through Florence’s death, is Anaya again expressing the view that, without their myths and ancestral wisdom as guides, the colonized people of the U.S are lost? After all, Samuel and Cico only reveal the golden carp’s location to those who “want to believe” (BMU 99), and they were going to allow Tony to share this god with Florence. Florence, however, dies without gaining knowledge of this legend.

Unanswered questions about Florence’s death plague Tony as well, for Florence haunts Tony’s dreams, his ghost motioning to scenes in which Tony sees each of the things that he holds sacred being destroyed: the church, the golden carp, Ultima and her owl. Tony’s dream of his dead friend, Florence, proves prophetic when Ultima and her protective owl are both destroyed by Tenorio in the closing pages of the novel. Ultima, who cures Tony’s Uncle Lucas of the curse put on him by Tenorio’s daughters, knows that she does so at her own peril, for part of the cure entails the destruction of Tenorio’s
bruja daughters. Ultima explains to Tony the risk that she has taken: "My work was to do good[,]... I was to heal the sick and show them the path of goodness. But I was not to interfere with the destiny of any man" (BMU 247). Ultima had tried to "reason with" Tenorio, but his daughters refused to "lift the curse" on Tony's uncle, forcing Ultima to use her powers—to "work the magic beyond evil"—in order to save the life of her friends' beloved Uncle Lucas (BMU 88). When his daughters begin to die one by one, Tenorio seeks revenge, and his final revenge is to kill Ultima by shooting her owl, her very "spirit" (BMU 247). As Tony tells us, "The shot destroyed the quiet, moonlit peace of the hill, and it shattered my childhood into a thousand fragments that long ago stopped falling and are now dusty relics gathered in distant memories" (BMU 245).

Tony's own life is spared in this scene of killing, for, when Tenorio turns his gun toward Tony after killing the owl, Tony's "uncle Pedro" fires on Tenorio, whose "face twisted with the pain of death" (BMU 246). Prior to his death, however, Tenorio's ultimate act of revenge, the killing of Ultima's owl, has brought an abrupt and brutal end to that "magical time of childhood" (BMU 1). Danger and violence, even during play, have been a part of the childhood that Tony retells in his narrative, but it is through this violence to Ultima, his mentor and the holder of his destiny, that Tony assumes a masculine identity of authority. Although only eight years old, Tony is no longer a child but is now "a man," and, returning to the house after the shootings, he instructs his mother to send his sisters "to their room": "It was the first time I had ever spoken to my mother as a man; she nodded and obeyed" (BMU 246). Tony asserts his patriarchal privilege within the home as a sign of manhood. While his mother's obedience is disconcerting, it is in keeping with the traditional hierarchy of patriarchy within the
Chicano home. After directing his mother’s actions, Tony turns to Ultima, who is depleted and dying through the loss of her owl, and asks for her blessing. Her final “words” speak of “strength”: “I bless you in the name of all that is good and strong and beautiful, Antonio. Always have the strength to live. Love life, and if despair enters your heart, look for me in the evenings when the wind is gentle and the owls sing in the hills, I shall be with you” (BMU 247).

The novel closes with Tony’s burial of the owl and his realization that he is destined to be a writer: “Sometime in the future I would have to build my own dream out of those things that were so much a part of my childhood” (BMU 248). What Tony “build[s]” is the narration of his childhood story. For Tony, the magical play of letters is the serious play that he has been destined to enact since birth. His mentor, Ultima, had “said to take life’s experiences and build strength from them, not weakness,” and Tony’s experiences have given him the courage to stand up for what he believes “to be right” (BMU 248, 205). While he does exert and enjoy male privilege in his home, Tony has challenged other traditional expectations. He has questioned the punitive doctrines of his Catholic religion, and he has synthesized his father’s and his mother’s differing expectations for him into the calling of writer.

Although the boyhood experiences of Anaya’s child protagonist in Bless Me, Ultima are in many instances quite dissimilar to those of Paredes’s Guálinto and Villarreal’s Richard, in Anaya’s novel, as in Paredes’s and Villarreal’s, narratives of play have served pivotal functions in the text and in the child character’s struggle with self-definition. In Bless Me, Ultima, through sites of childhood play coupled with images of the carnivalesque and the grotesque, Anaya implies that what will be regenerating is a
commitment to education and a return to the indigenous myths rather than a blind
adherence to the traditional discourse of Catholicism. In formulating a “vision” for
Chicano/a writers, Anaya articulates a legacy of regeneration in his article, “What Good
Is Literature in Our Time?”:

We can write that we entered our particular community to find the
meaning and direction we needed in the face of a chaotic world. We
entered our circle seeking ancestral meaning and centering ourselves in
that inheritance we found direction. We learned we could shape our
destiny even in the era of transformation. We wrote that meaning and
direction into our stories. The end of one cycle of time has within it the
seed from which a new era will be born. We are that seed. Literature can
have meaning in our time. (477).

For Anaya’s Antonio Márez, writing literature is both his destiny and his vehicle for
conveying “ancestral meaning.” As Vernon E. Lattin asserts, Tony “comes to a mythic
understanding and vision” through a narrative that “attempts to return to the sacred art of
storytelling and myth-making that is part of Indian oral tradition” (“Quest” 629, 639).
Through the honoring of his “mestizo heritage” (Anaya, “Aztlán” 234) as a part of both
his past and his future, Anaya’s protagonist, unlike Paredes’s Gualinto/George Gomez
and Villarreal’s Richard Rubio, “knows who he is” at the close of the novel; “[h]is
ethnicity and identity are one” (Lattin, “Ethnicity” 44). Importantly, learning about the
indigenous legend of the golden carp while at play, rejecting the identity of priest during
pretend play, and losing a valued friend through play have all been formative of the
identity of ethnic writer that the young Tony Márez assumes and embraces as his own.
Anaya asserts that the “growing-up stories” by Chicano writers “provide a history of our past,” but he also argues that because “Chicano culture is patriarchal in orientation,” we should pay “special attention” to “[t]he voice of the woman writer” (“Foreword” 5, 8). Anaya further states that “the voice of the Chicana writer in our culture is one of the most influential in helping to shape and change the cultural ways” (“Foreword” 8). Interestingly, considering Anaya’s comments, even his own *Bless Me, Ultima* does not escape being “patriarchal in orientation” (Anaya, “Foreword” 8), for Anaya’s novel marginalizes the stories of female characters as does Paredes’s *George Washington Gómez* and Villarreal’s *Pocho*. While the character of Ultima does occupy a position of importance in *Bless Me Ultima*, it is a male child whom Anaya has Ultima choose to mentor and it is over Ultima’s dead owl and broken body that this male child comes to manhood. Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*, on the other hand, foregrounds the dangers of male power and gender oppression and “gives voice to the passive and silent females of male-authored Chicano texts” (Olivares 213). As Sonia Saldívar-Hull points out, Cisneros’s text explores Chicana “life at the periphery” and “offers its readers, particularly its Chicana readers, a vision that allows them to believe that they too can speak and write their own versions of *Mango Street*” (87, 82).

In *The House on Mango Street*, Cisneros offers the first-person narrative of a young girl’s struggle with growing up amid the dangers of coming-of-age as a female in a Chicago barrio during the 1960s. In this Chicana narrative of girlhood, Cisneros foregrounds narratives of childhood play in order to highlight issues of self-worth, identity, and loss of innocence as well as to underscore the material conditions and the marginalizations that circumscribe her female characters’ lives. Unlike in *Bless Me,
Ultima, where many of the crucial playing scenes take place at school, at church, or in the surrounding New Mexico countryside, in The House on Mango Street, the playing grounds of Cisneros’s child protagonist, Esperanza Cordero, consist primarily of the streets and of the few neighborhood yards that sprinkle the concrete landscape of her barrio environment. While Esperanza’s coming-of-age story, like Tony’s, involves coming to the realization of writing as destiny, Esperanza’s narrative also is designed to reveal explicitly the entrapment of the females who inhabit her barrio. Throughout the text of The House on Mango Street, Esperanza observes the lives and destinies of both girls and women in her community primarily while she is engaged in activities of girlhood play. It is also during play and games that Esperanza begins to comprehend the dangers and the dilemmas of being a raced, classed, gendered, and sexualized subject.

Cisneros bases the stories of these barrio females on her own experiences as a child, and she explains the impetus behind the writing of The House on Mango Street as follows:

I have lived in the barrio, but I discovered later on in looking at works by my contemporaries that they write about the barrio as a colorful, Sesame Street-like, funky neighborhood. To me the barrio was a repressive community. I found it frightening and very terrifying for women. The future for women in the barrio is not a wonderful one. You don’t wander around ‘these mean streets.’ You stay at home. If you do have to get somewhere, you take your life in your hands. (Satz)

Cisneros emphasizes the “repressive” aspects of the barrio through Esperanza’s first-person accounts of female confinement within the patriarchal home in her neighborhood.
Many of the women in this text are imprisoned in the house by husbands or fathers who fear that their wives or daughters will abandon them or become fallen women outside of the home. For these women, home has become a danger zone.

The character of Esperanza, however, is not confined to the home; as a child she is allowed to roam and play outdoors. Yet the issues of danger and safety on the streets of her community are crucial to Esperanza’s own story, and narratives of childhood play and adolescent play constitute an organizing principle through which Cisneros conveys Esperanza’s experience of her world. Although Monika Kaup posits Mango Street as “a safe place for the children who live there, for they are under the casual surveillance of the adult residents” (391), it is my contention that many of the sites of playing in The House on Mango Street escape this “surveillance.” While the site of playing does, on occasion, contain excitement, fun, and friendship, the narratives of play in this text are also constructed as spaces of risk, violence, and revelation. Cisneros incorporates diverse narratives of play, including spectacle and carnival, and, by employing certain spaces of play as sites of betrayal, painful lessons, and physical dangers that occur out of the range of adult “surveillance,” Cisneros constructs play as an important force in the shaping of Esperanza’s self-image, identity, and chosen destiny as she moves toward adulthood. However, while Cisneros’s fictional children often escape the “surveillance” of concerned adults, many of her female characters cannot escape the stifling “surveillance” of their fathers or husbands.

Cisneros’s Esperanza, who is ten or eleven years of age at the novel’s inception, recognizes at an early age that her gender and culture place her at risk for entrapment within the traditional Chicano home, and she also perceives that her race, class, and
gender stigmatize her in the eyes of dominant Anglo society and position her in harm’s way outside of her communal Chicago barrio. Esperanza, who does not fear physical danger on the streets of her barrio community, explains that outsiders who “come into our neighborhood . . . think we’re dangerous”: “They think we will attack them with shiny knives. They are stupid people who are lost and got here by mistake” (HOMS 28). While Tony’s story in Bless Me, Ultima only briefly mentions the Anglo world explicitly, Esperanza tells us that she and others of her community are frightened when they ride through the “neighborhood[s] of another color” (HOMS 28). Within the boundaries of the barrio, however, Esperanza feels a sense of physical security where “[a]ll brown all around, we are safe” (HOMS 28). Nevertheless, gender does not provide safety in her traditional Latino community, where the fate of many women will be forced imprisonment in the patriarchal home and abusive treatment at the hands of a husband or father. In the end, Esperanza will decide that the dangers of staying on Mango Street outweigh the dangers that may be awaiting her in the outside world.

The street and its surroundings take precedence early in The House on Mango Street, and, when Esperanza first realizes how important having “a real house that would be ours for always” is to her, she is outside playing. As the title implies, this text revolves around the concept of house and home, a concept which is integral to Esperanza’s view of herself, and, in the space of a few brief paragraphs at the inception of this novel, Esperanza relates how her need for a house became to clear to her. Esperanza’s frankness in this short passage reveals both the material circumstances of her life in Chicago and the emotional impact of this experience on her identity and self-worth:
Once when we were living on Loomis, a nun from my school passed by and saw me playing out front. The laundromat downstairs had been boarded up because it had been robbed two days before and the owner had painted on the wood YES WE’RE OPEN so as not to lose business.

Where do you live? she asked.

There, I said pointing up to the third floor.

You live there?

There. I had to look to where she pointed—the third floor, the paint peeling, wooden bars Papa had nailed on the windows so we wouldn’t fall out. You live there? The way she said it made me feel like nothing.

There. I lived there. I nodded.

I knew then I had to have a house. A real house. One I could point to.

But this isn’t it. The house on Mango Street isn’t it. For the time being, Mama says. Temporary, says Papa. But I know how those things go.

(HOMS 4-5)

In this scene, the reality of how her home appears to others intrudes upon Esperanza while she is playing in the scant space available to her—in “front” of a “boarded up” and vandalized “laundromat” (HOMS 4). She is forced to view her family’s economic status as an indicator of her identity and of her self-worth by the nun’s words and tone of voice. One minute Esperanza feels confidence and self-respect; the next minute, she is “made [to] feel like nothing” (HOMS 4, 5). This opposition is one that Esperanza must learn to synthesize by coming to the realization that one’s house does not equal one’s worth.

As a child, however, Esperanza has not yet made this discovery, and the house on
Mango Street, a home that is finally their own and not a rented space, proves to be a
disappointment to Esperanza. She laments that it is nothing like "the house Papa talked
about when he held a lottery ticket" or "the house Mama dreamed up in the stories she
told us before we went to bed" (HOMS 4). Instead, this is a house with its "[b]ricks . . .
crumbling in places," with "no front yard," with "only one washroom" for six people, and
where "[e]verybody has to share a bedroom" (HOMS 4). The home that Esperanza
dreams of is "a house on a hill like the ones with the gardens where [her] Papa works"; in
those houses, she reflects, the residents "have nothing to do with last week's garbage or
fear of rats" (HOMS 86, 87). According to Maria Elena de Valdes, what Esperanza
"must learn is that the house she seeks is, in reality, her own person" (58). Thus, "[s]he
must overcome her rejection of who she is and find her self-esteem": "She must be true
to herself and thereby gain control of her identity. The search for self-esteem and her
true identity is the subtle, yet powerful, narrative thread that unites the text" (Valdes 58).

In The House on Mango Street, part of Esperanza's identity is tied to her role as
sister. Although she has two brothers, Esperanza explains that outside the house, "[t]he
boys and the girls live in separate worlds" (HOMS 8). As a result, it is her younger
sister, Nenny, that Esperanza watches over and views as her "responsibility" (HOMS 8).
Esperanza will not allow Nenny to "play with those Vargas kids or she'll turn out just
like them" (HOMS 8). Esperanza says that the Vargas children are "bad," but "how can
they help it with only one mother who is tired all the time from buttoning and bottling
and babying, and who cries every day for the man who left without even leaving a dollar
for bologna or a note explaining how come" (HOMS 29). The Vargas kids "bend trees
and bounce between cars and dangle upside down from knees" and are "without respect
for all things living, including themselves” (HOMS 29). When “they are playing chicken on Mr. Benny’s roof,” and he tells them they should “know better than to be swinging up there,” the Vargas kids “just spit” at him (HOMS 30). Esperanza’s assessment of this situation is that “after a while you get tired of being worried about kids who aren’t even yours,” and so “nobody looked up not once the day Angel Vargas learned to fly and dropped from the sky like a sugar donut, just like a falling star, and exploded down to earth without even an ‘Oh’” (HOMS 30). Cisneros shows here the chaotic and burdened life of a single-mother whose children create a world of chaos in their playing. Death in this world seems just another everyday occurrence, and Esperanza’s observation that “after a while you get tired of being worried about kids who aren’t even yours” shows that the adult “surveillance” (Kaup 391) system that keeps a watchful eye on the neighborhood children cannot accommodate the chaotic play of the Vargas kids.

Esperanza does watch after her own sister, however, and she makes certain that Nenny does not join the dangerous play of the Vargas children. Yet Esperanza does not consider Nenny as a “friend” because Nenny “is too young,” and, at this early stage in the text, Esperanza longs for an identity as someone’s “best friend” (HOMS 8, 9). In “Our Good Day,” she discovers this close friendship when Lucy and Rachel ask her to share in the cost of a bicycle. In this chapter, Cisneros highlights the girls’ economic status; Esperanza, Lucy, and Rachel cannot afford bikes of their very own. In addition to pointing to the children’s class status, Cisneros shows the congestion of their surroundings as Esperanza describes the “ride . . . [p]ast my house, sad and red and crumbly in places, past Mr. Benny’s’ grocery on the corner, and down the avenue which
is dangerous”: “Laundromat, junk store, drugstore, windows and cars and more cars, and around the block back to Mango” (HOMS 15, 16). In this episode, the site of play is constructed primarily as a fun activity although the danger of traveling too far from home is present. There is a thrill in this danger, however, for this episode is entitled “Our Good Day,” a day that includes the meeting of two new friends and an exciting ride around the block. According to Juanita Heredia, in this chapter, “Esperanza becomes an active agent of her life who wishes to become familiar with her social environment and beyond” (98). Esperanza’s eagerness to “trespass the limitations of her street and explore the other streets in her neighborhood” reflects her desire “to avoid the pitfalls of a ‘sitting by the window’ destiny” (Heredia 98). As Heredia notes, “[i]t is no wonder that for Esperanza and her new girlfriends this experience of owning a bicycle occurs on ‘our good day,’” because Esperanza “has found other girls with whom she can identify who are also willing to take risks” (98). Esperanza’s delight in both the bike ride and her newfound friends is evident in her voice: “Down, down Mango Street we go. Rachel, Lucy, me. Our new bicycle. Laughing the crooked ride back” (HOMS 16).

Shared laughter and play forms an important link between these friends. The laughter and play of Esperanza and her friends, however, is juxtaposed against the sadness and confinement of many of the barrio’s women. Esperanza recognizes the potential for female sadness and entrapment that is inherent in her own name, and she struggles against that identity and destiny throughout her narrative. Esperanza explains that her name was also her “great-grandmother’s name,” and she tells us that “[i]n English” Esperanza “means hope,” while “[i]n Spanish it means . . . sadness, it means waiting” (HOMS 10). Esperanza strongly desires to escape the traditional destiny of
“waiting” that, through marriage, ensnared her great-grandmother in a house where
“[s]he looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on
an elbow” (HOMS 11). Once “a wild horse of a woman,” Esperanza’s great-grandmother had been trapped by Esperanza’s “great-grandfather,” who “threw a sack over her head and carried her off . . . as if she were a fancy chandelier” (HOMS 11). Although Esperanza has “inherited her [great-grandmother’s] name,” she does not “want to inherit her place by the window” (HOMS 11). Instead, Esperanza’s hope is for independence in a home of her own where she will not be trapped and destined to repeat her great-grandmother’s fate.

This fated entrapment of Esperanza’s great-grandmother is linked implicitly to male fears of female spectacle through the masculine prohibition of her great-grandmother’s independence. A female, in order not to make a spectacle of herself, must act in proscribed ways within the culture of patriarchy, and “[t]he figure of the female transgressor as public spectacle is still powerfully resonant” (Russo 217). The dilemma for females within the discourse of spectacle is that dangers reside both inside the realm of domesticity and outside of its borders. Cisneros foregrounds this dilemma in The House on Mango Street through the female characters who are trapped within the patriarchal home, on the one hand, and through the character of Esperanza, on the other hand, who encounters danger in mobility and in the freedom to play beyond the boundaries of her home.

It is during the narrative of play related in “The Family of Little Feet” that Cisneros’s Esperanza experiences firsthand the specific dangers of spectacle. In this episode in The House on Mango Street, however, the idea of spectacle differs from the
use of spectacle and play in Bless Me, Ultima. In Anaya's text, while the boys from Los Jaros make a spectacle of the Christian first Christmas through their outrageous play onstage, their antics are greeted with unthreatening laughter from the audience. In actuality, little more than horseplay and antics are expected of the boys from "across the tracks" (BMU 33). The spectacle of urinating, swearing, and cross-dressing in the Christmas play is, with the exception of the cross-dressing, simply a magnification of what these boys engage in on an everyday basis—peeing against the church wall, wrestling and swearing at each other during play. The idea of spectacle takes a significant twist, however, when applied to female children. As Mary Russo points out in "Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory," many girl children frequently hear the following statement pronounced by women about "the behavior of other women: 'She' (the other woman) is making a spectacle out of herself" (213). Thus, female children often learn that "[m]aking a spectacle out of oneself seem[s] a specifically feminine danger" (Russo 213). According to Russo, "[f]or a woman, making a spectacle out of herself" entails "a kind of inadvertency and loss of boundaries," and "anyone, any woman, could make a spectacle out of herself if she was not careful" (213).

