

## CHILDREN'S FOLKLORE REVIEW

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The *CHILDREN'S FOLKLORE REVIEW* regularly publishes articles on all aspects of children's traditions: oral, customary, and material culture. In addition, *CFR* will consider articles dealing with the use of folklore in children's literature, children's folklore and education, children's folklore and popular culture, children's folklore and the internet, play studies, and similar topics. Articles are refereed and are indexed by the MLA and other major bibliographies.

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## FROM THE EDITOR

I am proud to present the thirty-ninth volume of the *Children's Folklore Review*, the first in, what I hope will be, a long line of digital, open-access issues dedicated to the study of children's folklore. This issue represents the start of a new era for our journal, one that I hope is marked by more accessible content, an expanded audience, and a renewed interest in the literature, practices, games, modes of play, etc. of children and the meaning these practices have in the lives of children.

This past year has reminded me of how vital folklore is and will continue to be for children, especially as they cope with a world that is rapidly evolving and in which their protections are eroding. At the time of this writing, there have been twenty-two school shootings in the United States in 2018. As a teenager, I would spend my summers working at my Grandfather's ranch in Floresville, Texas, just down the road from Sutherland Springs First Baptist Church where, in November 2017, a gunman opened fired killing 26 and injuring 20 others, of which many were children. At immigration detention centers around the country, children of illegal aliens and amnesty-seekers have been separated from their families as political bargaining chips. As scholars, as folklorists, I believe it is our responsibility to use our craft to provide insight into the lives of children, to describe how they cope with these new realities, and the meaning of material culture, social and cultural practices, modes of expression, and language. I hope I am not alone in this.

I will pivot now to share more about how digital this transition transpired. During last year's meeting of the Children's Folklore Section of the American Folklore Society held in Minneapolis, Minnesota, I shared some of my concerns about the continued viability of the *Children's Folklore Review* as a print publication. These were not new concerns; the previous editor, Trevor Blank, had also acknowledged this issue and had begun exploring alternative publishing outlets. Without institutional support, we argued, the publication and editorial costs of the journal would gradually erode the section's coffers. At our meeting, I proposed—and the section members voted unanimously—to shift the journal delivery method from print to digital. What you are reading today is the byproduct of that decision.

Even before last year's meeting, I held exploratory discussions with the professionals who manage Indiana University's ScholarWorks. ScholarWorks has longed maintained the *Children's Folklore Review's* digital repository of past issues, hosting, at no cost to the journal or section, an archive of the journal dating back to 1990. By partnering with IU, not only do we have a low-cost solution to our publishing concerns, but we also have the means of expanding our reach across the globe.

Finally, I would like to offer my thanks to the many people who have assisted in making this transition and this issue possible. First, I would like to thank our wonderful executive board Simon, Jay, Priscilla, Libby, and our newest member, Trevor Blank, for their guidance, wisdom,

and valuable feedback on the articles in this issue. I would also like to thank the leadership and staff at IUScholarWorks: Jamie Wittenberg, Richard Higgins, Jim Halliday, Sarah Hare, and Jennifer Hoops. Last of all, I want to thank Spencer Green for joining me as the review's editor for the journal and continuing to expand our review offerings.

BRANT W. ELLSWORTH  
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• 2017 W.W. Newell Prize Winner •

# Slumber Parties as Rites of Passage

ALINA MANSFIELD  
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*Children's supernatural based activities such as M.A.S.H, Bloody Mary, Ouija board experimentation, and "Light as a Feather, Stiff as a Board" comprise a traditional repertoire of paranormal and divinatory rituals to be drawn upon many times throughout a series of friends' birthday parties or sleepovers. This article investigates the cognitive and ritual functions of such supernatural play as performed by American pre-adolescent girls within the liminal context of the slumber party. Though characterized as children's play, this is ritual behavior in two senses: in its direct confrontation and thrilling exploration of the supernatural, and in its trance-inducing, ceremonial qualities. Such play is often structured and performed as traditional ritual and can invoke aspects of rites of passage, especially when undertaken cumulatively throughout adolescence. Drawing upon fieldwork in consultation with the collections of University of Oregon's Mills Northwest Folklore Archive, the Utah State University's Fife Folklore Archive, and children's folklore scholarship, this article explores such spiritualistic play as a vernacular process of adolescent individuation.*

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I don't remember doing "Light as a Feather, Stiff as a Board" this night, but I can't imagine that we didn't do it either. Because I feel like we just always did that at slumber parties (Christian 2016).