As Russo also notes, this fear of female spectacle has roots in Bakhtin's carnivalesque "with [its] particular emphasis on the grotesque body"—a "body [that] is the open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process, and change" (219). What is problematical with this grotesque image, Russo states, is that "Bakhtin finds his concept of the grotesque embodied in the Kerch terracotta figurines of senile, pregnant hags" (219). As Russo asserts, "for the feminist reader, this image of the pregnant hag is more than ambivalent: It is loaded with all of the connotations of fear
and loathing associated with the biological processes of reproduction and aging” (219). On the other hand, Russo writes, “Bakhtin’s description of these ancient crones is at least exuberant,” for they “‘are laughing’” (219). In Bakhtin’s view, “[t]he laughter of carnival” with its “spectacles and unconstrained speech in the Middles Ages” contained a “positive” aspect (Russo 218). However, “Bakhtin, like many other social theorists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, fails to acknowledge or incorporate the social relations of gender in his semiotic model of the body politic” (Russo 219). According to Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, “carnival often violently abuses and demonizes weaker, not stronger, social groups—women, ethnic and religious minorities, those who ‘don’t belong’” (19). As a result, carnival and spectacle hold particular “dangers for women” through the image of “the female body as grotesque (the pregnant body, the aging body, the irregular body) and as unruly when set loose in the public sphere” (Russo 214).

In *The House on Mango Street*, Cisneros first addresses the dangers of spectacle when Esperanza and her friends play dress-up with high-heeled shoes and blur the boundaries of childhood and womanhood. In the “The Family of Little Feet,” Esperanza, Rachel, and Lucy enthusiastically engage in pretend-play after they are given a sack of worn ladies’ shoes: “Hurray! Today we are Cinderella because our feet fit exactly, and we laugh at Rachel’s one foot with a girl’s grey sock and a lady’s high heel” (HOMS 40). The girls swap pairs of shoes back and forth, but Rachel is the one “who learns to walk the best all strutted in those magic high heels” (HOMS 40). She “teaches” them how “to cross and uncross [their] legs,” Esperanza says, and “how to walk down to the corner so that the shoes talk back to you with every step”—“[d]own to the corner where
the men can’t take their eyes off us” (HOMS 40). Mr. Benny tells the girls that their shoes “are dangerous,” and that they are “too young to be wearing shoes like that” (HOMS 41). When a young boy says to them, “Ladies, lead me to heaven,” the girls become even more enamored of their shoes, saying that they “will never go back to wearing the other kind again” (HOMS 41). When they pass “a bum man” who is sitting “in front of the tavern,” he asks them to “come closer” and tells Rachel that she is a “pretty girl,” offering her a dollar in exchange for a kiss (HOMS 41). While Rachel appears tempted by the offer, Lucy grabs her and the girls scamper for the safety of home. After their return home, Lucy finds a hiding place for the shoes which are later discovered and discarded by her mother; however, as Esperanza confides, “no one complains” about the loss of the shoes (HOMS 42).

According to Ramón Saldivar, in their donning of the shoes that are markers of adult femininity, “the girls come unwittingly face to face with the contours of their prescribed roles as players in the sexual economy” (CN 184). Esperanza and her friends, discovering that “their innocent toys . . . have turned out to be all too readily the implements of a sexual power structure” that they “only dimly perceive,” are not disturbed by the loss of the shoes, for in wearing the shoes, the girls have “experience[d] the various ways in which female sexuality is defined, constrained, [and] coerced by patriarchal society” (Saldivar, CN 185). According to Saldivar-Hull, in this episode, the girls receive “[t]he message” that “women are open targets on streets beyond Mango Street, and perhaps their fathers are correct—to be beautiful, to be a woman, is dangerous” (96). The girls are “sexualized” by males during their escapade on the high heels, and they “perceive their sexuality and how, through ideological socialization,
women’s sexuality is mediated by the male gaze” (Saldivar-Hull 97). As Laura Gutierrez Spencer asserts, unlike “the blushing Cinderella, whose symbol of salvation is a shoe, these young heroines learn that high-heeled shoes ‘are dangerous,’” and “that the power their sexuality holds in attracting attention from males often has negative consequences” (280). Through the girls’ experiences during their excursion in the high-heeled shoes, Cisneros invokes spectacle and the female body and indicates that “women and their bodies, certain bodies, in certain public framings, in certain public spaces, are always already transgressive—dangerous, and in danger” (Russo 217).

In The House on Mango Street, female sexuality is perceived by males as dangerous, and this text is filled with female characters who are locked away by the males who fear that these women and girls will make spectacles of themselves and, in doing so, shame the males who are their husbands or fathers. Through the stories of Sally and Rafaela, for example, Cisneros makes it clear that this feared shame is related to sexuality, and the grotesque destiny of these females is very much like that of Esperanza’s great-grandmother who “looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow” (HOMS 11). In Sally’s case, however, being locked away by her father whenever he thinks about his own sisters also includes physical abuse, and she confides in Esperanza that one time “he hit her with his hands just like a dog... like if I was an animal. He thinks I’m going to run away like his sisters who made the family ashamed. Just because I’m a daughter” (HOMS 92). To “escape” this brutality, Sally “get[s] married before eighth grade,” but this “escape” is into another prison where her husband will not allow her to “talk on the telephone” or to “look out the window” (HOMS 101, 102). Sally must “sit” with her “sadness” (HOMS
11) and gaze “at all the things they own” and “at the walls” and “the linoleum rises on the floor” (HOMS 102). Caged by fear, Sally does not dare leave the house unless she has her husband’s “permission” (HOMS 102).

The character of Rafaela, on the other hand, is allowed to look out of her window, but she is “getting old from leaning out the window so much” (HOMS 79). Rafaela “gets locked indoors because her husband is afraid Rafaela will run away since she is too beautiful to look at” (HOMS 79). The destinies of characters such as Rafaela and Sally are the fates that result from male fear of female spectacle and female fear of economic destitution should they attempt to provide a living for themselves. As Saldivar-Hull states, “[t]he Mango Street neighborhood is filled with women imprisoned in the domestic space by patriarchal and economic constraints” (94). Furthermore, the female characters in Cisneros’s text who can only look out of windows themselves become a spectacle of entrapment as they are gazed at by passersby. These are the gazes and the destinies that Esperanza must fight to avoid as she comes of age in a culture that constricts female freedom.

Yet, in The House on Mango Street, the use of spectacle is not limited to the spectacle of female sexuality and female entrapment. In “Born Bad,” Esperanza and her friends make a spectacle of female illness when Esperanza’s Aunt Lupe, “sick from the disease that would not go” (HOMS 58), becomes the brunt of a cruel game devised by Esperanza, Rachel, and Lucy. In this game, each player “imitate[s]” someone and the other players “would have to guess who it was” (HOMS 59). At first, the friends imitate celebrities, but later they decide to pretend to be various people in their neighborhood. This game takes on a cruel tone, however, when the girls decide to play this game a little
differently one day, and they all take turns mimicking Aunt Lupe:

We pretended with our heads thrown back, our arms limp and useless, dangling like the dead. We laughed the way she did. We talked the way she talked, the way blind people talk without moving their head. We imitated the way you had to lift her head a little so she could drink water, she sucked it up slow out of a green tin cup... Lucy laughed. Rachel too. We took turns being her. We screamed in the weak voice of a parrot for Totchy to come and wash those dishes. It was easy. (HOMS 61)

Esperanza says that when they “played the game” of mimicking her illness-ravaged Aunt Lupe, they “didn’t know she was going to die” (HOMS 61), and, in the case of this particular game, the girls’ play does not escape adult scrutiny. In a rare instance in this text, religion is mentioned when Esperanza describes her mother’s as well as her own reaction to this game of pretend: “Most likely I will go to hell and most likely I deserve to be there. My mother says I was born on an evil day and prays for me. Lucy and Rachel pray too. For ourselves and for each other... because of what we did to Aunt Lupe” (HOMS 58).

Like Tony, who experiences a type of religious moral enlightenment concerning his destiny through the game of pretend-priest, Esperanza undergoes a type of moral reckoning connected to her future through the game in which she makes fun of her blind and bedridden aunt. Tony, however, is enacting, through his pretend-priest role, a gender-specific masculine role of empowerment, and he rejects the oppressiveness of that role. Esperanza, on the other hand, both enacts and mocks a gender-specific role of feminine oppression and poverty, not realizing until her mother rebukes her that this is a
dangerous and shameful game that rehearses the oppressions of females. It is only after Aunt Lupe’s death that Esperanza and her friends are ashamed of having mocked this aunt who had once been “pretty” and a “swimmer” but whose destiny was to be confined to a bed, blind and diseased, in a squalid apartment that never saw the sun, an apartment with “dirty dishes in the sink[,] . . . ceilings dusty with flies, . . . ugly maroon walls,” and “bottles and sticky spoons” (HOMS 60). This is also the aunt who had “listened to every book, every poem” that Esperanza “read her,” even to one of the poems that Esperanza had composed (HOMS 60). Praising Esperanza’s poetry, Aunt Lupe had advised Esperanza “to keep writing” because “[i]t will keep you free” (HOMS 61). Although Esperanza had agreed with her aunt, she tells us that “at that time I didn’t know what she meant” (HOMS 61). Yet Esperanza says that after the death of Aunt Lupe, “who listened to my poems,. . . . we began to dream the dreams” (HOMS 61).

Esperanza does not explain what she means by this statement, but it is possible to infer that the cruelty of Esperanza’s childhood game of pretend, coupled with her aunt’s subsequent death, serves to cement and magnify Aunt Lupe’s words about writing in Esperanza’s mind. Esperanza will eventually experience the freedom of writing, but freedom for Esperanza will involve not only writing the stories of women like her Aunt Lupe, but also her dream of having her own house: “Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man’s house. Not a daddy’s. A house all my own. With my porch and my pillow, my pretty purple petunias. My books and my stories. My two shoes beside the bed. Nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody’s garbage to pick up after” (HOMS 108).

Although Esperanza alludes to household chores in the description of her dream house where she would not have to “pick up after” anyone, her household responsibilities
on Mango Street receive little attention in this novel. As readers, however, we realize that Esperanza must have some domestic duties at home when she states that she has started her “own quiet war”: “Simple. Sure. I am one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate” (HOMS 89). Esperanza has determined to resist constricting gender roles, and she has also “decided not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain” (HOMS 88). However, as Ellen McCracken points out, while Esperanza’s “gesture calls critical attention to gender inequities in the family, Cisneros avoids the issue of who, in fact, will end up performing the household labor that Esperanza refuses here” (70). As McCracken notes, Esperanza’s defiance of domestic gender norms “is likely, in fact, to increase the work for another woman in Esperanza’s household” (70).³

We are not told Esperanza’s family’s reaction to her defiance at the dinner table, but, interestingly, the chapter that follows Esperanza’s description of her “own quiet war” (HOMS 89) reveals significant information about Mrs. Cordero’s hopes for Esperanza. “I could’ve been somebody,” her mother says “while cooking oatmeal,” and she confides to Esperanza that she did not finish school due to shame: “Shame is a bad thing, you know. It keeps you down. You want to know why I quit school? Because I didn’t have nice clothes. No clothes, but I had brains” (HOMS 91). Her advice to Esperanza is to “go to school” and “[s]tudy hard” (HOMS 91). Mrs. Cordero believes that education is the key to a future for Esperanza that will not include a house like their current one where “[e]verybody has to share a bedroom” (HOMS 4). Gender, class, ethnicity, and poverty have constricted Mrs. Cordero’s options throughout her life, and, Mrs. Cordero’s own experiences, perhaps, are a significant reason why Esperanza is not confined to the
domestic sphere. As a child, Esperanza is allowed time for play and for adventures with friends, as opposed to other female characters in this text, like Marin, who are chained to household chores.

It is while “playing volleyball in the alley” with friends that Esperanza first observes Marin, who “can’t come out—gotta baby-sit Louie’s sisters—but she stands in the doorway a lot, all the time singing, clicking her fingers” (HOMS 23-24). Marin, as well as many other female characters in this text, places her hopes on marriage as a means to a better life. Saldívar-Hull makes the point that “Marin can imagine no other solution to her situation” because she is “[t]rapped by the undereducation imposed on women and men of her class and ethnicity” (94). Thus, as Esperanza phrases it, Marin “[i]s waiting for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change her life” (HOMS 27). At night, Marin sits outside because, as she explains to Esperanza, “What matters . . . is for the boys to see us and for us to see them” (27).

As Esperanza moves into adolescence, she, along with Lucy and Rachel begin to think about boys, and they ponder the connection between boys and their own female bodies while playing. In the segment entitled “Hips,” the girls discuss the implications of hips as they are jumping rope: “They’re good for holding a baby when you’re cooking,” “[y]ou need them to dance,” “[i]f you don’t get them you may turn into a man,” “you might decide to have kids,” “[y]ou gotta know how to walk with hips,” “that’s to rock the baby asleep inside you” (HOMS 49, 50). As Esperanza, Lucy, and Rachel take turns wiggling their hips as they jump, they begin creating new jump-rope songs about hips. The ending of Esperanza’s impromptu stanza reflects her desire that her body be transformed by the magic of hips: “I don’t care what kind I get. Just as long as I get
hips” (HOMS 51). Saldívar-Hull states that, while the girls “locate the center of production and reproduction in the hips,” these friends also “produce new meanings for their bodies, something other than making babies,” by creating “poetry, song, and dance” (97). As Saldívar-Hull notes, Esperanza, Lucy, and Rachel “celebrate their ability to play with words” by inventing their own “jump-rope chants” (97). Only Nenny still chants the old and familiar jump-rope rhymes which, for Esperanza, places Nenny “in a world” that she, Lucy, and Rachel “don’t belong to anymore” (HOMS 52). Esperanza is beginning the transition from childhood to adolescence, but she has not yet left childhood play behind. While the playful rhymes and jump-rope games of this chapter provide a safe outlet for the girls to explore their curiosity about “(hetero)sexuality” and to “flaunt their innocent physicality” (Saldívar-Hull 97), in a later playing segment, “The Monkey Garden,” innocent play is marred for Esperanza.

In “The Monkey Garden,” issues of danger and sexuality arise in an overgrown garden that had been, for Esperanza, a protected playspace. The barrio’s children, including Esperanza, love to play in this garden where flowers and weeds now grow wild and “[d]ead cars appear overnight like mushrooms” (HOMS 95). They also like the garden because it is a place to escape from their mothers’ control, from that “casual surveillance” that Kaup posits. As Sutton-Smith points out, while “the child public transcript is to be successful as family members and schoolchildren, . . . their private or hidden transcript is their play life, in which they can express both their special identity and their resentment at being a captive population” (123). Esperanza revels in the freedom of this garden where “[t]hings had a way of disappearing . . . as if the garden itself ate them, or, as if with its old-man memory, it put them away and forgot them”
The garden’s appeal is erased for Esperanza, however, on the day that Sally brings (hetero)sexuality into this playing ground of innocence and chooses males over Esperanza. On this day, Sally does not want to play in the garden with Esperanza and the other children and instead stays by the street talking with Tito and some other boys. Although Esperanza “wanted to go back with the other kids who were still jumping on cars, still chasing each other through the garden” (HOMS 96), she returns to the street for Sally. Sally, however, is no longer interested in playing and running in the garden and now has “her own game” with these boys (HOMS 96). The boys tell Sally that they will not let her have the car keys until she kisses them, and Sally, agreeing, follows the boys into the garden. This makes Esperanza feel “angry inside” and as if “something wasn’t right” (HOMS 97). She rushes to Tito’s house and tells Tito’s mother that he and the boys are making Sally kiss them before they will give her back her car keys. Tito’s mother, unconcerned, continues the ironing she is doing without even “looking up”:

“What do you want me to do, . . . call the cops?” Esperanza, gaining no aid from Tito’s mother and hoping to rescue Sally herself, picks up “three big sticks and a brick,” and races “to the garden where Sally needed to be saved” (HOMS 97). Sally does not want to be “saved,” however, and she tells Esperanza to “go home,” while the boys chime in with “leave us alone” (HOMS 97). Esperanza now feels “stupid” and “ashamed,” and she “hide[s]” in the garden, sobbing and “want[ing] to be dead” (HOMS 97).

The real world of sexuality and the power structure of gendered relationships has trespassed on this wonderful garden, breaking its safety and innocence, and Esperanza, who has now gained knowledge of her powerlessness to protect either Sally or the
garden’s innocence, mourns the loss of this little fairyland. In an Eden that previously had been unspoiled by sexual politics, Esperanza has witnessed, through Sally’s actions and Sally’s dismissal of her, “the emergence in boys of ‘sexual entitlement’ and in girls of ‘sexual accommodation’” (Tolman 55). With the entry of the sexual into the field of childhood play, Esperanza also mourns the passing of childhood and her identity as a child, for she tries to remember who had told her that she “was getting too old to play” in the garden, and she wonders why she had not “listened” (HOMS 96). Instead of voluntarily leaving behind the garden and childhood, Esperanza is forced to give up both in a manner that assaults her self-worth. There will be no fond memories of her last day of garden play, for this Eden-like playing ground has now been contaminated as a haven for safe and innocent play: “This is where I wanted to die and where I tried one day but not even the monkey garden would have me,” Esperanza says, and adds, “It was the last day I would go there” (HOMS 96).

The intrusion of Sally and the boys into the playworld of the monkey garden prefigures the sexual assault on Esperanza in the playworld of the carnival which, in this text, functions as dangerous space of play. According to Sutton-Smith, in opposition to the play “of order and civilization,” there is “the play of disorder, which includes “carnival” (81), and Cisneros sets Esperanza’s sexual violation in this playworld of disorder. In this episode, Esperanza tells us that she “was waiting by the red clowns,” next to the “tilt-a-whirl” for Sally, who “never came” back for her (HOMS 99, 100). Esperanza’s words in this chapter express a distressing cry for Sally’s help, but Sally has left to be with a boy, once again choosing males over her friend and leaving Esperanza alone and in danger. Although Esperanza had tried to come to Sally’s aid in the monkey
garden, at the carnival “she waits in vain by the grotesque red clowns for Sally” (Doyle 22). Abandoned by Sally and with no one to rescue her or to respond to her pleas for help, Esperanza’s narrative gives voice to her agony:

Sally Sally a hundred times. Why didn’t you hear me when I called? Why didn’t you tell them to leave me alone? The one who grabbed me by the arm, he wouldn’t let me go. He said I love you, Spanish girl, I love you, and pressed his sour mouth to mine. . . . I couldn’t make them go away. I couldn’t do anything but cry. I don’t remember. It was dark. I don’t remember. I don’t remember. Please don’t make me tell it all.

(HOMS 100)

Cisneros places this vicious assault on Esperanza within the chaotic atmosphere of the carnival where, as Heredia asserts, “Esperanza realizes that even in a children’s world like a carnival, young girls are not safe” (101). Importantly, Esperanza does not even “like carnivals,” but has gone to this carnival in order to be with Sally and watch her “laugh on the tilt-a-whirl” (HOMS 99). The only laughter that Esperanza will remember from this night, however, is “[t]he red clowns laughing their thick-tongue laugh” as she is being sexually assaulted (HOMS 100).

In this episode, her “brutal encounter with male power adds the vulgarity of racial politics to the horror of sexual politics”; “Esperanza sees that the ideologies of romantic love serve as the propaganda for the maintenance of the sexual economy that makes women like Sally and Esperanza victims merely because they are women” (Saldívar, CN 186). As Olivares states, Esperanza, in an earlier chapter entitled “Sire,” had communicated to the reader “her burgeoning sexuality” and “her attraction to boys”
In the "Red Clowns" chapter, however, Esperanza realizes that "what she perceives to be the romantic and liberating aspects of her sexuality...exposes her to peril and male domination," and the "physical violation" of her body "brutally undermines her romantic notions of love and sex" (Olivares 219). In this anguishing scene of assault at the carnival, Cisneros incorporates a version of carnival and laughter that is not the regenerative laughter of the folk carnivalesque but instead functions as a "grotesque form" of laughter that "acquires the traits of mockery and cynicism, and finally becomes satanic" (Bakhtin, RW 51). During the assault on Esperanza, carnival and the grotesque become "all that is dark and terrifying" (Bakhtin, RW 47).

Yet in spite of the horrifying experience of being sexually assaulted, Esperanza is able to go on with her life, to tell us her story, to write about "Mango Street, sad red house, the house I belong but do not belong to" (HOMS 110). Although Esperanza has been subjected to violent forces, she still says, in her closing comments, that she is "strong" and that, while she will someday leave Mango Street, she will return "[f]or the ones who cannot out" (HOMS 110). Esperanza's ending remarks also reveal that she has begun to comprehend the connection between freedom and writing: "I write it down and Mango says goodbye sometimes. She does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free...One day I will say goodbye to Mango. I am too strong for her to keep me here forever" (HOMS 110). By the close of her narration, it is also evident that Esperanza has combined the sadness and the hope inherent in her name to produce a strength that allows her to take a stand both for herself and for the women of Mango Street through the act of writing.

Saldivar argues that "in the writings of Chicana authors, dialectics works to undo..."
... abstract binary oppositions (CN 175), and Valdes asserts that Cisneros’s Esperanza, through the act of writing, “has created a present in which she can be free and belong at the same time” (69). The voice of Esperanza, in the final pages of Mango Street, brings to mind Anzaldúa’s “new mestiza,” who “copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity”:

She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing is rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else. . . . In attempting to work out a synthesis, the self has added a third element which is greater than the sum of its several parts. That third element is a new consciousness—a *mestiza* consciousness—and though it is a source of intense pain, its energy comes from continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm. (766-767).

Anzaldúa’s theory of the new *mestiza* consciousness seems an apt description of the character of Esperanza at the close of The House on Mango Street. Esperanza’s loss of innocence, her exposure to violence and marginalization, her experience of the confining restrictions of her material conditions and of patriarchal culture have all been confronted by Esperanza and reformulated into the strength of conviction. Her conviction to tell the stories of “the ones who cannot out”—the women she has “left behind”—positions her as “a political agent capable of achieving and maintaining personal and political power and also demonstrates an effective means for others like her to claim a space for themselves in the world” (Karafilis 76).
In writing the stories of “the lonely and imprisoned, the physically and psychologically abused,” Esperanza also “displays her collective identity with her sisters” (Olivares 213). Esperanza embraces the women of her community through her writing just as she embraces her own destiny and identity as a Chicana writer. Unlike masculine narratives of growing up in which the individual is reified, Cisneros “diminishes the status of the individual and reintroduces a collective Latino public space, the urban equivalent of the homeland” (Kaup 390). Esperanza, unlike George W. Gomez and Richard Rubio, will not leave without looking back, and the dream she has for the future is not only her “own dream” (BMU 248), as is Tony Márez’s, but is also a dream of return for the ones “left behind” (HOMS 110). It is “through education and writing” that Esperanza has “escape[d] from her physical and cultural confinement”; however, in a sense, “she never leaves Mango Street because instead of romanticizing or fantasizing, she writes of her reality” (Olivares 226). The narrative of that reality is filled with what Esperanza observes, perceives, and learns during playtime. The risk, revelation, and violence that Esperanza experiences during play, instead of defeating her, provide her with added resolve to forge an identity that resists oppressions and a spirit that fights for the women she has “left behind” (HOMS 110).
Notes

1 Calderón situates “Bless Me, Ultima as a romance” (24) that offers little “worthwhile analysis or attention to the contradictions of race, class and gender which were the results of conquest” (39). According to Calderón, “[t]he actual events of the discovery and conquest of the New World and the Southwest . . . are repressed and reconceptualized as a nostalgia for the heroic ideals of an earlier medieval-like society or as a return to the adventure and magic of the chivalric romances” (39). There are critics, however, who hold the opposite view. In “Learning to Read (and/in) Rudolfo Anaya’s Bless Me, Ultima,” Juan Bruce-Novoa argues that Calderón’s “approach” runs the risk of “condemning Anaya to the reactionary position of a nostalgic dreamer in search of a golden age no longer, and perhaps never, possible in reality” (187). Bruce Novoa asserts that “Anaya is clearly conscious of the malaise of modernity” and “does not reject the realities of the nuclear age, as Calderón seems to imply, but rather offers . . . an alternative based in the ancient wisdom of peoples and not limited to the rationalism that sees anything but reason as escapist fantasy” (187-188). In “Myth as the Cognitive Process of Popular Culture in Rudolfo Anaya’s Bless Me, Ultima: The Dialectics of Knowledge,” Enrique R. Lamadrid also defends Anaya against the charge that Bless Me, Ultima is “ahistorical” (497). Lamadrid argues that Antonio’s “emerging consciousness . . . incorporates a dynamic, even dialectical awareness of historical forces, from the colonization by Hispanic farmers and ranchers to the coming of the Anglos and World War II” (496).

2 In The Politics and Poetics of Transgression, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, finding Bakhtin’s “optimistic populism” to be “problematic,” attempt “to effect a
transposition of the Bakhtinian conception of the carnivalesque into a framework which makes it analytically powerful in the study of ideological repertoires and cultural practices” (9, 26). Their “transposition” of Bakhtin “reveals that the underlying structural features of carnival operate far beyond the strict confines of popular festivity and are intrinsic to the dialectics of social classification” (26). Stallybrass and White argue that “transcodings between different levels and sectors of social and psychic reality are effected through the intensifying grid of the body”; thus, “transgressions and the attempt to control them obsessively return to somatic symbols, for these are ultimate elements of social classification itself” (26). Anaya’s version of the carnivalesque and of the grotesque body also, I argue, highlights “different levels and sectors of social and psychic reality . . . through the intensifying grid of the body.”

3 In speaking of her childhood, Cisneros explains that, although she did have her “‘share of housework to do,’” she did not have to deal with “‘the burden of endless housework’”: “‘Because of my mother, I spent my childhood afternoons in my room reading instead of in the kitchen . . . I never had to change my little brothers’ diapers, I never had to cook a meal alone, nor was I ever sent to do the laundry’” (Ganz n. pag). Cisneros’s childhood experience as a female child in a house with six brothers stands in stark contrast to that of many other Chicanas. In Feminism on the Border: Chicana Gender Politics and Literature, Chicana feminist and literary critic Sonia Saldívar-Hull writes that her childhood “[i]n the Río Grande Valley of South Texas” (2) “did not allow playtime for girls” (6). Her “Mother could not accept a daughter’s learning to ride a bike or even to roller-skate,” and, while Saldívar-Hull’s “brothers could play, read, and study as much as they wanted,” she was expected “to perform crucial household and child-care
tasks” (9). For Saldivar-Hull’s mother, her daughter’s “longing to ride a bike or play baseball with the boys could signify only dangerous propensities to wander, improper desires for a girl” (9). Saldivar-Hull states that “becoming a full-fledged American never altered her [mother’s] biases against her daughter’s attempt to escape traditional gender constraints” (9). In The House on Mango Street, Cisneros critiques and resists this traditional attitude through the construction of a protagonist who is not confined to household duties in the domestic sphere. While Cisneros’s Esperanza Cordero has time to play outside the confines of her tiny home, however, Cisneros also shows that “propensities to wander” (Saldivar-Hull) can have negative consequences for female children who, while exploring their surroundings, are subjected to the unwanted sexual advances of males. See Robin Ganz, “Sandra Cisneros: Border Crossings and Beyond” MELUS 19 (Spring 1994), Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost, Rice University, Fondren Lib. 3 March 2003 and Sonia Saldivar-Hull, Feminism on the Border: Chicana Gender Politics and Literature (Berkeley: U of CA P, 2000).
Chapter Three

**Toni Morrison’s Politics and Poetics of Girlhood Play: Dolls, Dismemberments, and Disappearing Playmates in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula***

While Chapter Two juxtaposed the dynamics of play in a Chicano novel of development and a Chicana coming-of-age narrative, this chapter takes as its focus two female-centered African American *bildungsromane*, Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Sula* (1973). Like Sandra Cisneros, who illuminates the experiences of Chicanas whose stories are marginalized in Chicano narratives, Morrison, in her first two novels, delves into the lives of black women and girls whose experiences are silenced in texts by African American males. Morrison states that when she wrote her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, she wanted to address ""the whole business of what is physical beauty and the pain of that yearning and wanting to be somebody else, and how devastating that was and yet part of all females who were peripheral in other people’s lives’’ (Ruas 95-96). Writers like ""Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright,’’ Morrison adds, ""all of whose books I admire enormously—I didn’t feel were telling me something’’ (Ruas 96).

Morrison’s focus on what is excluded by African American male writers brings to the fore the central role of childhood play in negotiating the affects of racist violence within the context of intraracial female relationships. Throughout her corpus, Morrison has created a diverse array of African American women and girl characters, and their lives frequently contain both physical and psychological violence. Morrison began her exploration of violence in female lives, in part, through the playtime activities of the girls in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*. The violence inherent in Morrison’s depiction of girlhood playtime has roots in the historical and political circumstances of her characters’ lives.
and branches out to have negative consequences for her characters’ self-identity and self-esteem. Morrison, like Cisneros, foregrounds narratives of play to highlight the resistance of certain female child characters to oppressive societal and communal systems. However, while Cisneros uses various scenes of play to show the oppressiveness of Chicano patriarchy and Esperanza’s resistance to male power, Morrison employs narratives of play to critique how intersections between racism and sexism create a resistance in African American girls to black maternal values. Moreover, although Cisneros’s Esperanza experiences danger and violence during particular scenes of play, Esperanza’s narrative also shows that the right to play is a part of her childhood and that she has playtimes that she enjoys. In *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, on the other hand, which more explicitly revolve around the conflicted processes of self-definition in a racist world, Morrison shows that the right to play is not a right of all childhoods, and she also questions the value of play as a site for positive developmental progress for her child characters.

While Morrison challenges both the theory of play as progress and the popular ideology that the right to play is a right of childhood, her most striking use of childhood playtime foregrounds the tensions in her girl characters’ relations to maternal power. In both *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, black maternal attitudes are complicit in devaluing black female children, and Morrison’s Claudia MacTeer, Sula Peace, and Nel Wright resist this assault on their self-worth through their violent actions during play. However, while all three of these girl characters rebel against the maternal through the roles that they assume during play, their play actions cause each of them to either reject or repress their playing identities at a cost. For Claudia, the cost is her eventual acceptance of white dolls and
white icons, a conformity that cheats the self. For Sula, the cost is a rejection of her very self and of all sense of “responsibility” (Sula 118), and, for Nel, the cost is a superior attitude of goodness that suppresses the part of herself that is ashamed and fearful. In constructing playing as a site for unsuccessfully negotiating a positive sense of self, Morrison challenges the widely-held view of play as progress for children.

In a 1985 interview, Morrison expresses her view that “children are really in danger—our children” (Jones and Vinson 186), and, in The Bluest Eye, Morrison attributes part of that danger to the absence of positive images of African Americans in mass culture—an absence that leads to an invalidation of self and of others through assimilation and internalized racism. While many of the adult characters in The Bluest Eye evidence a lack of positive self worth, Morrison places the primary focus of this novel on Pecola Breedlove, the child character who, through her retreat into the sanctuary of insanity, embodies the devastating consequences of assimilating white culture’s definitions of desirability. Morrison also explores the negative implications of assimilation for the child character of Claudia MacTeer through both the Shirley Temple icon and the activity of doll-play. Through Claudia, Morrison not only highlights the negative consequences of African American girls being given the gift of white baby dolls but also addresses what doll play in general might mean to young female children. While The Bluest Eye stresses the nonavailability of black baby dolls during the early 1940s time setting of the novel, the distressed reactions of the black women characters to Claudia’s dismemberment of her white baby dolls serves as commentary on their own material circumstances as young girls and on their absorption of white ideologies of beauty.
Although many scholars have focused on Claudia’s dismemberment of white
dolls in *The Bluest Eye*, I argue that a knowledge of the history of U.S. doll-making and
doll-marketing is crucial to an understanding of why the gift of white dolls forces Claudia
to define herself against both white racism and the internalized racism of black women.
The black women who give Claudia the gift of white baby dolls find her dismemberment
of those dolls appalling, and, while the text does not specifically name Claudia’s mother
among those women, it is implied that she shares their mortification at Claudia’s
destructive play actions. *The Bluest Eye* does make it clear, however, that Mrs. MacTeer
loves both of her daughters even though the text does not show Claudia’s mother taking
time from household chores to play with either Claudia or Frieda. Pecola Breedlove, on
the other hand, who seems to have no toys at all, has a mother who neither loves her nor
plays with her, instead preferring the white child that she is employed to nurture.

In *Sula*, the character of Hannah Peace, as a grown woman, questions her
mother’s love for her as a child because that love did not include Eva’s playing with
Hannah. On the other hand, Hannah loves but does not like her own daughter, Sula, who
compensates for this perceived rejection through the playtime drowning of a small black
boy, Chicken Little. The character of Nel Wright, whose mother, Helene, has forced
Nel’s “enthusiasms” and “imagination underground” (*Sula* 18), experiences a thrill
during this same playtime accident—a suppressed thrill that is related to her mother,
whose actions on their Jim Crow train ride caused Nel shame and fear in front of black
males. Although Sula’s and Nel’s reasons for resistance to the maternal are different,
both girls, through Sula’s drowning of Chicken Little, react to the ways that racism and
sexism have an impact upon black families. The playtime drowning of this male child
constitutes a form of rebellion against maternal attitudes that either value black males over daughters or that shame daughters in front of black males. However, in destroying a live black child, as opposed to a doll, Sula and Nel reenact the cycle of violence that is a part of their family histories as African Americans living in a racist and sexist U.S. society.

Morrison forthrightly declares her commitment to revealing the political implications for blacks residing in a white supremacist society when she states that for her the act of writing cannot be a gratification of personal imaginings; instead, “the work must be political” (“Rootedness” 339). In Morrison’s fictional worlds, the political persecution and marginalization of African Americans by dominant white culture often leads either explicitly or implicitly to damaging psychological effects in her characters. Because Morrison feels that the devaluation of African Americans is particularly injurious to black children, she uses the figure of the playing child as well as the figure of the disappearing child in The Bluest Eye to comment on both the racism of dominant white society and the complicity of the black community in their disregard for what she sees as the most vulnerable of society’s members. This inattention and indifference has political resonance for Morrison, for the neglect that enveloped enslaved black children did not end with emancipation. In Stolen Childhood, Wilma King asserts that the children of slaves “have received little attention because they, more than other enslaved persons, were ‘silent and invisible’: This enormous population did not write or speak for itself and was often ignored by others” (xviii). In Beloved (1987), Morrison turned her attention specifically to the “‘silent and invisible’” children of slavery, and, in her first novel, The Bluest Eye, and more obliquely in her second novel, Sula, her child characters
serve as reminders of that legacy of neglect through their marginal positions within a racist U.S. society.

The Bluest Eye and Sula also prefigure the theme of “disallowing” or rejection that is so crucial to Morrison’s more recent novel, Paradise (1998). In Paradise, a group of black families moves to Oklahoma after having been disallowed any semblance of civil rights in the white supremacist South of the late-nineteenth century, and, during their journey westward, they are also rejected by a town of “fair-skinned colored men”—an outrage which these travelers name “The Disallowing” (P 195). These nine families, as a result of being disallowed by the internalized racism of other African Americans, adopt an exclusionary and unspoken blood “rule” (P 195), a rule that leads to a vicious cycle of disallowings of difference. Morrison also explores a disallowing of difference in The Bluest Eye and in Sula with respect to both the disallowings imposed by the white world and the disallowings evident within the black communities of each text. In The Bluest Eye, for example, Pecola’s poverty and her adolescent pregnancy mark her as different, and she is “disallowed” compassion within her own community. In Sula, Sula’s unconventional attitudes and even her birthmark signify her difference, and, she, too, is “disallowed” any understanding by the members of her community. Morrison, however, does not limit these disallowings to physical ostracization by the community of origin; she also highlights the internal psychological consequences of a disallowing or rejection of the self.

Morrison began her interrogation of physical and psychological rejection with The Bluest Eye, which is narrated in part through the first person voice of Claudia MacTeer. In this novel, Morrison relates a story of the dreadful childhood happenings
that drive Claudia’s friend, Pecola Breedlove, into madness. While the child Claudia
does not live with the absence of love nor with the presence of violence as does the child
Pecola, Claudia, nevertheless, struggles with a related area that also affects her
negatively—the issue of the proliferation of white images in popular culture and the
absorption of those images as ideal by members of her community. For the young
Claudia, one of the disturbing spaces of childhood involves doll play, and issues of race
and gender revolve around this activity. If “dolls, like other objects of ordinary life, can
be seen as ‘texts’ that shed light upon the intentions of producers” (Formanek-Brunell,
MTPH 2), then the manufacturing and marketing of white dolls as ideal by the white-
dominated doll industry is evidence of a racist intent to further exclude African
Americans from positive representation in the popular sphere.

However, white baby dolls are not the only images of whiteness in The Bluest
Eye that Morrison exposes as a means for devaluing and excluding black children. A
critique of the ideologies of happy playtimes in a perfect and beautiful white world also
holds a prominent positioning in this text, for Morrison opens The Bluest Eye by
prefacing this novel’s story with an excerpt from the white Dick-and-Jane school primer.
The passage from this primer is noteworthy for its repetition of the word “play”:

See Jane. She has a red dress. She wants to play. Who will play with
Jane? See the cat. . . Come and play. Come play with Jane. The kitten
will not play. . . . Mother, will you play with Jane? Mother laughs.
Laugh, Mother, laugh. See Father. . . . Father, will you play with Jane?
Father is smiling. Smile, Father, smile. See the dog. . . . Do you want to
play with Jane? . . . Here comes a friend. The friend will play with Jane. They will play a good game. Play, Jane, play. [emphasis added] (3)

The attention to play in this selection from the elementary-school primer indicates the prevalence of “[t]he image of the happily playing child” (Kline 108) in popular culture and reinforces the ideology that play is a crucial component of a happy childhood. Thus, one of the disquieting questions that The Bluest Eye raises is who will play with Pecola, and the above quoted passage foreshadows the perturbing nature of Pecola’s experiences during the course of the novel. Although Claudia and Frieda include her in their activities when the MacTeers take Pecola in for a short time as an act of neighborly charity, and the three prostitutes who live upstairs from Pecola are kind to her, Pecola’s pleasurable interactions with others begin and end here, for “Pecola is both the communal and familial scapegoat—she is continually defined by other characters as ‘Black and ugly’” (Sargent 231). As Mariann Russell points out, “Pecola is ignored by teachers and other students, except the boys who taunt and victimize her” (38). Pecola’s mother, Pauline Breedlove, who “comes under the influence of the movies, embracing white standards of physical beauty and romantic love,” treats Pecola no better than the teachers who ignore her, and she “teach[es] Pecola “fear and self-hatred” (Sargent 232). Pecola’s father, Cholly, while “free of the distortions of his wife who can only hate her daughter because she reminds her that she is also not white,” nevertheless, “is able to love his daughter . . . only in a way that is destructive” (Sargent 232). Thus, in scene after scene, Pecola’s life becomes a nightmarish inversion of the loving and protective world of the Dick-and-Jane story. From the episode with the hateful Louis Junior and his mother’s cat, through Pauline’s scathing treatment of Pecola and Pecola’s rape by Cholly, to the
poisoned dog at Soaphead Church’s lodgings, Pecola is positioned within a frightening and menacing reversal of the playful Dick-and-Jane world.

As Russell observes, at crucial intervals in *The Bluest Eye*, “some line from the Dick and Jane story heads various sections of the book in heavily ironic fashion” (37). For example, “[t]he section where Pecola is raped by her father is introduced by a line about Father playing with Jane,” while “[r]efERENCE to a cat prefigures Junior, son of a lower middle class black family, hurling his mother’s cat at Pecola, thus expressing his hatred of mother, cat, and Pecola” (Russell 37). There is also “[t]he Dick and Jane reference to a family dog [that] prefaces a section where Pecola is tricked into poisoning a dog beloved by its elderly owner” (Russell 37). Russell states that “[t]he whole book has developed Pecola’s search for the answer to her question: ‘How do you do that? I mean, how do you get somebody to love you?’” (39). At almost every turn in her search, however, Pecola is subjected to violence, not love. Although Cholly’s rape of Pecola, according to Morrison, “‘is all the gift he has left’” and stems from “‘his love for his daughter and his powerlessness to help her pain’” (Tate 164), his “‘touch was,’” nonetheless, “fatal” (*TBE* 206). After being raped and impregnated by her father, Pecola seeks and receives the blue eyes that she is convinced “will make ‘somebody’ love her” (Russell 39). Having received blue eyes, Pecola invents a friend who will love and play with her without the threat of physical violence; this friend, however, unlike the friend in the Dick-and-Jane primer, is the imaginary friend of a mind driven over the brink of sanity.

While Morrison places the absence of nurturing playmates for Pecola in opposition to the happy playworld of the Dick-and-Jane stories, she situates the presence
of white baby dolls for Claudia against black maternal expectations for nurturing these
images of whiteness. Importantly, Morrison uses both the absence of play for Pecola and
the presence of play for Claudia to comment on intragroup racism and internalized racism
through the adult women who shun Pecola and her unborn baby but adore the white dolls
that they bestow on Claudia as gifts. Claudia, in her anger and frustration at being given
white baby dolls as playthings, destroys them; however, even Claudia eventually comes
to accept these white images when she becomes dismayed at her own thoughts of shifting
this violence onto the bodies of real-life white girls.

One of the critical commentaries on this novel that is particularly relevant to my
discussion of the production of white dolls and white icons is Susan Willis’s article, “I
Shop Therefore I Am,” in which Willis discusses The Bluest Eye as part of a critique of
mass media’s furthering of the white middle-class image as ideal and “the exploitation of
black people as consumers” (1000).¹ According to Willis, “[i]n the absence of a whole
and sustaining Afro-American culture, Morrison shows black people making
‘adjustments’ to mass white culture” (“I Shop” 994). While “Claudia preserves more
integrity than her sister, Frieda, . . . both finally learn to love the white [Shirley Temple]
icon” (Willis, “I Shop” 994). Willis further states that in Pecola’s receiving of blue eyes,
she also receives “the madness of assimilation” (“I Shop” 994). Thus, Willis asserts that
these “young girls represent varying degrees of distortion and denial of self produced in
relation to a culture they and their parents do not make, but cannot help but consume” (“I
Shop” 994).