A good slumber party inevitably leads to the supernatural. Supernatural and divination-based games such as M.A.S.H., Bloody Mary, Ouija board experimentation, and Light as a Feather, Stiff as a Board comprise a complex of interlocking pre-adolescent slumber party activities in persistent and enduring affiliation with each other. Each one tending to trigger the suggestion to play the other, such games provide children with a traditional repertoire of paranormal and divinatory rituals to be drawn upon many times throughout a series of friends' birthday parties or sleepovers. Though characterized as

children's play, these activities demonstrate genuine ritualistic behavior in their direct confrontation and thrilling exploration of the supernatural, and in their trance inducing, ceremonial qualities. Such play is often structured and performed as traditional ritual and can invoke aspects of rites of passage, especially as performed cumulatively throughout adolescence. To investigate the functions of such play, particularly within the liminal context of the slumber party, I interviewed twelve women who participated in these supernatural traditions as children. I also consulted the extensive and rich collections in the Randall V. Mills Northwest Folklore Archive and in Utah State University's Fife Folklore Archive. Drawing on Alan Dundes' analysis of Bloody Mary (1998), and Elizabeth Tucker's analyses of both Bloody Mary and Light as a Feather, Stiff as a Board (1984), as well as my own archival research and fieldwork, I propose that such spiritualistic play is a vernacular process of adolescent individuation.

#### HISTORIC PRECURSORS

Bill Ellis situates contemporary adolescent supernatural play within a long, venerable history of occult rituals in children's folklore, recorded as far back as medieval times:

Traditions surrounding Stone Age monuments in Great Britain and Brittany repeatedly allude to customs involving trips by courageous youths to challenge the power of the supernatural. Thus we can trace a lengthy history of occult play activities like Ouija boards and séance rituals (2004, 12).

Noted children's folklore scholars Iona and Peter Opie report a levitation game being performed by children as early as 1665 (1960, 454), and Ellis additionally notes that it was the conducting of séances in 1692 by a group of adolescent girls (age ten through eighteen) that triggered the infamous and tragic Salem Witch Trials (1994, 62). But it was the founding of Spiritualism, launched into the mainstream zeitgeist by the spirit rapping séances of the young Fox sisters, that caused divination activities to explode in popularity in America in the 1840s. This led to the popularity of séances and the development of

spirit contacting devices out of which evolved the commercialized Ouija board so popularly associated with slumber parties.

It is not clear how contemporary versions of older, spiritualist practices became so embedded in the vernacular social activities of adolescent girls, particularly girls' birthday parties-- but it is perhaps related to traditional and popular associations of women with the supernatural, as well as their reported tendency towards more intimate and collaborative types of play (Kayser 2009, 91; Mechling 1989, 97-98). In fact, divination activities were at one time commonly performed by young women in Europe and America on liminal calendrical dates or in conjunction with a transitional event such as a wedding, usually revolving around the divining of a future spouse through mirror gazing or other methods (Ellis 2004, 159; Knapps 1976, 253; Tucker 2005, 190).

#### BELIEF AND FEAR

Though degrees of belief and participation in these forms of vernacular spiritualism are diverse and individualistic, girls often take these games very seriously, treating them as true rituals. Discussing *Light as a Feather, Stiff as a Board*, Elizabeth Tucker writes:

The persistence of certain symbolic elements, over a wide span of time and space, creates a sense of ritualistic potency. As in many rituals, the order of events must be faithfully maintained, the tone must be solemn, and the outcome is expected to be something almost miraculous; so the word 'game' does not do justice to the nature of what is happening (1984, 126).

The Ouija board in particular is approached with awe and fear of its numinous power. Stories of its use at slumber parties tend to follow a similar pattern: children begin by asking fun and entertaining fortune telling questions, until contact is made with something perceived as sinister, and the game takes a turn to the dark side. The participants may then ask for a sign, and in response an object moves or acts paranormally, validating the presence of a spirit or perhaps even "Satan." In many cases, parents intervene and warn their children not to use it again, and the adolescents then

tell stories to warn each other. But rather than being deterred, this numinous attraction often becomes all that more enticing to users:

Anyway, we were 'talking' to someone and we kept asking for a sign. My dogs started barking and freaking out, and then eventually all the dogs nearby my house were barking and howling. It felt like it went on forever which woke my mom up. I felt really scared and started crying and told my mom that I thought it was the Ouija board that caused the dogs to bark. I was expecting her to not take it seriously, but instead she got upset and took the board away and said, 'You guys shouldn't be messing around with that!' Which further freaked us out. But I'm pretty sure we did it again like a week later (Barkman 2016).

We were asking it a lot of stupid questions about who were we going to marry and who we really liked and so on, and a lot of embarrassing things came to light.