Willis points out the exclusion of African Americans from modes of production,
and she targets the film, doll, and toy industries for their production of images that
construct “the white middle class [as] the norm against which all else is judged” (“I Shop” 999). In view of the critical role of dolls in *The Bluest Eye*, it is important to understand the history of U.S. doll-making and the advertising and promotion of those dolls in order to fully appreciate the complexity of Morrison’s characters’ reactions to white dolls and to white icons of desirability such as Shirley Temple. The image of film star Shirley Temple, used so pointedly in *The Bluest Eye*, was reproduced in a broad array of forms and was just as broadly dispersed throughout popular culture: “During the 1930s Shirley Temple became the best-loved child star of the silver screen, and the toy and publishing industries eagerly created a wide range of products in her image” (Lavitt 137). The Shirley Temple dolls that were produced by the Ideal Novelty & Toy Company “grossed more that $6 million in sales for the company”, “in 1937 Shirley Temple was rated the most popular movie star—adult or child—the world over, and by then countless dolls had already been modeled in her image by many firms” (Lavitt 277). A testament to the pervasive ideology of blonde-hair and blue-eyes as emblematic of white female desirability is the surprising fact that the real-life Shirley Temple has brown eyes, and, while the Ideal Novelty & Toy Company produced her doll image with “[b]rown sleep eyes” (Lavitt 276), Patsy Moyer’s doll collectors’ guide shows that Shirley’s doll image was also manufactured by Ideal with “green sleep eyes” (311).

Morrison, however, does not specifically attribute blue eyes to Shirley in *The Bluest Eye*; Claudia’s reflections regarding Shirley’s eyes are limited to “old squint-eyed Shirley,” and the dolls that Claudia destroys are “blue-eyed Baby Doll[s],” not Shirley Temple dolls (TBE 19, 20). Nevertheless, the dolls that Claudia receives as gifts are evidence to her that the women who give her these baby dolls “treasure” whiteness more

While the adult doll-givers chastise Claudia for her refusal to properly care for and play with these white images, her treatment of these dolls can be “interpreted in terms of the political rhetorics of power and identity,” a play theory which argues “that the resistance of those who are being culturally assimilated expresses itself directly in terms of the way in which they play or refuse to play the games of the powerful colonizers” (Sutton-Smith 102). Claudia, at this point in the novel, rejects the notion that she should love and cherish these miniature images of “the powerful colonizers” that are fashioned in the form of white female infants. While “[r]esistance against adult power and conventions is a hidden transcript of childhood” (Sutton-Smith 125), Claudia’s rejection of what the adult women in her life view as the proper “conventions” of doll play is not hidden from them; what is concealed from these adults is the reason for Claudia’s dismemberment of the dolls. Only to the reader does Claudia reveal that she tears apart her dolls in an attempt to find the secret of their “dearness” (TBE 20). Claudia realizes that “[a]dults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured” (TBE 20). As a result of this awareness, Claudia is
intent on unearthing, as she puts it, “the dearness, . . . the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me” (TBE 20).

In this novel, the adult women who bemoan Claudia’s treatment of white dolls have accepted the popular ideology that constructs these white images as ideal. In giving white baby-dolls as gifts, these women seem to Claudia to be proclaiming, “‘Here, . . . this is beautiful, and if you are on this day ‘worthy’ you may have it’” (TBE 21). However, there is a complex matrix at work in the gift-giving of these adults that operates beyond the acceptance of the preciousness of white dolls, for the women who bestow on Claudia the gift of white baby dolls are only now, as adults, able to be consumers of dolls. The reactions of the adults to Claudia’s disrespectful (in their eyes) doll treatment and their reference to the lack of dolls in their own pasts—“‘I never had a baby doll in my whole life and used to cry my eyes out for them’” (TBE 21)—highlights the material circumstances of these women’s own childhoods. As commentary on the material and historical realities of the lives of the grownups who lament Claudia’s behavior, the early 1940s setting of The Bluest Eye indicates that these women would have been little girls themselves in the late nineteenth century or the early twentieth century. Dolls were still very expensive items during that time period, and the exceedingly low pay of the jobs available to most black women would have prohibited the purchase of dolls even for special occasions like Christmas. While mothers and daughters could and did make their own dolls (Goodfellow 88), manufactured dolls were a rarity even in middle-class homes before the end of the nineteenth century. In Made to Play House: Dolls and The Commercialization of American Girlhood, 1830-1930, Miriam Formanek-Brunell states that “there were still few dolls around in the average
middle-class household in the 1850s, a fact of doll demography that would change dramatically only after the Civil War” (14). However, even by 1890, “the majority of dolls remained prohibitively expensive for working-class families” (Formanek-Brunell, MTPH 15). Furthermore, in the late nineteenth century, toy and doll sales were aimed at “a clientele of urban middle-class women [i.e. primarily white women], most of whom did not work outside the home and for whom shopping for self, friends, and family was becoming a central activity” (Formanek-Brunell, MTPH 16). While a wholesale catalog from the late nineteenth century, Turn-of-the-Century Dolls, Toys and Games: The Complete Illustrated Carl P. Stirm Catalog from 1893, does contain some black dolls they are, by far, in the minority.

Furthermore, the stereotyping of the few black dolls in Stirm’s wholesale catalog would have made those images appealing to white retail buyers but not to black purchasers of dolls. For example, this catalog contains a doll that depicts one of the stereotypes furthered by the myth of the loyal and happy plantation slave—a “Dressed Colored Nurse with Baby [i.e. white baby]” (Stirm 18). According to Formanek-Brunell, “in late nineteenth-century America . . . black [rag dolls] were a favorite among white children”: “‘My little girl has two such [rag] dolls,’ commented a mother, ‘one white and the other black, but her affections are centered on the colored woman . . . never going to bed without Dinah in her arms, and crying for ‘di’ if the nurse had forgotten to put it in her crib’” (MTPH 28). Formanek-Brunell also states that “one four-year old girl fed everything that tasted good to her black rag doll,” which for Formanek-Brunell “[s]uggest[s] a relationship born of affection,” as “African-American women played an increasingly significant role in the rearing of middle-class children” (MTPH 28). Yet
Formanek-Brunell overlooks the fact that the “Mammy” doll, which the little white girl so loved, serves to reinscribe the black woman “in the much-stereotyped role of caring for white children” (Lavitt 75). In the years following slavery and continuing on through the first half of the twentieth century, “caring for white children” (Lavitt 75) was one of the few means of employment open to black women. Dorothy Sterling states that “most black women found no escape from service jobs and the grinding poverty that went with them” (425). Even “[e]ducated [black] women often cleaned houses or washed clothes when they could not find other employment” (Sterling 424). The stereotyping of black women as “Mammy” figures circumscribed economic opportunities for black women far into the twentieth century, and this confining stereotype has been a persistent one; “Mammy” images in the form of dolls were still being produced “as late as the 1950s” (Lavitt 75).

In addition to “Mammy” dolls, white children also had other black dolls in their doll retinues, but those dolls had functions similar to that of the mammy doll. According to Myla Perkins, “[t]he earliest black dolls commercially made as playthings for children” date to “between 1820 and 1840,” and it appears that all of the dolls made between 1820 and 1860 were made to be used as supplementary dolls, used in play situations as maids, servants, slaves, etc., for the white dolls” (6). Even “[d]uring the third quarter of the nineteenth century,” Perkins states, “many of the black dolls . . . were still used as supplementary play for the white dolls as were the earlier black dolls” and were often clothed as nursemaids, cooks, or in other servant attire (19, 20). However, “the doll makers in the late 1890s and early 1900s began to dress the black dolls in clothing similar to that of the white dolls,” and “black dolls were not seen as frequently as ‘servants or
domestic dolls” (Perkins 22). According to Perkins, during this time period, “[i]t became obvious that there was a need for a black doll to be used as something other than a supplementary toy for the white doll”: “Black people were feeling the need to have black dolls available for their children. There was much emphasis on the black dolls for black children being ‘properly’ dressed and presented in a positive manner to black children” (22). Perkins notes that “[t]his desire of black people to reverse the accepted attitude for black dolls and turn the dolls into toys of pride” can be found in “illustrations and descriptions” that appeared in the “catalog from the National Negro Doll Company, established in the early 1900s by a black man, Mr. R. H. Boyd” (22).

There were also other African American owned doll companies operating during this time period, and, according to Formanek-Brunell, “Harlem residents Victoria Ross and Evelyn Berry, proprietors of Ross & Berry, Inc. [incorporated in 1918], were the first African-American female large-scale manufacturers of black composition dolls; [t]he firm's purpose was the ‘manufacturing, contract for, sale and purchase of toys, shirts, shirtwaists and other goods’” (MTPH 150, 220n32). While Constance García-Barrio states that “[f]ew records remain of specific African-American doll makers,” she also points out that “Leo Moss of Macon, Georgia, is an exception” (60). During “the early 1900s,” Moss, according to Myla Perkins, “made dolls that resembled members of his family’” (qtd. in García-Barrio 60).

It is significant to note, however, that “after World War I, . . . black dolls were not as popular or favorably received as they were in the late 1800s and early 1900s” (Perkins 76). As a result, “[g]ood quality, large black dolls were relatively scarce” (Perkins 76). Perkins credits the decline in the acceptance of black dolls to “social
changes during this period” (76), and, although she does not comment on what these “social changes” might have been, the rise of the eugenics movement arguably played a role in the scarcity of black dolls. The ideas of eugenicists such as Francis Galton, who entreated “the ‘fit’ members of the society to reproduce themselves,” fell on “particularly fertile ground in the United States in the period just prior to and following World War I” (Hasian 21). Consequently, cultural artifacts such as white dolls were seen as instruments that could promote Anglo reproduction. According to play theorist Bernard Mergen, white “[d]olls were seen as an ‘Antidote for Race Suicide’ by psychologist Florence Coyle, who stated “in an interview in Playthings in December 1927” that childhood “play with dolls would prevent the dulling of maternal instincts leading to companionate marriages and ‘one-child’ mothers” (109). The wide-ranging popularity of eugenicist theories surely must have had an impact on the distribution and advertising of dolls, for Perkins also notes that, while “black dolls of some sort were advertised during the 1920s, probably less than one percent of dolls advertised were black” (78).

At the same time, stereotyping by white manufacturers of the black dolls that were available began to escalate, and, according to Perkins, “[i]n the 1920s, black dolls began to take on a different form,” and, while “still made from the same mold as the white dolls, were ‘doctored’ up,” which frequently meant having “three holes . . . drilled in the head and tuffs of yarn or string . . . inserted for ‘Topsy’ type hair” (76). During this time period, an “advertisement from the Toy Shop” promoted “their newest hit doll on the market,” the “‘Pickaninny Baby’” (Perkins 76). Stereotyping by white doll producers also included “[c]haracter dolls like ‘Aunt Jemima,’” and, according to Perkins, “Aunt Jemima was by far the most popular black doll made in composition on
the market in the mid-1920’s” (76). Images of black male character dolls during this time period included the servile “‘Rastus’ . . . cloth Cream of Wheat doll” (Perkins 67). When mail-ordered, the Rastus doll arrived along with a letter from the Cream of Wheat Company stating that “your Rastus Doll . . . is a jovial, good-natured individual, and is always ready to serve you with a delicious, nourishing breakfast” (Perkins 67).

According to play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith, “while toy manufacturers do flood the world with their stereotypic images, their success or failure depends on their making a toy that presents some dynamic underlying human fantasy” (153). The fantasy that white producers of dolls wanted to play into was the white fantasy of white supremacy. In disseminating stereotypes of the black body in mass culture, while, at the same time, mass-producing and mass-marketing white dolls, the white-dominated doll industry formed, as Laura Wexler has argued regarding photography, a “part of the master narrative that created and cemented cultural and political inequalities of race and class” (164). White manufacturers of dolls racialized the realm of dolls as white, marked this realm as middle-class, and, according to Lori Merish, defined it by “cuteness”—“an aesthetic category saturated with racial, as well as class, meanings” (187).

Given the fact that “black dolls were seldom seen on the toy shelves in the late 1930’s and 1940’s and were not carried in most mail-order catalogs” (Perkins 80), the gift of white baby dolls in The Bluest Eye exposes a historically-specific lack. The abundance of white dolls and the dearth of black dolls in both Morrison’s text and the real-world attests to the “all-pervasive and insidious [ideology of this] mass culture industry” (Kuentz 421). In response to the white-dominated doll industry, during “the 1920s the black nationalist leader Marcus Garvey produced dolls as part of his plan to
make blacks self-sufficient” (Garcia-Barrio 60). According to Kevin K. Gaines, however, the cost of black dolls, for the most part, remained prohibitively high, and Hubert H. Harrison, who was “one of the more significant contributors to the progressive ‘New Negro’ militancy” in the 1920s, “encouraged ‘New Negro business men’ to merge personal ambition and racial welfare by marketing Negro dolls at more affordable prices” (242). Gaines asserts that “the failure to do this made it easier for black mothers to select cheaper white dolls for their children, with disastrous results for black consciousness” (242).3

In The Bluest Eye, Morrison shows the “disastrous results” that Gaines connects with the lack of positive images for African American adults and children. While Pecola clings to an image of Shirley Temple and prays fervently for “Alice-and-Jerry-blue-storybook-eyes” (TBE 46), Pecola’s mother, Pauline, shirks her daughter and clasps a “little pink-and-yellow girl” (TBE 109) to her bosom. In a scene that vividly portrays the relationship between Pecola and her mother, Morrison juxtaposes Pecola’s position with that of the little white girl who is embraced tenderly by Pauline. In this scene, Pecola enters the white household of her mother’s employer in order to pick up the washing. While inside, Pecola accidentally knocks over the blueberry cobbler that her mother has just made, and Claudia and Frieda, who have come looking for Pecola, watch in “dread” as Pauline strikes Pecola, sending her “slid[ing] in the pie juice, one leg folding under her” (TBE 109). Pauline then “slap[s] Pecola again” and orders her out of the house: “‘Pick up that wash and get on out of here, so I can get this mess cleaned up’” (TBE 109). Pauline’s white charge is by this time crying, and Pauline begins “hushing and soothing the tears of the little pink-and-yellow girl”: “‘Hush, baby, hush. Come
here. Oh, Lord, look at your dress. Don’t cry no more. Polly will change it” (TBE 109). When the little white girl asks who the visitors were, Pauline replies with “honey in her words,” “Don’t worry none, baby . . . Hush. Don’t worry none” (TBE 109).

Having “absorbed in full” the white ideal of beauty “from the silver screen” (TBE 122), Pauline treats the Fisher child like a precious little white baby doll that must be handled with considerable love and care not only in this scene but on a daily basis: “When she bathed the little Fisher girl, it was in a porcelain tub with silvery taps running infinite quantities of hot, clear water. She dried her in fluffy white towels and put her in cuddly night clothes. Then she brushed the yellow hair, enjoying the roll and slip of it between her fingers” (TBE 127). This is the tender treatment that Claudia’s gift-givers expect her to shower on her white baby dolls, and it is also emblematic of the treatment that Shirley Temple’s film characters receive from the mammy figures in her films. It is no wonder then, as Jane Kuenz asserts, that “Claudia feels ‘the familiar violence’ rise at the little pink girl’s” use of the name Polly for Pecola’s mother instead of the proper title of Mrs. Breedlove (425).

The resurfacing of Claudia’s feelings of “familiar violence” (TBE 108) in the scene at the Fisher home, as well as her destruction of white baby dolls, constitute reactions against participating in a culture where a child is loved, even by black mothers, for being white. Claudia’s urge “to scratch” the Fisher child for “calling Mrs. Breedlove Polly” (TBE 108) can also be read as resistance to becoming a “mammy figure” herself to a white child such as this “little pink-and-yellow girl” (TBE 109). The mammy role implicit in the caring and nurturing of white dolls is not a role that Claudia desires to play, and, as Merish also notes, Claudia “rejects the ‘black mammy’ position and
stereotype" by "refusing to mother white baby dolls" (201, n3). If play, including doll-
play, is "an enculturative mechanism" that "servic[es] an envisioned destiny," then
Claudia rebukes the destiny implied in mothering white baby dolls and does not
constitute, as does Pecola, "[t]he passive child [who is] an empty vessel into which
culture [is] poured" (Goldman 38-39). Instead, Claudia represents a child who wishes to
be an "agent in [her] own enculturation" (Goldman 39). Rather than merely accepting
the worship of whiteness as the only response imaginable, Claudia tries to fathom the
reasons for the black maternal adulation of white dolls by probing, prodding, and
dismembering each white doll in search of answers. "I could not love it," she tells us,
"[b]ut I could examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable": "Break
off tiny fingers, bend the flat feet, loosen the hair, twist the head around, . . . [r]emove
the cold and stupid eyeball, . . . take off the head, shake out the sawdust, crack the back
against the brass bed rail" (TBE 21).

Claudia's unconventional play action of dismembering her white dolls is in
keeping with Sutton-Smith's assertion that children's play "takes the world apart in a way
that suits their own emotional responses to it" and, accordingly, "is a deconstruction of
the world in which they live" (166). Claudia's dismemberment of white dolls signifies
her own attempt to deconstruct, and, in the process, figure out what she says "eluded"
her—"the secret of the magic" that real-life "little white girls . . . weaved on others":
"What made people look at them and say, "Awwwww," but not for me? The eye slide of
black women as they approached them on the street, and the possessive gentleness of
their touch as they handled them" (TBE 22-23).
While Claudia rejects the roles of mother to or worshiper of white baby dolls, she also resists “the magic” of real “little white girls” (TBE 22). Unlike Frieda and Pecola, who are in awe of Shirley Temple, Claudia loathes the child movie star who fills the role that should be Claudia’s—that of Bojangles’s dancing partner. As Kuenz points out, for Claudia, “the outrage” in the Shirley Temple movies in which Bill Robinson appears is “the rewriting of either a historical moment (the Civil War) or interpersonal relationship (an orphaned child and benevolent older friend) with her [a black female child’s] part edited or bleached out” (426). Consequently, “those few images of African-American life afforded space on the big screen are put there not as evidence or proof of the experience itself, but as a tactic for further erasure, denial, or revisioning of just that experience” (Kuenz 426). In the “narrative formula” of the Shirley Temple movies “in which black adults would be charged with entertaining white children” (Vered 57), the experience of the African-American adult women characters who appear in these movies is also erased.

Unlike the Shirley Temple films, in which the mammy figure’s life outside of her white employer’s home or outside of the slave owner’s house (depending on the time setting of the movie) is kept hidden, Morrison’s text reveals the destitution surrounding Pauline Breedlove and her family. As the third-person narrator tells us, at the Fisher home, for Pauline there was “[n]o zinc tub” like in her own dreary dwelling, “no buckets of stove-heated water, no flaky, stiff, grayish towels washed in a kitchen sink, dried in a dusty backyard, no tangled black puffs of rough wool to comb” (TBE 127). Eventually Pauline “stopped trying to keep her own house,” and “she neglected her house, her children, her man—they were like the afterthoughts one has just before sleep, the early-
morning and late-evening edges of her day, the dark edges that made the daily life with the Fishers lighter, more delicate, more lovely” (TBE 127). Pauline, enthralled by the “lovely” Dick-and-Jane atmosphere of the Fisher home, becomes unwilling to give her own daughter the gentle nurturance that she bestows on the little white child.4

A further consideration in the incident at the Fisher’s is the fact that the Fisher child appears to have no idea that Pecola is Pauline’s daughter, a fact which highlights the very real circumstances of many black women who were well aware that as far as their white employers were concerned, their own children and families did not exist. For Morrison’s fictional Fisher child, the character of Pauline, her “Polly,” is the embodiment of the mammy dolls that real-life little white girls often favored as the “center” of their “affections” when it came to their dolls (Formanek-Brunell, MTPH 28). Those mammy dolls, implicitly serving as mothers only to white infants and children, are representative of historical accounts which emphasize that white employers wanted their black employees’ families to stay invisible and unacknowledged. An article by an anonymous contributor to The Independent in 1912 attests to the indifferent and uncaring attitudes of her white employers. The writer of this article, who is a nurse in a white family, states, “I am allowed to go home to my children, the oldest of whom is a girl of 18 years, only once in two weeks, every other Sunday afternoon—even then I’m not permitted to stay all night’” (Lerner 227). This anonymous nurse describes in detail not only her long hours, low wages, and endless household duties, but also the circumstances of her own children:

‘I not only have to nurse a little white child, now eleven months old, but I have to act as playmate [emphasis added]. . . to three other children in the home, the oldest of whom is only nine years of age. I wash and dress the
baby two or three times each day; I give it its meals, mainly from a bottle.
I have to put it to bed each night; and, in addition, I have to get up and
attend to its every call . . . I am not permitted to rest . . . it is not strange to
see “Mammy” watering the lawn, . . . sweeping the sidewalk, mopping the
porch and halls, dusting around the house, helping the cook, or darning
stockings. . . . I don’t know what it is to go to church; I don’t know what it
is to go to a lecture or entertainment or anything of the kind; I live a
treadmill life and I see my own children only when they happen to see me
on the streets when I am out with the children, or when my children come
to the “yard” to see me, which isn’t often, because my white folks don’t
like to see their servants’ children hanging around their premises. You
might as well say that I’m on duty all the time—from sunrise to sunrise,
every day in the week. I am the slave, body and soul, of this family. And
what do I get for this work . . . The pitiful sum of ten dollars a month!”

(Lerner 227-228)

The writer goes on to point out the young age at which her own children are compelled to
find work. Her eighteen-year-old daughter has been doing laundry for the past two years
which consists of the “washing and ironing of two white families, with a total of five
persons; one of these families pays her $1.00 per week, and the other 75 cents per week,
and [she] has to furnish her own soap and starch and wood” (Lerner 228). The writer’s
thirteen-year old daughter “has been nursing and she receives $1.50 per week” (Lerner
228). The writer’s children must contribute financially just to help the family make ends
meet; there is rent to pay, as well as food and clothing to buy for three children.
Moreover, while this nurse has "to act as playmate" to the white children, she seldom is allowed to see her own children who, like their mother, seem to have no free time for leisure either.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison complicates this issue of serving white children while being disallowed time with one's own family by having Pauline, as a mammy figure and "ideal servant" (TBE 127), take delight in both her employer's home and in their child. Morrison's Pauline revels in the "beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise" (TBE 127) that she finds in the Fisher home, and she hoards "this order, this beauty, for herself, a private world, and never introduce[s] it into her storefront, or to her children" (TBE 128). Although Pauline's first-person narration discloses that she would "feel sorry" for her own children for "hollering at them and beating them," she "couldn't seem to stop" (TBE 124). Pauline's voice also speaks of the "love" she had intended to have for her "second" child, "no matter what" the baby "looked like" (TBE 126). Yet, in remembering Pecola's birth, Pauline reflects, "I knew she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly" (TBE 126). Would Pecola have been cherished as a precious little doll if Pauline had considered this tiny girl-child of hers to be cute?

According to Merish, "[w]hat cute stages is, in part, a need for adult care" (187), a commentary also forwarded by anthropologist Dorothy K. Washburn, who states that "cute features foster the unremitting attention and care that is required during the lengthy period of dependence babies have on their parents" (121). Merish contends that cuteness offers "protection' from violence and exploitation" and that "[t]his sphere of protection is marked by class and race, as is evident in *The Bluest Eye*" (189).\(^5\) Merish also asserts that "[s]ome bodies, Morrison makes clear, are positioned outside the realm of
sentimental protection, within the sphere of economic/sexual exploitation and violence” (189). That Pecola is most certainly placed outside of the maternal protection that “the cute” fosters is effectively demonstrated in Pauline’s abusive treatment of her daughter at the Fisher home and in Pauline’s later refusal to “believe” her daughter “when [she] told her” that she had been raped by Cholly (TBE 200). The Fisher child, on the other hand, is placed firmly within the sphere of Pauline’s maternal protection. According to Merish, “[m]aternal desire becomes the vehicle through which being and having are synthesized; the cute is identified as part of the ‘family,’ indeed part of the self” (186-187). Thus, through her “mammy” role, Pauline, by “loving the ‘adorable’ as culturally defined,” submits to “a structure of identification”—“wanting to be like the cute” (Merish 186).

Pecola, too, desires “to be like the cute” (Merish 186), and it is through Pecola’s infatuation with Shirley Temple that Morrison shows the extreme violence to an African-American child’s self-image that results from acceptance of dominant society’s construction of desire through cultural objects. According to Washburn, “[c]hildren in cultures everywhere create rich and elaborate imaginary worlds when playing with objects” (111-112), and Pecola’s actions at the MacTeers provide evidence for this assertion. As Pecola holds a Shirley Temple cup in her hands, “gaz[ing] fondly at the silhouette of Shirley Temple’s dimpled face” (TBE 19), the “imaginary world” that Pecola “creates” for herself is the safe, wonderful, protected, and privileged world of Shirley Temple, a world that could be hers if only she had “Alice-and-Jerry-blue-storybook-eyes” and could be as “cu-ute” as Shirley (TBE 46, 19). Claudia, on the other hand, detests Shirley as well as white baby dolls, and, Merish argues that Claudia, through her destruction of white dolls is opposing “the power of the cute” (186).
According to Merish, “Morrison suggests that while ‘cuteness’ is certainly a culturally specific, rather than organically based, phenomenon, the values it expresses are by no means trivial in their political significance nor in their social or psychological effects” (187, 185). Merish states that Morrison highlights “two aspects of cuteness: the symbolic properties and qualities that define the cute in a white supremacist culture (white skin, blond hair, blue eyes); and the culturally specific ways in which consumers or spectators learn to ‘recognize’ and ‘value’ the cute” (186). Thus, “Morrison is especially concerned with the ways in which appreciating cuteness becomes a normative aesthetic response,” and, through Claudia, Morrison creates a character whose “resistance is specifically a refusal to ‘love’ the cute—that is, to feeling the culturally specified normative emotions” (Merish 186). Merish also states that “the cute demands a maternal response,” a response which Claudia withholds from “one particular commodity” that embodies the “aesthetics of cuteness”: “the doll” (Merish 187).

However, while Merish posits the reasons for the fictional Claudia’s destruction of white baby dolls as both a rejection of the “mammy” role by an African American child and a denial of the cute as normatively defined by the producers of mass cultural artifacts such as dolls, it is important to remember that Claudia, through her dismemberment of white dolls, is in search of “the secret of the magic” that “little white girls . . . weaved on others” (TBE 22). Claudia’s words imply that if she could figure out this “secret,” then she, too, would have the power to elicit the same response of “possessive gentleness” from “black women” (TBE 23, 22). Claudia learns, however, that dismantling the white dolls does not provide her with an entry into this aura of “magic” nor does it dismantle the constructs of race and beauty. It is also worth pointing
out, in the context of Merish’s argument for Claudia’s “refusal to ‘love’ the cute” (186), that mistreatment of dolls was an activity engaged in by little white girls as well. In “Sugar and Spite: The Politics of Doll Play in Nineteenth-Century America,” Formanek-Brunell examines the doll-play of white “middle-class girls” and argues that “although adults, especially parents, perceived dolls as useful vehicles in feminine socialization, their daughters—with a different agenda—appropriated dolls and used them for purposes other than training in the emotional and practical skills of mothering” (108). Using “[m]emoirs, autobiographies, biographies, and oral histories” as evidence, Formanek-Brunell concludes that “an unquantifiable number of girls challenged parental authority, restrictive social customs, and gender roles” during “their doll play” (“Sugar and Spite” 108). Formanek-Brunell also maintains that through their transgression of the conventions of doll play, “[t]hese girls, in late nineteenth-century America, engaged their parents in a political struggle to define, decide, and determine the meaning of dolls in their own lives and as representations of their own culture” (“Sugar and Spite” 108-109).

White dolls were not always treated as cherished infants by their white child owners, but, instead, “were both intentionally and unintentionally dismembered” (Formanek-Brunell, “Sugar and Spite” 123). According to Formanek-Brunell, while “George Eliot remembers that she ‘only broke those (dolls) . . . that could not stand the test of being undressed, . . . Zona Gale and her friend wreaked havoc on their tea party by smashing their unsuspecting dolls to bits” (“Sugar and Spite” 123). Continuing this investigation in her book, Made to Play House, Formanek-Brunell writes that a “contributor to Babyhood magazine in 1905” commented, “‘Of doll-haters, I have known a few’” (MTPH 30). Mistreatment of dolls included “[p]unishments [that] were often
particularly brutal: One thirteen-year-old girl broke her doll by knocking it against a window for crying,” and “[a] four-year-old girl disciplined her doll by forcing it to eat dirt, stones, and coal” (Formanek-Brunell, MTPH 30-31). This rough treatment of dolls indicates that “girls’ play behavior was not always submissive nor instinctively maternal; evidence reveals that doll players pushed at the margins of acceptable feminine and genteel behavior” (Formanek-Brunell, MTPH 30).

The loving nurturance of dolls and the mimicking of mothering activities, however, is usually an adult expectation for doll-players, and, during the early decades of the twentieth century, doll manufacturers campaigned to increase doll sales “through the mass marketing of a new generation of dolls that represented abundance, domesticity, and maternal self-fulfillment” (Formanek-Brunell, MTPH 184). Formanek-Brunell states that “by the early twentieth century, dolls [had] cease[d] to be the objects of resentment and resistance manifested in previous generations,” and “[t]hose doll players who accommodated themselves to the new domestic ideal were more likely to be nurturing than nasty” (MTPH 162). This “new domestic ideal” was forwarded by the doll industry through the marketing and “selling [of] impossibly ‘perfect’ baby dolls that idealized motherhood and homemaking and flirtatious dolls that modeled husband-getting” in an effort “to restore traditional gender roles for American girls” (Formanek-Brunell, MTPH 163). Washburn, who conducted interviews in order to “explore categories of dolls and doll play for women in middle-class American culture between 1900 and 1980” (111), reports that many of the respondents in her survey, in recalling childhood playtime, “considered that their doll play was training for motherhood—the same role-
model/socialization interpretation that is typically advanced by scholars, doll
manufacturers, and other commentators on the human condition” (115-116).

Although Claudia’s family in The Bluest Eye may not be middle-class (Mrs.
MacTeer refers to her “poor” status: “‘[A]nd here I am poor as a bowl of yak-me’” (TBE
26)), Claudia is expected to engage in play actions with her dolls that are typical
mothering gestures. For Claudia, however, these baby dolls that neither look like her nor
feel real with their “unyielding limbs,” “bone-cold head[s], “glassy blue eyeballs,” and
“yellow hair” are all sources of “irritat[ion]” (TBE 20,21).⁶ Issues of both race and
gender figure in Claudia’s resistance to loving these dolls as expected; Claudia does not
desire to claim the identity of a “mammy” in the service of a white baby doll nor does she
want to claim the play identity of mother at all.⁷ In addition to reacting against the dolls’
whiteness, Claudia, like the abusive white doll-players who “smash[ed] their
unsuspecting dolls to bits” (Formanek-Brunell, “Sugar and Spite” 123), is also resisting
gendered protocols that presume that all girls should want to love and play with dolls.
Aside from the offending cold whiteness of the doll, Claudia muses about the purpose of
baby dolls in general: “What was I supposed to do with it? Pretend I was its mother? I
had no interest in babies or the concept of motherhood. I was interested only in humans
my own age and size, and could not generate any enthusiasm at the prospect of being a
mother” (TBE 20). For nine-year-old Claudia, “[m]otherhood was old age, and other
remote possibilities” (TBE 20). She “learned quickly, however, what [she] was expected
to do with the doll: rock it, fabricate storied situations around it, even sleep with it”
(TBE 20).
Claudia’s resistance to performing these expected doll-play activities crumbles, however, after she imagines an aggressive transference of her violent doll-play actions to real-life white children. As she dismembers her white baby dolls, Claudia envisions what would happen if she “pinched” real “little white girls” whose “eyes—unlike the crazed glint of the baby doll’s eyes—would fold in pain, and their cry would not be the sound of an icebox door, but a fascinating cry of pain” (TBE 22, 23). When Claudia realizes that this “violence” would be “disinterested” and, therefore, “repulsive,” she takes “refuge” in “fraudulent love” (TBE 23). According to Willis, it “is an important point in Morrison’s development of Claudia,” that Claudia is “restrain[ed] ... from committing mayhem” through the “recognition that the acts of violence she imagines would be ‘disinterested violence,’” for, “[i]n defining Claudia as someone who learns the ‘repulsive’ nature of ‘disinterested violence,’ Morrison affirms the fullness of her character’s humanity” (“I Shop” 993).

Morrison also reveals, through Claudia’s “shame” (TBE 23) about her imagined transference of violence, that Claudia does not want to claim her play identity as destroyer of white doll bodies as a part of her real-life identity. While Sutton-Smith asserts that “[c]hildren . . . know that their play self is not the same as their everyday self” (159), Claudia only learns this when she comprehends that “the dismembering of dolls was not the true horror”: “The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls” (TBE 22). The “humanity” (Willis, “I Shop” 993) in the fictional Claudia’s refusal to transform her violent play actions into real actions becomes even clearer when compared to the actions of real-life white children who abused black dolls. The most telling abuse of black dolls is related by an anonymous black woman in
an article in *The Independent* in 1902, and it is a chilling example of the “repulsive”
nature of “disinterested violence” and of the inhumane lessons taught by white parents to
their children: “I have seen very small white children hang their black dolls. It is not
the child’s fault, he is simply an apt pupil” (Lerner 168). This shocking use of the black
dolls owned by white children in 1902 also foregrounds the political realities for African
Americans during the time setting of *The Bluest Eye*—the very real threat of bodily
harm, dismemberment, and death. In this political climate, Claudia’s decision to abandon
her dismemberment of white dolls and “to ‘worship’ Shirley Temple” is also, as Willis
argues, Morrison’s way of “suggest[ing] that white cultural domination is far too
complex to be addressed only in a retaliatory manner” (“I Shop” 993).

Yet Claudia’s rejection of her playing identity as destroyer of white dolls is
“adjustment without improvement” (TBE 23), and, through this confession, Morrison
comments on the theory of play as progress, which professes the view that “play is some
form of adaptation or that it provides for some useful development” (Sutton-Smith 18).
That Claudia does learn that she is incapable of “disinterested violence” (TBE 23) is a
“useful” lesson in the sense that this realization, as Willis states, “affirms the fullness of”
Claudia’s “humanity” (“I Shop” 993). On the other hand, Claudia’s adoption of
conventional forms of doll-play and worship of white icons is an adaptation that carries
negative consequences for the formation of a self-affirming identity. Although Claudia’s
admission that this was not an “improvement” (TBE 23) indicates her ability to recognize
that she is disallowing her own desirability by accepting white images, an acceptance of
these images, whether or not it is a “fraudulent” (TBE 23) acceptance, can be viewed as
a psychological dismemberment that cuts off a part of the self.
While Claudia comes to the conclusion that the worship of white images is a form of self-negation and amounts to “fraudulent love” (TBE 23), Pecola is convinced that certain white images contain the promise of a life filled with love and protection. If only she could “be like the cute” (Merish 186), then her home life “would be different” (TBE 46). As Russell argues, “Pecola as an ‘ugly’ dark black girl is shut out from any valorization of self in the communications media”; she “simply does not exist in any aesthetic sense” (36). Pecola, in fact, wishes that she could “disappear” (TBE 45) or, if she cannot vanish, then she hopes to at least become “beautiful” (TBE 46). In the aftermath of a brutal argument between her parents, she huddles in bed and prays, “Please God, . . . Please make me disappear” (TBE 45). Another of Pecola’s prayers is a recurring one: “Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes” (TBE 46). Pecola is convinced that “if her eyes . . . were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different,” and then “maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too” (TBE 46). Following her rape by Cholly and the bestowal of blue eyes by Soaphead Church, Pecola does, in a sense, get her wish to disappear for, as a pregnant child, the community shuns her, and, as an insane adolescent after the death of her baby, the community avoids her. Just as the poisoned dog at Soaphead Church’s lodgings had “moved like a broken toy around the yard,” the “broken” Pecola “walk[s] up and down, up and down, her head jerking, . . . [e]lbows bent, hands on shoulders,” as “she flail[s] her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly” (TBE 176, 204).8

In her “Afterword” to The Bluest Eye, Morrison, in retrospect, states that “the central chamber of the novel . . . does not in its present form handle effectively the silence at its center: the void that is Pecola’s ‘unbeing’” (215). However, it can be
argued that this “void” works effectively throughout the novel as a parallel to the
treatment that Pecola receives from others. She is a space into which others pour their
disgust, self-hatred, lust, and desires. While Morrison reflects that Pecola’s “‘unbeing’ . . .
should have had a shape” (“Afterword” 215) and, while Claudia, as narrator, tries to
give Pecola substance, the character of Pecola is constructed as the vacuum into which
Claudia admits everyone “dumped” their “waste”: “All of us—all who knew her—felt so
wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood
astride her ugliness” (TBE 205). But this is the adult Claudia’s voice, not the child
Claudia’s thoughts, for as Claudia’s prologue tells us, she and her sister longed for “the
health and safe delivery of Pecola’s baby” (TBE 5).

Claudia, who had “overheard” the women in her community commenting that
Pecola would “‘be lucky if’” the baby did not survive, feels the “need for someone to
want the black baby to live—just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls
[and] Shirley Temples” (TBE 188, 189, 190). As a result, Claudia engages her sister,
Frieda, to help her “‘make a miracle’” for Pecola’s unborn baby by praying, sacrificing
their bicycle money, and planting seeds (TBE 191, 192). The seeds that they planted and
incanted over, however, did not grow. Those “seeds shriveled and died; her baby too”
(TBE 6). The child Claudia and her sister, Frieda, are convinced that had their plants
lived, Pecola’s baby would also have lived. Not realizing that they are powerless to
change Pecola’s life or to make her baby thrive, their inability to transform Pecola’s
situation leaves them feeling that they have “failed her” (TBE 204-205) and that they
should assume “guilt” (TBE 5) for the death of Pecola’s baby.
In contrast to the adults who assume no responsibility for the fate of Pecola or her baby, these two girls are less inclined to divest themselves of accountability than are the black women who “were disgusted, amused, shocked, outraged, or even excited by the story” of Pecola’s misfortunes (TBE 190). However, unlike Shirley Temple’s film characters, who “represent what Kathy Merlock Jackson calls the ‘fix-it child’ of late-nineteenth-century sentimental literature” (Vered 54), Claudia and Frieda are unable to make everything turn out well for Pecola. Nevertheless, while as a child Claudia could not “fix” Pecola’s situation, as an adult the telling of Pecola’s story through the act of writing is a means of proclaiming, not the fault of two young girls whose “seeds . . . did not sprout” (TBE 5), but the fault of the political systems and societal images that are “bad for certain kinds of flowers,” that “will not nurture certain fruit” (TBE 206).

While, in The Bluest Eye, Claudia desires to help Pecola’s baby survive in order to counter black maternal love for white dolls and white children, in Sula, a black male child is discarded like an unwanted doll by Sula Peace and Nel Wright in their effort to counter hostilities toward black maternal attitudes that either value black males over daughters or that shame daughters in front of black males. Although the types of destructive play are very different in The Bluest Eye and Sula, the reasons for violent play actions are closely related, for both texts deal with the ways that racism and sexism complicate love and self-worth within the black family. In contrast to Claudia’s violent doll-play, through which she attempts to subvert the hierarchy of whiteness over blackness, Sula and Nel attempt to invert the hierarchy of black males over black females and the power of black mothers over black daughters through the drowning a black male child during play.9
It is important in *Sula* that the black child who is destroyed is a male child, for Sula and Nel are not responding to black maternal attitudes that define white femininity as worthy of adulation, but to black maternal attitudes that either give preference to black males or deference to white males. Through her playtime action of killing Chicken Little, Sula reacts to the fact that her mother likes black men yet, at the same time, dislikes her own daughter. Unlike Claudia, who resists her imagined transference of violence to real-life white children, Sula actually does transfer her feelings of maternal rejection to a real-life child, and this action results in an abdication of all sense of "responsibility" (*Sula* 118) and in the loss of self. Nel’s transference of violence, on the other hand, is through her vicarious enjoyment of Chicken Little’s death, a repressed reaction to the memory of her mother’s deference to a white male on the Jim Crow train car and the venomous gaze of black males that her mother incurred for that action.

For both Nel and Sula, certain psychological consequences are initiated as a result of the violent childhood play that ended in Chicken Little’s death. Like Claudia, who eventually rejects her play identity as a destroyer of dolls, Nel rejects her play identity as a vicarious destroyer of a black male child. However, while Claudia assumes an identity in real life that expresses false affection for white images, Claudia does realize the negative implications of this assumed identity. Nel, on the other hand, assumes the identity of a “calm, controlled” (*Sula* 170) and good person both in play and in her real life, an identity that both rejects and suppresses her part in Chicken Little’s drowning. Sula rejects both her “play self” and her “everyday self” (Sutton-Smith 159) as a result of Chicken Little’ death, for her play identity as Chicken Little’s killer causes Sula to believe “that there was no self to count on” (*Sula* 119) at all now.
With Chicken Little’s violent disappearance into death during play, Morrison emphasizes both Sula’s and Nel’s family histories of violence in the context of mother/daughter relationships. As Willis asserts, a “black woman’s relation to history is first of all a relationship to mother and grandmother” (Specifying 5), and Sula’s action of killing Chicken Little is mired in a maternal history of missing body parts, murder of black males, and “manlove” (Sula 41) that begins with her grandmother, Eva Peace. As a young mother abandoned by her husband, Eva can find no adequate means of employment in the nearby white community, and her dire material circumstances result in her self-violent action of sacrificing a leg as a means of supporting her family with insurance money. Eva’s actions as a mother also include violence to her son, Plum, who returns from fighting in World War I with a debilitating drug habit. Fearing that the adult Plum “want[s] to crawl back in” her “womb,” Eva murders her son by setting him on fire, a murder which the adult Sula divulges to Nel that she had secretly witnessed as a child (Sula 71, 101).

Eva’s violent murder of her son seems in some ways to contrast with the “manlove that Eva bequeathed to her daughter[,]” Hannah (Sula 41). However, Plum’s murder is portrayed as a mercy killing in the text, and, it is significant to note that Eva also gives another reason for killing Plum, for she tells Hannah that she wanted Plum to “die like a man” (Sula 72). In preventing Plum from sinking even further into a pit of drug-induced stupor, Eva feels as if she is doing him a service—an unusual, but protective, form of “manlove” perhaps. As the narrator explains, Eva and her daughter, Hannah, “simply loved maleness, for its own sake,” and Eva’s house, where Hannah and Sula also live, is filled with “gentleman callers” (Sula 41) and the stray boys whom Eva
takes into her home. This house is also filled with Hannah’s “lovemaking,” for “Hannah simply refused to live without the attentions of a man” (Sula 43, 42). Interestingly, however, Hannah has acquired more from Eva than love of males. Hannah also adopts the same maternal attitude of distance from her own daughter that caused her pain as a child, for the narrator points out that Hannah is a “distant mother” (Sula 52).

Morrison places both Hannah’s attitude of maternal distance and her adult remembrance of her own childhood within the context of the absence of mother/daughter play. While in The Bluest Eye, Pauline ignores her daughter’s needs in favor of those of a white child, in Sula, Eva provides for her children and keeps them alive at great bodily cost to herself. For Hannah, however, a mother’s sacrifice does not equal love, and this becomes clear when the subject of having no time to play with one’s children surfaces. As an adult woman in 1923, the character of Hannah Peace expresses doubt that her mother loved her as a child when she asks Eva, “‘Mamma, did you ever love us?’” (Sula 67). Hannah “sang the words like a small child saying a piece at Easter” (Sula 67), and Eva is stunned and offended by this grown daughter’s question. Eva’s outraged reaction and the exchange that follows between the two women merits quoting at length, for Eva fiercely describes the material conditions that precluded playing with her children:

Eva looked up across from her wagon at her daughter. ‘Give me that again. Flat out to fit my head.’

‘I mean, did you? You know. When we was little.’

Eva’s hand moved snail-like down her thigh toward her stump, but stopped short of it to realign a pleat. ‘No. I don’t reckon I did. Not the way you thinkin’.’
‘Oh, well. I was just wonderin’.’ Hannah appeared to be through with the subject.

‘An evil wonderin’ if I ever heard one.’ Eva was not through. . . .

‘You settin’ here with your healthy-ass self and ax me did I love you? Them big old eyes in your head would a been two holes full of maggots if I hadn’t.’

‘I didn’t mean that, Mamma. I know you fed us and all. I was talkin’ ‘bout something else. Like. Like. Playin’ with us. Did you ever, you know, play with us?’

‘Play? Wasn’t nobody playin’ in 1895. . . . I’m talkin’ ‘bout 18 and 95 when I set in that house five days with you and Pearl and Plum and three beets, you snake-eyed ungrateful hussy. What would I look like leapin’ ‘round that little old room playin’ with youngins with three beets to my name? . . . Pearl was shittin’ worms and I was supposed to play rang-around-the-rosie?’

‘But Mamma, they had to be some time when you wasn’t thinkin’ ‘bout . . .’

‘No time. They wasn’t no time. Not none. Soon as I got one day done here come a night. With you all coughin’ and me watchin’ so TB wouldn’t take you off and if you was sleepin’ quiet I thought, O Lord, they dead and put my hand over your mouth to feel if the breath was comin’ what you talkin’ ‘bout did I love you girl I stayed alive for you can’t you
get that through your thick head or what is that between your ears, heifer?"

(Sula 67-69)

In this dialogue, Hannah aligns love with playing, and the psychic consequences for her are that she has felt the painful lack of both. Eva, on the other hand, whose life as a young mother had been a constant and violent battle to keep her children and herself alive, even sacrificing a leg to do so, feels an outraged disbelief at Hannah’s wistful questioning.

This mother-daughter conversation, like the previously-quoted anonymous nurse’s assertions concerning the miniscule amount of time that she is allowed to spend with her own children, gives the lie to Mary Lynn Stevens Heininger’s declaration that at “the end of the [nineteenth] century, ‘having a childhood’ had become an American right,” and “[w]hat . . . this meant to the toy trade was growth and profit” (Intro, Stirn n. pag.). Heininger’s statement implies that childhood includes toys and playtime as a right for all children. Whether or not the fictional Hannah had playmates her own age as a child is unclear; what is clear, however, is that Hannah equates the absence of mother-child play in her own childhood with the absence of a mother’s love—a judgment that implies play’s ideological framing as an important component of a loving household but a component that is not available to all.

For Hannah’s mother, Eva, playing did not fall into the category of a necessity for survival, and Eva’s sole determination, as a mother, had been to keep her children alive. In the case of the fictional Eva and the real-world anonymous nurse, as well as others in similar situations whose lives were a daily struggle to stay healthy and provide food and clothing and shelter for their families, the right for their children to have a life filled with
mother-child play is prohibited by exhausting and never-ending obligations. Whereas Eva’s conviction is that survival and sacrifice should be indicative of a mother’s love for her children, Hannah’s view reflects the ideology that play signifies both maternal love and parent/child “bonding and belonging” (Sutton-Smith 107).

However, although Hannah conflates love and play, there is no mention in this novel of her playing with her own daughter, Sula. Certainly, there are gaps in the novel regarding Sula’s early childhood, and, perhaps, there was mother-child play between Hannah and Sula during those years. What is not left missing from this text, however, is Hannah’s attitude toward Sula, who overhears Hannah tell two women visitors, “I love Sula. I just don’t like her” (Sula 57). Hurt by her mother’s “pronouncement,” Sula lingers upstairs in “bewilderment” until “Nel’s call” beckons “her away from dark thoughts back into the bright, hot daylight,” where these two twelve-year-old friends go “looking for mischief . . . down by the river” (Sula 57, 56). The boisterous playtime that ensues, however, will turn into a fatal activity for a black male child called Chicken Little.

As Lucille P. Fultz notes, Sula’s “‘dark thoughts’” following “her mother’s pronouncement . . . surely must have found expression in her teasing and furiously hurling Chicken Little to his accidental death” (“To Make Herself” 233). Fultz points out that Hannah’s words “convey distance and disapproval” and that “Hannah’s inability to like her daughter may be linked to her own mother’s inability or failure to give Hannah the feeling of being liked” (“To Make Herself” 233). It is important to note, however, that Hannah does say that she loves her daughter, but Sula discounts that part of Hannah’s statement and focuses only on the fact that her mother does not “like her”
While Hannah had considered a mother’s play with her daughter to be a necessary expression of maternal love, Sula considers a mother’s “‘like’” for her daughter to be a necessary component of maternal love. Sula lives in a household where her mother gives black males more attention and affection than she does her own daughter, and, although Hannah’s affection for males is primarily sexual, Sula, as a child, believes that affection or “‘like’” should also be a part of maternal love for a daughter. It is interesting to note that Sula’s drowning of Chicken Little occurs while she is attempting to play with him in what could be construed as a way that shows maternal affection for him but that, at the same time, demonstrates her antagonism toward a black male as the recipient of female affection.

Prior to Chicken Little’s death scene, however, there is another crucial scene in this text during which Sula and Nel engage in what could be termed an erotics of play. The “grass play” that Nel initiates has been critiqued, as Helena Michie points out, “oppositely and convincingly as a moment of heterosexual initiation and lesbian eroticism” (165). Michie, who “prefer[s] to read this passage . . . not so much as a play between the ‘heterosexual’ and the ‘lesbian’ as between the concepts of ‘same’ and different,” asserts that, while this “erotic scene” of play “ends with a symbol of unity and sameness as the two holes collapse into one,” the death of Chicken Little that follows this scene locates the two girls “in different positions in the visual economy of the text” (165). While Michie places emphasis on the drowning of Chicken Little as the initial event that “establish[es] a difference between Sula as actor and Nel as watcher” through a “process of differentiation begun in violence” (165, 166), I focus on the significance of childhood play as the means by which Sula and Nel rebel against the maternal through
their unconscious desires to drown a black male child. Although both girls have had very
different experiences of the maternal, they both respond, through Chicken Little’s
drowning, to their separate perceptions of being devalued as daughters.

Importantly, the girls’ grass-digging scene includes the literal burial of “debris”
(Sula 59), a significant action in the context of Chicken Little’s imminent drowning, for
each girl child reacts, through his death and through this grave-digging, to what she
unconsciously views as debris in her own life—the experience of either maternal
rejection or shaming. The literal burial of debris during the girls’ activity of digging
begins when “Nel’s twig” snaps, and she flings it into the grave “[w]ith a gesture of
disgust”; Sula copies Nel’s action by pitching her own twig in as well, and Nel follows
suit with “a bottle cap” (Sula 58). The girls search “for more debris to throw into the
hole: paper, bits of glass, butts of cigarettes, until all of the small defiling things they
could find were collected there” (Sula 58, 59). Only then do the two girls “replace the
soil and cover the entire grave with uprooted grass” (Sula 59). The symbolic
significance of the grave with its buried debris is crucial in the context of the remainder
of the novel. If read as a sexual erotics of play, this grave and burial, which prefigures
Chicken Little’s death, also foreshadows the grave that the girls’ friendship will become
when the adult Nel walks in on her husband’s and Sula’s sex play. Again, as in the scene
with Chicken Little, it is Sula’s “playing” that leads to loss. Nel, in all three instances—
the burial of debris, the death of Chicken Little, and the death of her marriage—buries
crucial feelings until the novel’s conclusion. In Sula’s case, some of her feelings are
apparent at the time of Chicken Little’s death; others are not revealed until much later in
the text. For both Sula and Nel, however, a form of self-negation results from the
crucially linked moments of the burying of debris and the drowning of Chicken Little.

It is immediately following their burial of debris, while the two girls are looking
in “unspeakable restlessness and agitation” at the river and its “swift dull water,” that
Chicken Little, “[a] little boy in too big knickers,” approaches them (Sula 59). While
Nel taunts the child for “pick[ing] his nose,” Sula says, “‘Leave him ‘lone, Nel,’” and
then helps the child climb a tree, “as high as they could go” (Sula 59, 60). When
Chicken Little is frightened of climbing back down, Sula halts in her descent and
“together they slowly work their way down” (Sula 60). On the ground again, Chicken
Little is “elated” and proudly says, “I was way up there, wasn’t I? Wasn’t I? I’m a tell
my brovver” (Sula 60), prompting the two girls “to mimic him: ‘I’m a tell my brovver;
I’m a tell my brovver’” (Sula 60). These childhood games of tree-climbing and
mimicking, however, turn raucous and irrevocably violent when Sula continues to
playfully entertain Chicken Little:

Sula picked him up by his hands and swung him outward then around and
around. His knickers ballooned and his shrieks of frightened joy startled
the birds and the fat grasshoppers. When he slipped from her hands and
sailed away out over the water they could still hear his bubbly laughter.

The water darkened and closed quickly over the place where
Chicken Little sank. The pressure of his hard and tight little fingers was
still in Sula's palms as she stood looking at the closed place in the water.
They expected him to come back up, laughing. Both girls stared at the
water. (Sula 60-61)
This scene of Chicken Little’s death links the imagery of dolls, dismemberments, and disappearing playmates in this text. As readers, we must suspend our disbelief as Chicken Little’s body, more like the body of a cloth-and-cotton rag doll than the flesh-and-bone body of a child, defies gravity and “sail[s] away out over the water” (Sula 60). The subsequent disappearance of Chicken Little into the water is marked in the narrative with allusions to dismemberments and to the Peace family: “The water was so peaceful now. There was nothing but the baking sun and something newly missing” [emphasis added] (Sula 61). This wording immediately brings to mind Eva’s missing leg and Sula’s missing fingertip, which she herself had sliced off in protecting Nel from the “harass[ment]” of a group of “white boys” (Sula 53). This theme of absent body parts and absent playmates will culminate in Nel’s epiphany on the novel’s final page when she uncovers what she has buried in her psyche—the fact that what she has been “missing” (Sula 174) throughout her entire adult life is Sula’s friendship.

At the time of Chicken Little’s drowning, however, Nel again decides that something must be buried—Sula’s involvement in his death. Although Nel and Sula fear that Chicken Little’s murder was witnessed by Shadrack from across the river, they keep the drowning as a secret between them. Nel comforts a tearful Sula after Chicken Little’s death, “‘Sh, sh. Don’t, don’t. You didn’t mean it. It ain’t your fault. Sh. Sh. Come on, le’s go, Sula. Come on, now’” (Sula 63). While, as Michie states, Sula is constructed “as actor and Nel as watcher” (165) during Chicken Little’s drowning, the comforting Nel is the active one here as she undertakes a role of maternal nurturance. However, just as Sula had failed in being maternally playful with Chicken Little by letting him slip from her hands, Nel’s attempt at being maternally comforting is tainted by her belief that her
“calm, controlled behavior” positions her as the “good” one (Sula 170, 144). Moreover, Morrison’s narrator reminds us, through the refrain of “the closed place in the water” (Sula 61), that Nel’s decision that they should keep silent about Sula’s part in Chicken Little’s death will have lasting consequences that are not “good” for either girl. Through this repeated refrain that reverberates throughout the remainder of the novel, Morrison constructs “playing as the underlying, always-there continuum of experience” (Schechner 42) for Sula and Nel. Morrison also connects playing with “the underlying, always-there” experience of the maternal in each of these girls’ lives. While Sula expresses her hurt at being rejected by the maternal through the killing of Chicken Little and her subsequent “experimental life” (Sula 118), Nel, on the other hand, represses her fear and shame caused by the maternal through her vicarious aggression against Chicken Little and her subsequent conventional life. Sula’s and Nel’s resistance to the maternal in their own lives, their failed enactments of the maternal, and their choice not to speak of this playtime accident again, even to each other, leads to a burial of feelings about Chicken Little’s drowning that has consequences for each girls’ development of a self-affirming identity.

The psychological consequences for Sula of this playtime turned deadly are explained by the story’s narrator: “[H]ers was an experimental life—ever since her mother’s remarks sent her flying up those stairs, ever since her one major feeling of responsibility had been exorcised on the bank of a river with a closed place in the middle. The first experience taught her there was no other that you could count on; the second that there was no self to count on either” (Sula 118-119). While the narrator credits Hannah’s overheard comments as the moment that convinces Sula of the unreliability of
others, it is Sula’s action of killing Chicken Little that leads her to disallow her very self and that illustrates “how spheres of play and how games increasingly reach into the arena of responsible and irreversible action” (Erikson 69). There is, of course, no way that Sula can reverse the result of her play actions with the black male child, Chicken Little. Furthermore, if children’s play can be seen “as subversive and resisting the order of things” (Sutton-Smith 55), then Sula’s play, although unconsciously designed to disrupt “the order of things” in her own life, only reinforces and reenacts the violence in her family background.

Sula’s murder of Chicken Little parallels Eva’s murder of her own son, and both acts of violence also reenact the violence to black male bodies that was occurring in the white world during the 1922 time-setting of Chicken Little’s death. While in The Bluest Eye, black maternal awe for whiteness in the form of dolls or real children protects white female bodies and devalues black girls, in Sula, black male bodies experience violence that is linked both to the maternal and to the devaluing of black daughters. This differing valuation of white female bodies and black male bodies in The Bluest Eye and Sula mirrors historically-specific conditions for blacks in racist America. In this hierarchy of value, black girls occupy the bottom tier, for they are devalued and disempowered in their positions as children, as blacks, and as females. In both The Bluest Eye and Sula, Morrison shows that even during childhood play, her girl characters cannot escape or overturn the racism and sexism that is a part of both their family histories and their daily lives. However, it is crucial to note that, unlike the violence against African Americans by whites, Sula’s killing of a black male child is not
consciously intentional, and she experiences a devastating loss of self as a consequence of his playtime drowning.\footnote{12}

Morrison explicitly incorporates the white world and its violence toward and disallowing of the humanity of African Americans through the discovery of Chicken Little’s body by a white man. Morrison’s narrator tells us that the “bargeman,” on finding the child’s body, “shook his head in disgust at the kind of parents who would drown their own children”: “When, he wondered, will those people ever be anything but animals, fit for nothing but substitutes for mules, only mules didn’t kill each other the way niggers did” \textit{(Sula 63)}. This white man unceremoniously “dump[s] Chicken Little into a burlap sack,” and fearing “that the corpse in this heat would have a terrible odor,” the man fastens the bag “over the side, so that the Chicken’s body was half in and half out of the water” \textit{(Sula 63, 64)}. When the barge operator reaches the nearest port and relates the incident to the local authority, he finds that the probable home of this child is not at this landing but near Medallion. To the barge operator’s comment that “he couldn’t go all the way back there, it was every bit of two miles, [t]he sheriff said why’n’t he throw it back into the water,” and “[t]he bargeman said he never shoulda taken it out in the first place” \textit{(Sula 64)}. Although the white barge operator had discovered the body on the same day that Chicken Little was drowned, the white man’s mistreatment of the body and his refusal to transport the body to Medallion result in a closed-coffin funeral, for Chicken Little “was unrecognizable to almost everybody who once knew him” \textit{(Sula 64)}.

At the closed-coffin funeral of the now “unrecognizable” \textit{(Sula 64)} Chicken Little, Sula and Nel do “not touch hands or look at each other”: “There was a space, a separateness, between them. Nel’s legs had turned to granite . . . Sula simply cried” \textit{(Sula}
However, during the graveside ceremony, as the two girlfriends watch the burial of Chicken Little, "the space that had sat between them in the pews" disappears; now Nel's and Sula's hands are joined. Much like "the two holes that [had] collapse[d] into one" (Michie 165) during their grave-digging, the girls again erase "the space . . . between them" (Sula 66), and the secret of how Chicken Little died becomes buried debris. The girls' rejoicing of hands after Chicken Little's burial is also an example of how players often react when the physical harm caused by playing has been removed from sight. While "[a] serious injury can change the tone of a football game, both for players and spectators," after "the wounded are carried from the field, the mood changes back to the playful" (Schechner 26). After Chicken Little's body is buried out of sight in the ground, Sula and Nel "relax" the "clenched" grip of their hands until their "fingers" become "laced in as gentle a clasp as that of any two young girlfriends trotting up the road on a summer day wondering what happened to butterflies in the winter" (Sula 66).

Many years later, however, the girls' joined hands will slip apart again when a male figure once more comes between these two friends through Sula's sex play with Nel's husband, Jude. Sula's play is again disastrous, and it severs the connection between Sula and Nel that Chicken Little's death had only threatened to disrupt. Importantly, like the girls' grass-digging and playtime drowning of Chicken Little, the scene that marks the death of Nel's marriage to Jude also has links to both Sula's and Nel's relationships with their mothers. As Michie points out, "Sula's sense of sexuality comes," in part, "from her mother, from whom she learn[ed] that 'sex was pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable'" (161-162). Sula's mother, Hannah, "could break up a marriage before it had even become one—she would make love to the new groom
and wash his wife’s dishes all in an afternoon” (Sula 44). Nel, on the other hand, having followed in the footsteps of her own “conservative” (Sula 18) mother, is now an adult woman immersed in the conventional norms of her community, and she cannot view Sula’s sex with Jude as mere play. Sula’s actions thwart any rejoining of the two female friends across the chasm of infidelity. The unconventionality of Sula’s sexual antics with Jude begins a chain of truth and rumor that mark her as outsider through her disregard for societal norms—her bedding down with the Bottom’s men, her forcing of Eva into an old folks’ home, and the especially “unforgivable thing . . . for which there was no understanding, no excuse, no compassion,” the rumor “that Sula slept with white men” (Sula 112).

Sula’s unconventional and “experimental life” (Sula 118), rooted first in her mother’s overheard comment and then in her playtime discarding of Chicken Little, carries over into adulthood and renders her “pariah” (Sula 122). Sula resides in a community that subscribes to very explicit norms regarding good and evil behavior, and, as an adult, she purposely defies those norms. The normative and good action of a grandchild would be to care for her aging relative at home, the normative and good action of a friend would be to respect the sanctity of another person’s marriage, the normative and good attitude of “a black woman” would be to consider “all unions between white men and black women to be rape” (Sula 113), and the normative and good action of an unmarried young woman would be to get married and settle down with one man. Sula, in her disregard for all of these norms, comes to epitomize the values of evil in the eyes of her community.
Yet the character of Sula almost capitulates to societal norms when she enters into a relationship with Albert Jacks and experiences a “new and alien . . . feeling”— “possession or at least the desire for it” (Sula 131). However, when Albert “detect[s] the scent of the nest” (Sula 133), he bolts, forestalling Sula’s flight into the conventional. After his departure, Sula remembers a childhood fear of hers: “When I was a little girl the heads of my papers dolls came off, and it was a long time before I discovered that my own head would not fall off if I bent my neck. I used to walk around holding it very stiff because I thought a strong wind or a heavy push would snap my neck. Nel was the one who told me the truth. But she was wrong” (Sula 136). Now, Sula compares herself to those headless paper dolls of her childhood: “‘I did not hold my head stiff enough when I met him and so I lost it just like the dolls’” (Sula 136). Sula had learned as a child that “there was no other that you could count on” (Sula 118-119), and, through her counting on the continued presence of Albert Jacks in her life, Sula is figuratively dismembered by his leaving—by “his stunning absence” that was “everywhere” (Sula 134). In the passages surrounding Albert’s departure, Morrison highlights missing things and absent people through the lost heads of paper dolls, Albert’s absence, and the mention of Sula’s estranged friend, Nel. Significantly, Morrison also points to the long-absent Chicken Little through wording reminiscent of the debris-filled grave and Chicken Little’s death. Sula thinks of her childhood and Albert Jacks and his “smile that kept slipping and falling, falling, falling so she wanted to reach out with her hand to catch it before it fell to the pavement and was sullied by the cigarette butts and bottle caps and spittle at his feet” (Sula 135). However, just as Sula could not keep Chicken Little from “slipp[ing] from
her hands” and plummeting into the water (Sula 135, 60), she cannot prevent Albert Jacks and his smile from “slipping and falling” from her grip.

Through the disappearance of Albert Jacks from Sula’s life, Morrison links Sula’s identification with the fragility of paperdolls to Chicken Little who, in doll-like fashion, was vulnerable to violence in her hands. In comparing herself to headless paper dolls, Sula expresses her own fear of vulnerability to violence in the hands of others. Sula does not, however, let her community’s members suspect her fragility. Although aware of her community’s “magnificent hatred” (Sula 173) and disdain for her, Sula appears unruffled by her ostracization. In spite of Sula’s seeming unconcern for the community’s view of her, however, we find during her deathbed scene that what is missing from her life is what was missing from Pecola’s—love.

When Nel, like “any good woman come to see about a sick person” (Sula 138), visits the now seriously ill Sula, and Sula asks Nel why she “‘couldn’t get over’” her having “‘fucked’” Jude, Nel retorts, “‘You laying there in that bed without a dime or a friend to your name having done all the dirt you did in this town and you still expect folks to love you?’” (Sula 145). Sula’s reply attests to the lack of love that she has felt in her life since that afternoon when she had heard Hannah’s remarks and then killed another human being:

‘Oh, they’ll love me all right. It will take time, but they’ll love me. . . .

After all the old women have lain with the teen-agers; when all the young girls have slept with their old drunken uncles; after all the black men fuck all the white ones; when all the white women kiss all the black ones; when the guards have raped all the jailbirds and after all the whores make love
to their grannies; after all the faggots get their mothers’ trim; when
Lindbergh sleeps with Bessie Smith and Norma Shearer makes it with
Stepin Fetchit; after all the dogs have fucked all the cats and every
weathervane on every barn flies off the roof to mount the hogs . . . then
there’ll be a little love left over for me. And I know just what it will feel
like.’ (Sula 145-46).

Sula’s life-long sense of vulnerability is apparent in her words. While her mother,
Hannah, had thought that love was missing from her relationship with Eva, Sula lets us
know here that she feels that love has been missing from all of the relationships in her
own life. After her speech to Nel about love, Sula’s thoughts are filled with memories of
childhood play, the maternal, Nel, and buried things as her mind drifts back to “the wind
pressing her dress between her legs as she ran up the bank of the river to four leaf-locked
trees and the digging of holes in the earth” (Sula 146). This is a memory of her last
shared moment with Nel before males come between them—first, Chicken Little and,
later, Jude. After Nel leaves, Sula thinks again of her childhood and her mother’s death
by fire: “I didn’t mean anything. I never meant anything. I stood there watching her
burn and was thrilled. I wanted her to keep on jerking like that, to keep on dancing”
(Sula 147). As Sula’s physical pain increases in this scene, death releases her from her
suffering, and Sula’s reaction to her own death is, “Well, I’ll be damned, . . . it didn’t
even hurt. Wait’ll I tell Nel’” (Sula 149).

In 1965, twenty-five years after Sula’s death, Nel is at last forced to deal with her
feelings about Sula and about the childhood play episode with Chicken Little that ended
in his drowning. Nel, who has not seen Sula’s grandmother in years, decides to pay Eva
a visit, and Nel is shocked when Eva says out of the blue, "Tell me how you killed that little boy... The one you threw in the water" (Sula 168). Nel responds, "I didn't throw no little boy in the river. That was Sula," to which Eva replies, "You. Sula. What's the difference? You was there. You watched, didn't you? Me, I never would've watched!" (Sula 168). After leaving Eva's room, Nel is forced into a realization about herself as she thinks about her conversation with Eva:

What did old Eva mean by you watched? How could she help seeing it? She was right there. But Eva didn't say see, she said watched. 'I did not watch it. I just saw it.' But it was there anyway, as it had always been, the old feeling and the old question. The good feeling she had had when Chicken's hand slipped. She hadn't wondered about that in years. 'Why didn't I feel bad when it happened? How come it felt so good to see him fall?' All these years she had been secretly proud of her calm, controlled behavior when Sula was uncontrollable, her compassion for Sula's frightened and shamed eyes. Now it seemed that what she had thought was maturity, serenity and compassion was only the tranquillity that follows a joyful stimulation. (Sula 170)

Nel's secret reaction during Sula's fatal play with Chicken Little is much like the "secret dark play" of children in which they "play out selves that cannot be displayed" elsewhere (Schechner 28). In this type of play, "[t]he thrill and gratification... is to perform anonymously, in disguise, or in a closet what one cannot do publicly 'as myself'" (Schechner 28). Since Nel has placed great value in her belief that she is a good person and that she is the good one in comparison to Sula, any admission of her feelings during
Chicken Little’s death would have been a threat to her identity. Now, however, Eva’s words have compelled Nel to examine the fact that she had felt good about Chicken Little’s death while Sula had felt badly about it.

Nel also has to admit to herself that she vicariously participated in Chicken Little’s drowning through both that “good feeling” and through watching. Morrison explains in an interview with Betty Jean Parker that the word “‘watch’ is something different from ‘saw’”: “‘You have to be participating in something that you are watching. If you just saw it, you just happened to be there’” (64). In this instance, Nel’s participatory watching seems to have crucial links to Claudia’s “repulsive” and “disinterested violence.”13 Willis states that “[b]y demonstrating that violence against whites runs the risk of being ‘disinterested violence,’ Morrison suggests that white people are little more than abstractions” to Claudia (“I Shop” 993). Could Morrison be showing in *Sula* that Chicken Little was “little more than [an] abstraction” for Nel—that Nel’s “contentment” and “enjoyment” in watching the violence of Chicken Little’s death is “repulsive” because she is “disinterested” in his plight but not in her own pleasure?

Unlike the explicitly race-related politics of Claudia’s “disinterested violence,” Nel’s disinterest, on the surface, seems to be merely a vicarious thrill for a child whose “enthusiasms” and “imaginations” had been shoved “underground” by her mother (*Sula* 18). However, in the context of Nel’s childhood and the shame and fear that she experienced during the ride in the Jim Crow train car to New Orleans with her mother, her “enjoyment” (*Sula* 170) in watching Sula throw Chicken Little in the river resonates with pleasure in overturned hierarchies—a fantasized triumph of female over male and daughter over mother. Nel’s “enjoyment” (*Sula* 170) also has overtones connected with
a Freudian erotics of play and pleasure. While Wexler points out that "Freudian
psychoanalysis operates with a certain picture of the family in mind, an image of the rules
and the psychic results of kinship that is not a universally explanatory structure" (159),
Nel's reaction of "joyful stimulation" (Sula 170) when Chicken Little fell from the sky
and disappeared into the water strongly invokes the Freudian pleasure principle regarding
children's play. Through his observation of an otherwise "good little boy" who had
developed the tendency of grabbing his toys "and throwing them away from him into a
corner," Freud theorized the "economic motive" of children's play—"the consideration of
the yield of pleasure involved" (13). After tossing a toy away, this young child that
Freud studied would speak "the German word 'fort' ('gone')" while exhibiting "an
expression of interest and satisfaction" (Freud 13). At the "reappearance" of the toy, he
would utter "a joyful 'da' ('there')" (Freud 14). Thus, "the complete game" entailed
"disappearance and return"; however, "[a]s a rule one only witnessed its first act, which
was repeated untiringly as a game in itself, though there is no doubt that the greater
pleasure was attached to the second act" (Freud 14). Freud's explanation for this game
of "disappearance and return" is that, in this way, the child was able to assume "an active
part" although he was in a passive situation" whenever his mother left him alone; thus,
"her departure had to be enacted as a necessary preliminary to her joyful return" (15). In
"[t]hrowing away the object so that it was 'gone,'" the boy could "satisfy an impulse . . .
which was suppressed in his actual life, to revenge himself on his mother for going away
from him" (Freud 15).

This game of "disappearance and return" seems especially pertinent to both Nel's
pleasure during Chicken Little's flight to his death and her shame during the train ride to
New Orleans with her mother. According to Fultz, “[w]atching her mother reduced to ‘custard’ under the gaze of a white conductor and black men helps to distance Nel from Helene and forces her to question her mother as a role model” (“To Make Herself” 233). As Michie notes, this “journey itself, in a segregated train, is filled with racial and sexual humiliation,” and “Nel begins for the first time to form her own sense of self in opposition to her mother” (157). Nel’s comprehension of the hate in the eyes of the watching black soldiers on observing Helene “smile dazzlingly” at the white train conductor leaves Nel unable to “look at” either “her mother” or “the soldiers” (Sula 22). Having seen “the midnight eyes of the soldiers,” and “the muscles of their faces tighten, a movement under the skin from blood to marble,” Nel “resolve[s] to be on guard—always, . . . to make certain that no man ever looked at her that way, “[t]hat no midnight eyes or marbled flesh would ever accost her and turn her into jelly” (Sula 21-22). In thinking of her mother, the child Nel fears that “[i]f this tall, proud woman, this woman who was very particular about her friends, who slipped into church with unequaled elegance, . . . if she were really custard then there was a chance that Nel was too” (Sula 2).

Consequently, Nel’s vicarious participation in the throwing of Chicken Little into the river, if read in accordance with the pleasure principle theory of the fort/da game, could be explained as Nel’s way of taking an active role in making her mother’s custardness and the black soldiers’ marbledness disappear. Interestingly, one aspect of current play theory asserts that “the fun of playing when there is fun, is in playing with fire, going in over one’s head, inverting accepted procedures and hierarchies” (Schechner 26-27). For Nel, a character in a novel filled with inversions, Chicken Little’s flight seems to afford her a child’s fantasy thrill of exerting power over her mother and a
female’s imagined satisfaction of exerting power over a male. If this is the case, then Chicken Little, at least for a moment, represented merely an abstraction for Nel, much like a toy violently and contentedly discarded in order to “satisfy an impulse . . . which was suppressed” (Freud 15). Yet even this Freudian reading of play connects Nel’s pleasure at seeing Chicken Little’s fatal flight to the political climate for African Americans during the time setting of the novel and foregrounds the issues of racism and sexism which surfaced on the Jim Crow car ride south to New Orleans.

The possible connection of Chicken Little in Nel’s mind to the smile of her mother and the eyes of the soldiers on the train gains credence through the episode in which Nel walks in on her husband and Sula together. Nel’s narration of her encounter with Sula and Jude, who were “down on all fours naked,” explicitly refers to that train ride: “[W]hen I opened the door they didn’t even look . . . But then they did look up. Or you did. You did, Jude. And if only you had not looked at me the way the soldiers did on the train . . . I just stood there seeing it and smiling, because maybe there was some explanation . . . that would have made it all right” (Sula 105). Nel’s fear is palpable when she relates, “I was . . . scared too because your eyes looked like the soldiers’ that time on the train when my mother turned to custard” (Sula 106). After Jude leaves, Nel retreats to her bathroom where she remembers “the women at Chicken Little’s funeral . . . who shrieked over the bier and at the lip of the open grave,” and she realizes that “[w]hat she had regarded since as unbecoming behavior seemed fitting to her now” (Sula 107). Faced with the death of her marriage, Nel now feels that “[i]t was poisonous, unnatural to let the dead go with a mere whimpering, a slight murmur, a rose bouquet of good taste,” for surely “[g]ood taste was out of place in the company of
death” (Sula 107). Instead “of her very own howl,” however, “[a] gray ball . . . of muddy strings, but without weight, fluffy but terrible in its malevolence” materializes “just to the right of her, in the air, just out of view” (Sula 108, 109).

Just as with the covered “debris” in the grass grave and the “closed place in the water” that covered Chicken Little, Nel refuses to face the fearsome “gray” mass and probe its meaning. Like Sula, who had thought that she should keep her neck “stiff” (Sula 136) in order not to loose her head, Nel keeps her eyes firmly turned away from the “gray ball” (Sula 109). Yet, it had been Nel who, as a child, had told Sula that she would not loose her head if she loosened her neck. In ignoring her own advice to Sula and in failing to examine the ball of debris at the first moment of its appearance following her discovery of Sula’s and Jude’s affair, Nel loses not her head but her friendship with Sula.

It is only through Nel’s examination of her feelings surrounding Chicken Little’s death—the debris that she has kept buried from herself—and her subsequent trip to the cemetery with its memories of Sula’s funeral, that Nel’s “gray ball” (Sula 109) bursts, and she is finally able to erupt in “her very own howl” (Sula 108) for the lost friendship of her childhood. Nel can now assume responsibility for her part in the disruption of hers and Sula’s friendship and recognize that assuming an identity of goodness as defined by societal norms is not necessarily in one’s best interest. During their childhood, these two friends, “tucked up there in the Bottom” (Sula 6), had each “discovered . . . that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them”; as a result of this realization, “they had set about creating something else to be” (Sula 52). The violent playtime drowning of Chicken Little in 1922, however, plays a major role in
the stifling of both Sula’s and Nel’s creativity. Kept secret at Nel’s insistence, this terrible playtime incident, with its “closed place in the water” (Sula 61), affects the future identities of each girl in destructive, not creative, fashionings of the self. While Hortense J. Spillers argues that “[w]hatever Sula has become, whatever she is, is a matter of her own choices, often ill-formed and ill-informed” (296), Sula’s fate is decided during childhood play “on the bank of a river” (Sula 118) at the age of twelve when her sense of responsibility and self vanish.

Headless “paper dolls” (Sula 136), a little “laughing” boy “sail[ing] away out over the water” (Sula 60-61), blue-eyed baby dolls “bleat[ing]” (TBE 21), “cu-ute” Shirley Temple dancing (TBE 19), a little black girl praying for blue eyes, “a broken toy” (TBE 176), a mother having no time to play with her children and sacrificing a limb in order to provide for them—these are the images Morrison connects with girlhood and playing in The Bluest Eye and Sula. Who will play with Pecola in a safe and loving way? Who will give Claudia black baby dolls and a place at Bojangles’s side? Who can take back the hand-slide and Chicken Little’s flight to death? Walter Slatoff asserts that “certain kinds of human damage can’t be repaired” (34). Certainly, Morrison demonstrates this through a series of unsettling images of playtime that disrupt dominant ideologies of the happily playing child. In foregrounding play as the primary arena in which black girls address their feelings of disempowerment and work through issues of identity, Morrison uses play to link love and violence within black families to the harsh affects of historical realities for African Americans living in a racist and sexist U.S. society. Through her literary use of play to critique white racism, internalized racism, and intragroup racism in The Bluest Eye and Sula, Morrison offers a powerful argument
for the centrality of play to the making and the unmaking of a self in childhood, adolescence, and beyond.
Notes

1 Among the critics who, like Willis, focus on the issue of consumerism, is Jane Kuenz, who provides a compelling critique of “commodity culture” as it relates to The Bluest Eye in her article “The Bluest Eye: Notes on History, Community, and Black Female Subjectivity,” African American Review 27 (Fall 1993): 421-31. As Kuenz states, commodity culture “increasingly disallows the representation of any image not premised on consumption or the production of normative values conducive to it” (421).

2 In The Ultimate Doll Book (London: Dorling Kindersley, 1993), Caroline Goodfellow writes that “rag dolls were made at home by mothers as playthings for their children,” and “many a doll was made from an old rag or woolen remnants that could be found in the home” (88). Furthermore, Wilma King notes in Stolen Childhood (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995) that even slave children made their own dolls, fashioning them out of “rags and string” (45).

3 In the now well-known 1940s study carried out by “African American psychologists Mamie Phipps Clark and her husband Kenneth B. Clark, . . . African American children, [w]hen offered a choice between black and white dolls, . . . tended to choose the white dolls.” The reason given for this preference by the child participants “was that the black dolls were ugly and the white dolls were pretty.” Based on their studies, “[t]he Clarks’ conclusion was that black children become aware of racial identity at the age of three, and by age five they develop negative personal self-images derived from the prejudiced values of the larger society.” The Clarks “shared their conclusions with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People,” and their “findings,” presented during “the Brown v. Board of Education case,” were instrumental

4 The character of Pauline Breedlove has received much critical attention. As Kuenz points out, Pauline’s "job with the Fishers provides her with the semblance of acceptance and community she cannot find or create in her own home and neighborhood"; the Fishers "have given her the nickname she never had as a child and tell small anecdotes about her" (425). Kuenz asserts that "it is easier for Pauline to ignore the fact that both the name and the anecdotes are condescending and exemplative of her subordinate, and ultimately outsider, status in the Fischer household . . . than to do without the ‘power, praise, and luxury’" that Pauline believes her position affords her (425). Pauline has her own deep emotional scars, and, as Jan Furman states in Toni Morrison’s Fiction (Columbia: U of SC P, 1996), “[b]y the time Pecola finds herself awkwardly standing in the Fisher’s kitchen, responsible for the spilled remains of a freshly baked pie at her feet, Pauline is incapable of a mother’s love and forgiveness; [h]er best response is knocking Pecola to the floor and running to console the crying Fisher child” (16).

5 While Merish’s argument holds true for the fictional world of The Bluest Eye and the fictional worlds of Shirley Temple movies, it does not stand up to the test of real world scrutiny. For example, in the case of JonBenet Ramsey, her whiteness, cuteness, and middle-classness did not serve to protect her from harm.

6 In “Dyes and Dolls: Multicultural Barbie and the Merchandising of Difference,” Ann Ducille raises the question, “What does it mean . . . when little girls are
given dolls to play with that in no way resemble them?" (48). The “dolls [Ducille] played with as a child were white,” but she states, “I still remember the first time I saw a black doll. . . . she was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen; I wanted her desperately, and I was never again satisfied with white Betsy Wetsy and blonde, blue-eyed Patty Play Pal” (64). Ducille critiques the “current popularity and commercial success of Black Barbie and Shani,” and she wonders whether or not “we [have] regressed to such a degree that ‘difference’ is only conceivable as similarity—as a mediated text that no matter what its dye job ultimately must be readable as white” (65-66). Ducille’s article appears in Differences 6 (1994): 46-68. There are, however, African-American owned doll companies that strive to redress Ducille’s concerns. García-Barrio writes that “Myla Perkins notes that the number of African-American doll makers ‘surged in the 1960s, . . . and it seems to be rising again’” (60). Although “[t]he number of black-owned toy manufacturers remains small at present,” there are “a few companies [that] have been able to achieve real commercial success” (60, 62). One of those companies is Olmec Toys, Inc., “founded” by Yla Eason “in 1985 after Eason had ‘search[ed] in vain for African-American action figures for her son” (García-Barrio 62). According to García-Barrio, “Olmec’s bestseller is a doll named Imani, who sports cornrows and, unlike many black dolls on the market, has recognizable African-American features” (62). Olmec Toys also “produces toys for Asian and Hispanic children,” and Eason’s primary goal for her customers is “‘building self-esteem’ (García-Barrio 62).

7 Interestingly, according to Washburn, little girls do not always experience doll-play as a mothering activity, and dolls can be “friends” and “companions” as well as “babies” (134). More importantly, for the doll-players in Washburn’s survey, certain
categories of dolls “are real people with real feelings,” and “[t]hese dolls are treated gently and carefully like babies; they are fed, rocked, and put to bed every night” (118). However, for a doll to be considered “real” by a doll-player, it “must look and feel like [a] real” person (Washburn 118). Thus, for example, “Topsy-turvy dolls with their ‘heads between their legs’ . . . are not considered to be realistic” (Washburn 123).

Significant to the role of the topsy-turvy doll in popular culture is Merish’s comment that “Harriet Beecher Stowe presents the minstrel sprite Topsy as a comic figure and foil for the pious, spiritualized, and deeply serious Little Eva (a role Shirley Temple would adapt in Dimples)” (198). Thus the topsy-turvy doll can be seen as a configuration designed “to ‘enhance by contrast,’ as Harryette Mullen has put it” (Wexler 174).

In Toni Morrison: Playing with Difference, however, Lucille P. Fultz cautions us that “[i]n scrutinizing Pecola as scapegoat, it is important to consider her actions as survival techniques and not merely as self-loathing or only as a desire to be like Shirley Temple or Mary Jane” (TM 56). Fultz argues that Pecola’s “subjectivity is shadowed by the emphasis on the perception of her as a victimized ‘other’ within the African American racial and social economy,” and “what is often overlooked are Pecola’s desperate, single-handed attempts to change other people’s perceptions of her” (TM 55). Fultz “emphasize[s] Pecola’s conscious and unwavering attempts at refashioning a self that, in her own mind, at least, comports with the one she believes others will befriend and love” (TM 59). Pointing to Pecola’s own efforts “to remedy her situation,” Fultz argues that if “we shift our focus from Pecola’s victimization to her gestures at agency and human connectedness, we may be less inclined to pity her and more inclined to admire her” (TM 56). As Fultz notes, “Pecola is clearly seeking love through relationships” (TM 59).
Thus, when she “accept[s] Maureen’s invitation for ice cream and Junior’s invitation to see his cat, Pecola is not just responding to coercion; she is responding to her inner loneliness and desire for companionship” (Fultz, 59). Pecola’s “visits with the prostitutes are self-initiated,” and “[e]ven her decision to seek help from Soaphead Church,” Fultz contends, “must be read in the context of her efforts to find a solution to the hatred heaped on her” (59). In searching out Soaphead Church, Pecola is “seeking control of her destiny by trying to counter her tortured existence,” and, in her conversations with her imagined friend near the novel’s conclusion, Pecola is striving “to create order out of her chaotic world and tortured mind” (Fultz, 59).

9 Like The Bluest Eye with its nightmare inversion of the Dick-and-Jane primer, Sula is also a novel that includes startling inversions. The inversions in Sula and The Bluest Eye, however, are not merrily carnivalesque but, as Mariann Russell states of The Bluest Eye, are “heavily ironic” (37). Chicken Little’s name, for example, provides an ironic touch to his death—unlike the Chicken Little of the children’s tale who shouts that the sky is falling, Morrison’s Chicken Little falls from the sky and dies.

10 I would like to thank Mandy Reid for pointing out this possible reading of Sula’s inability to cope with that fact that her mother does not like her.

11 White violence to black males was “fueled” by “[t]he myth of the black male rapist [and] led to white mob rituals of lynching and mutilation (though it is important to remember that black women were lynched as well)” (Gaines 12). Kevin K. Gaines, Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1996.
Morrison employs the narrative use of play to comment on white racism in other instances in this novel. The passage in which Hannah "could see the deweys still playing chain gang; their ankles bound one to the other, [as] they tumbled, struggled back to their feet and tried to walk single file" (Sula 72) strongly evokes the real-world conditions for black males during this chapter's time setting of 1923. Morrison also uses play in the form of the community's first-time participation in Shadrack's Suicide Day parade following Sula's death to highlight white supremacist disallowing of African Americans as workers. As some of the Bottom's community members join the parade, they "call" for others "to come out and play in the sunshine—as though the sunshine would last, as though there really was hope" (Sula 160). When this playful march ends at "the tunnel they were forbidden [by white folks] to build," the participants in National Suicide Day try "to wipe from the face of the earth the work" that they were denied to benefit from economically in the form of jobs; however, "in their need to kill it all, all of it, . . . they went too deep, too far" (Sula 161-162.)

14 Unlike an analysis such as that of Houston A. Baker, Jr., who argues that the burying of debris and the drowning of Chicken Little are “Sula’s and Nel’s exorcising ritual[s] of the Phallus” (105), I am not placing the actions of the two girls within a Lacanian framework. Even my use of Freud is not intended as an oedipal reading of Nel’s pleasure but as a reading in the contexts of both her history and of theories of play. My emphasis is on the identities and roles assumed during play, why they are assumed, and how those identities have consequences for the making of a self both inside of and outside of the realm of play. For Baker’s Lacanian analysis, see Houston A. Baker, Jr., “Knowing Our Place: Psychoanalysis and Sula.” From Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women’s Writing (Chicago and London, 1991), pp. 145-50. Rpt. in Toni Morrison: Contemporary Critical Essays. Ed. Linden Peach. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998. 103-09.
Conclusion

In my concluding remarks, I would like to speculate about the ways that I might shape my dissertation for a future book project. In researching and writing this dissertation, my primary goal was to explore and comment on the commonalities and the differences in the ways that the ethnic writers in my project theorize play as a crucial site for the making of a self in racist U.S. society. As a result, play theories and critical race theories provided the umbrella that guided my analyses. Under this umbrella, in pairing Américo Paredes's *George Washington Gómez* with José Antonio Villarreal’s *Pocho*, I looked at how a dialectics of play functions in each of these two novels. In comparing Rudolfo A. Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima* to Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*, I used theories of the carnivalesque/grotesque and spectacle in my analysis of the narratives of play in these two novels. While I incorporated the histories of the protagonists in my readings of these four texts that comprise my first two chapters, the chapter that provides the fullest historicist reading coupled with play theories is the chapter on Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*. Thus, an enlarged version of my dissertation might include an enhanced historicist reading of the narratives of play in *George Washington Gómez, Pocho, Bless Me, Ultima*, and *The House on Mango Street*.

A richer historicist approach to childhood play in Paredes’s *George Washington Gómez* could take a similar trajectory to my argument that the history and marketing of dolls in the U.S. is crucial to an understanding of Claudia’s destructive doll-play in *The Bluest Eye*. For example, in Paredes’s *George Washington Gómez*, an inclusion of the history and content of Mexican border *corridos* and how they function in the context of Guálinto’s pretend battles would provide additional insight into his violent playtime
heroics. Guálinto names two of the heroes of these Mexican border ballads when he thinks to himself that "[s]omeday he would grow up and then he would go out and kill five or six Gringos like Gregorio Cortez and Cheno Cortinas" (GWG 54). Both Cortez and Cortinas, men who sought to avenge the wrongs done by Texas Rangers to the Mexican people on Texas-Mexico border, are heroes of border ballads or corridos.

Guálinto also incorporates the messages of the corridos into his play battle in the banana grove through his speeches to the pretend rinche: "You have killed another Mexican who never hurt you... Why don't you try to kill me, eh? Because you shoot people in the back. Because you kill unarmed men and little children. Go back to your camp and tell old man Keene that Guálinto Gómez doesn't kill men who won't fight" (GWG 68).

Guálinto's thoughts about Gregorio Cortez and Cheno Cortinas, his reference to Keene (who is the novel's version of Richard King of the King Ranch), and his understanding that rinchés kill innocent Mexican Americans testifies to Guálinto's knowledge of border ballads and the legends of their heroes. A further historicist reading of narratives of play in this novel, therefore, would stress the importance that the masculine heroics of these border corridos hold for the child Guálinto and, subsequently, for the adult George.

To more richly historicize the narratives of play in Villarreal's Pocho, I could explore further the Mexican patriarchal traditions that cause Richard's father to equate manhood with heterosexual and domestic dominance. Richard, as a very young child, adopts this attitude of his father's both inside and outside of the world of play. For example, Richard says to another character in the novel, "'Maybe you should have a woman,'... 'My father says that a man should have a woman if only to do the work around the house'" (Pocho 84). Richard's father, Juan, believes that "[a] man must have
a house, place his family within it, and leave no room for authority but his own” (Pocho 122). Juan feels that it is his “right,” even as a married man, to have an affair with another woman if he so desires, and Richard, as Juan’s loyal son, “believe[s] that Juan Rubio had every moral right to do so” (Pocho 92, 94). In addition to addressing the history behind this particular mode of masculinity within the Chicano home and its affect on Richard’s play actions, the issue of the Americanization of his mother, Consuelo, could also be brought to bear on Richard’s heterosexual dominance of Zelda during play. His mother has begun to act like ““an American woman,”” which infuriates Juan and “frighten[s]” Richard (Pocho 91, 94). Consuelo incurs Juan’s wrath when she asks where he has been, and this question is apparently one that a Mexican woman, during the time period of this novel, should not ask her husband. Juan is outraged by this breach of conduct: ““I have had my fill of your whimpering and your back talk! You are thinking yourself an American woman—well you are not one and you should know your place. You have shelter, and you have food and clothing for you and the children. Be content! What I do outside the house is not your concern”” (Pocho 91). Like his father, Richard holds the view “that a family could not survive when the woman desired to command” (Pocho 134), and his playtime domination of Zelda has roots in both his father’s brand of patriarchy and what Richard sees as his mother’s “abuse [of] the privilege of equality afforded the women of her new country” (Pocho 134). Connecting the history of Mexican patriarchy and the Americanization of Mexican women to Richard’s actions during play would more clearly link the narratives of play in this novel to the past, present, and future lives of Richard and his family.
In the chapter that contains *Bless Me, Ultima*, my interpretation of the narratives of play, which are so closely tied to issues of religion and the priesthood for Tony Márez, could be complemented by offering a history of the Hispanic priesthood in New Mexico. Tony's mother's wish that he become a priest is tied to both the settling of New Mexico and to her family, the Lunas. At the novel's outset, Tony is curious about "the strange, whispered riddle of the first priest who went to El Puerto" *(BMU 27)*. Tony tells us that he has heard that "[t]he colony had first settled there under a land grant from the Mexican government, and the man who led the colonization was a priest, and he was a Luna" *(BMU 27)*. "That is why my mother dreamed of me becoming a priest," he narrates, because there had not been a Luna priest in the family for many years. ... A community of farmers ruled over by a priest, she firmly believed, was the true way of life" *(BMU 27)*. Yet Ultima tells Tony, ""As you grow into manhood you must find your own truths"" *(BMU 112)*. Both the legend of the golden carp and the success of Ultima's magic when even "the power of the priest had failed" *(BMU 215)* give Tony reason to question the "truths" proclaimed by Christianity. In pretending to be a priest for his friends, Tony's learns a valuable truth about himself and the punitive nature of his religion. Prior to the novel's conclusion, he also realizes a truth about that first Luna priest which gives him new hope. When Tony says to his father, ""The first priest here, . . . he was the father of the Lunas[,] wasn't he,""] (*BMU 236)*. Now Tony knows for certain that "it was true, the priest that came with the first colonizers to the valley of El Puerto had raised a family, and it was the branches of this family that now ruled the valley. Somehow everything had changed. The priest had changed, so perhaps his
religion could be made to change” (BMU 236). As Tony’s playtime pretend-priest role has shown, however, changing the ingrained religious beliefs of others will not be easy. By providing an account of the priesthood in New Mexico and of the crucial role of Catholicism in Chicano/a lives, Tony’s disturbing playtimes as priest can be placed in a more comprehensive historical context.

As respects The House on Mango Street, there are several ways that stronger connections between narratives of play and history could be forwarded. Esperanza often sees women who are trapped in the domestic realm while she is outside playing, and a more extended examination of the history of the entrapment of women in the Latino home would serve to highlight the significance of Esperanza’s freedom to play and her ability to “leave the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate” (HOMS 89). It is important to note that this domestic entrapment applies to Latinas in Esperanza’s neighborhood and not just to Chicanas. Esperanza lives in a barrio where people from Puerto Rico and other Spanish-speaking areas also reside, and a more complete historical reading of the cultural traditions of patriarchy would include both Chicano and Latino histories. Another way to historicize the narratives of play in this text would be to trace the history of the formation of the lower-class Chicago barrio where Esperanza lives and plays. How did this section of Chicago become an area that Latinos and “Latinas [who] are denied the promised American dream of upward mobility” (Ortega and Sternbach 14) migrate to? Esperanza’s narrative makes it clear that class and ethnic discriminations await outside of her neighborhood, and her descriptions of her playtimes show that it can be both dangerous and exciting to move beyond the boundaries of the barrio. Nevertheless, Esperanza is willing to face the
dangers and discriminations lurking outside of her familiar environment. In an additional
historian reading of Esperanza’s determination to move away from her barrio, it is
interesting to note that this novel takes place during the 1960s, a time period during
which there was a resurgence of the feminist movement in the U.S. and during which the
Chicano civil rights movement was gaining strength. Although Esperanza does not
mention either of these movements, her self-affirming spirit and her willingness to take
risks point to a knowledge of the events in the world around her.

In addition to a more extensive historian reading of the novels in my dissertation,
the theories of the carnivalesque, the grotesque, and female spectacle that I used in my
chapter on The House on Mango Street and Bless Me, Ultima can be brought to bear on
other texts in my study. Both of Morrison’s novels, The Bluest Eye and Sula, are filled
with carnivalesque inversions and grotesque imagery. In Morrison’s The Bluest Eye,
however, we do not find the merry and regenerating inversions of the carnivalesque.
Morrison, instead, uses a nightmarishly grotesque inversion of the Dick-and-Jane school
primer as the template for Pecola’s life. Morrison also uses images of the grotesque body
in this novel, particularly in the form of the white “Raggedy Ann doll” whose “round
moronic eyes, the pancake face, and orangeworms hair” make Claudia feel “physically
revolted” and “secretly frightened” (TBE 20). For Claudia, the grotesque body is a
white doll’s body, and, it could be posited that, in the eyes of the black women who give
her those dolls, Claudia makes a spectacle of herself by dismembering white dolls. It
could even be argued that Pecola, through no fault of her own, makes a spectacle of
herself in the eyes of the black women of her community when she becomes pregnant,
through rape, by her own father.
Morrison’s *Sula* also contains inversions and female spectacle. The opening inversion of the black community of the Bottom, where the hillside land is unyielding and its black inhabitants can “literally look down on the white folks” in their fertile valley below, is constructed as an ironic “nigger joke” (*Sula* 5, 4). Nevertheless, the narrator states that “it was lovely up in the Bottom” and “maybe the white farmer was right after all” when he told his slave that “it was the bottom of heaven” (*Sula* 5, 6). This double inversion—the undesirable lowness of the high hills becomes “lovely” in its lowness—could be viewed as a form of the exuberant carnivalesque; other inversions in this novel, however, do not take the light-hearted “joke” form of the opening chapter. In fact, Morrison plays a heavy-handed “joke” on her unsuspecting readers in this first chapter by leading us to believe that all will be “lovely up in the Bottom” in the story that follows. The most unexpected marring of the loveliness of the Bottom is the playtime death of Chicken Little, an event that is also about inversions, although definitely not merry ones. In addition to her use of both the light and the dark sides of the carnivalesque, Morrison also makes use of the grotesque body in this novel. In the context of narratives of play, imagery of the grotesque body occurs in connection with Chicken Little, whom Nel chides for “pick[ing] his nose” when she yells to him, “‘Your mamma tole you to stop eatin’ snot, Chicken’” (*Sula* 59). Chicken Little’s “bubbly laughter” (*Sula* 61) and the ability of Chicken Little’s body to soar through the air in defiance of gravity could also be seen as forms of the carnivalesque-grotesque’s overabundant extension of boundaries. Morrison also incorporates female spectacle in this novel through the character of Sula, who, in the eyes of her community, does indeed make a spectacle of herself and through
the character of Nel, who is quite determined not to make a spectacle of herself in front of anyone.

The carnivalesque, the grotesque, and female spectacle are much less evident in George Washington Gómez and Pocho, but it is possible to argue that the imagery of some of these forms does appear at times in these novels in connection with play. For example, in George Washington Gómez, Guálinto is shamed by Maria Elena at a festival—a carnivalesque space of play which is not constructed as festive for Guálinto but as a darker form of the carnivalesque. The inversion that the “low” Mexican American Guálinto makes when he becomes the “high” Americanized George G. Gomez is also not constructed as a merry inversion, and George’s night dreams of the revolutionary that he was as a playing child show that the adult George’s inversion is one that he has not fully embraced. In Pocho, there is the inversion that occurs in the playworld when the “low” Richard shames the “high” Zelda into having sex with all of the boys. The high becomes low and the low becomes high through this inversion, but this is not an inversion that is either playful or full of regenerating laughter. Unlike Guálinto, who is shamed by a female in a site that is scene of play, Richard emerges triumphant.

It is interesting that challenges posed by females and by the maternal are negotiated during play by these male protagonists as they attempt to achieve an empowering masculinity. The violent forms of masculine play in the texts that I have examined mimic real-world power structures that produce males who will be misogynistic as adults. The female children in these texts also contend with maternal values and issues of empowerment during play, and, as females, they have the added
pressure of dealing with misogynistic males. While I addressed the violent playtime resistance to the maternal in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, this push against maternal control during play in the other novels in my project is a subject that would be a fruitful avenue to explore for future research. Importantly, it is not only ethnic children at play who must contend with parental, societal, and communal control or with class and/or gender oppressions. Anglo children at play confront these issues as well. However, there is a significant difference in the issue of self-making for Anglo child characters at play, for, unlike the ethnic child characters in my study, Anglo children do not share a history of racist oppression in the U.S.\(^2\) While the Mexican American and African American children in my study inhabit different margins, they do share a history of racist oppression in the U.S.\(^3\)

In the texts that I have examined, dominant society’s racist discrimination plays a major role in the lives of ethnic child characters in disturbing ways, for the larger society’s oppressive ideologies are often adopted by the ethnic community and family of origin through their intra-group and internalized racism. In spite of the different histories and divergent experiences of Mexican Americans and African Americans, Paredes, Villarreal, Anaya, Cisneros, and Morrison theorize childhood play not as a safe realm of frivolity but as a site where violent struggles for self-definition, self-esteem, and self-empowerment are linked to their characters’ histories of marginalization, oppression, and resistance as they come of age in a racist U.S climate.

I titled my introduction to this dissertation as “The Work of Play in Chicano/a and African American Coming-of-Age Narratives,” and, in this conclusion, I would like to revisit the work that play does in the *bildungsromane* that comprise this project.
Importantly, the writers in my study use play as a pivotal moment in their use of the
genre of the *bildungsroman*. The traditional *bildungsroman*, as defined by Merriam
Webster’s *Encyclopedia of Literature*, is a novel “that deals with the formative years of
the main character,” a male protagonist “who goes out into the world seeking adventure
and learns wisdom the hard way” (139). The traditional *bildungsroman* also “ends on a
positive note; [i]f the grandiose dreams of the hero’s youth are over, so are the many
foolish mistakes and painful disappointments, and a life of usefulness lies ahead”
(MWEL 139). In the novels in my study, play is frequently the site where “grandiose
dreams” are enacted and where “painful disappointments” are experienced. Play is also
the realm where many of these characters attempt to work through and to transcend the
“painful disappointments” that they have experienced outside of the world of play. While
the children in these novels may learn valuable lessons during play, what they learn often
results in negative not positive psychological development. Significantly, in these ethnic
*bildungsromane*, rather than moving “out into the world,” as in the traditional
*bildungsroman*, the protagonists “seek adventure and learn wisdom the hard way” in the
world of play. Moreover, the “mistakes and painful disappointments” experienced or
resisted during play are not “over” for these protagonists; instead, as they move ahead
into adulthood, those playtime experiences often haunt and shape their futures. Not even
during play, these writers seem to say, can their ethnic child characters escape working
through or against the demands and discriminations that are a part of their current lives
and past histories in the world outside of play.
Notes

1 Américo Paredes's own study of the border corrido, "With His Pistol in His Hand": A Border Ballad and its Hero (Austin: U of TX P, 1958), is an excellent source for the history and content of these ballads.

2 For some examples of Anglo children at play, see Carson McCullers's The Member of the Wedding (New York: Bantam, 1946) and Harper Lee's 1960 novel, To Kill a Mockingbird (New York: Warner Books, 1982). While the protagonists in these two novels are not racially oppressed, it is interesting to note that both McCullers's and Lee's child protagonists must move away from their proximity to African Americans in order to be fully affirmed as white subjects. In expanding my dissertation into book form, I could incorporate and comment on one or both of these novels as a critique of Anglo children at play and the issues that arise for them.

3 In her discussion of Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye and Sandra Cisneros's The House on Mango Street, Sonia Saldívar-Hull notes both the differences and similarities in the histories of Mexican Americans and African Americans. Although Saldívar-Hull is writing specifically about the "desire for 'property,'" her assertions highlight a similar history of racist oppression: "What separates the African American and Mexican American experience and desire for 'property' and a 'real house' from that of immigrant groups is how these two groups became 'American.' The specific histories of slavery for African Americans and imperialistic absorption for Mexican Americans demand that issues of 'private property' and 'ownership' require a nuanced analysis rather than a reductionist Marxist methodology that focuses only on class" (90). Saldívar-Hull goes on to state that it is imperative that we not forget that the ownership of property was
Works Cited


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