It took a while for the spirit to start working, but gradually we could feel the spirit and the pointer was flying across the board. Just then my parents came back from the show and gasped because they could feel the spirit that was in the house...Everyone was frightened and took off and my parents told me not to do that again. But of course this was the kind of thing everyone wants to do again so the next week we met at another friend's house (Tometich, 1968).

She was trying to convince me that Ouija boards are influenced by Satan, and I should not have anything to do with them. I believed the story, but it didn't stop me from using the Ouija board (Hardy, 1984).

Another interviewee, Mary Kupsch, when asked whether she sincerely believed in the reality of the supernatural as a child participant, explained that she did not necessarily truly believe, but felt it advisable to exercise caution around the Ouija board, "just in case." She claimed that after joining others in Ouija board play at a slumber party she had felt "weird and scared" for weeks afterwards (2016). Despite this fear and discomfort, she persisted in undertaking another related ritual--the summoning of Bloody Mary in a bathroom mirror. Mary recollected that she had felt the need to affirm her bravery-- to herself and others--as well as to find out for herself what it was everyone

else had experienced by participating in this frightening ordeal (Kupsch 2016). Others similarly describe a genuine fear involved in the invocation of Bloody Mary. As Jamie Jensen recalled, "Fear was mounting; we had to talk each other into continuing. Finally we built up the courage to say in sync, 'Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary' (2000). Rachel Prisbrey reported being too afraid to attempt Bloody Mary, citing parental warnings and religious beliefs, and she correlated belief in the ritual with her lingering fear of the bathroom mirror (1993).

In many accounts, the invocation of Bloody Mary is similarly reported to be undertaken as a test of bravery, curiosity, and peer group allegiance (Langlois 1980, 196, 201-203; Tucker 200, 115; Leonard 2001), it's widespread ubiquity suggesting its potency as both an adolescent initiatory rite and a sincere spiritual investigation of the true nature of the unknown. Jessica Duong, a 23 year old University of Oregon student, recalled that one girl in her group of friends, was designated "the scaredy-cat" (2017), when they performed supernatural rituals at age nine, while another took on the mantle of ritual leader. As the designated, "skeptic," Jessica was often blamed for blocking their various spiritualist explorations from working. As Bill Ellis points out about the Ouija board: "However game-like it is, then, its earnest referent is the shamanistic quest, in which individuals or small groups seek out their own personal definitions of the mythic world, often in the face of priestly institutions" (1994, 83). He finds that adolescents who participate in the ritualistic role play of the Ouija board séance are acting from a genuine religious impulse to test spiritual reality. By encountering threatening figures within the safe and playful container of the traditionally structured Ouija ritual, adolescents often enact the mythic narratives of their religious and cultural beliefs (1994, 83-85).

#### SLUMBER PARTY GAMES AS FEMININE RITES OF PASSAGE

Theresa Vaughan points out that girls in North America tend to engage a series of rites, rather than a single ceremony, to mark the transition from childhood to adulthood (2009,

600). One series of events that marks a young girl's transition into adulthood is participation in various slumber parties, including one's own-- a common celebration of a girl's birthday:

Young American girls' slumber parties, within the roughly defined 'pre-adolescent' phase from about age eight to twelve, are times of great fun and experimentation. The girls may play all their favorite records, try on make-up, make prank phone-calls, stuff themselves with junk food, and valiantly try to stay up all night: but they are also very likely to experiment with some kind of supernatural game-playing (Tucker, 1994, 125).

The gathering of young girls of the same age together for a slumber party is reminiscent of certain cross-cultural and historic initiation ceremonies or rituals--"often in the case of females the ritual consisting of some form of enforced seclusion" (Dundes 2002, 84). Collectively sequestered and somewhat unsupervised (in that the parents are usually in another room or asleep), slumber party attendees usually stay up later than usual, sometimes all night--transgressing usual temporal boundaries and moving into liminal time. The very name of the event--slumber party--emphasizes its celebration of communal liminality.

### *Ritual Features of the Slumber Party*

Supernatural activities performed at a slumber party activate the functions of ritual through rhythmic and collaborative actions that may transport a cohort of friends into a state of trance and *communitas*, a distinguishing feature of a rite of passage:

Rhythmicity has long been recognized as a key feature of transition rituals (rites of passage) that carry an individual or group from one social state or status to another. Rhythmic, repetitive stimuli (especially in safe, relaxed settings) coordinate emotional, cognitive, and motor processes and synchronize them among the various ritual participants. This process called "entrainment," may be experienced as a loss of self-consciousness, a feeling of flow. Ritual entrainment can lead to transpersonal bonding, a sense of the unity and oneness of the group, as in for example the collective and

polyphonic ritual funeral wailing practices of Warao women in Venezuela (Chapman and Davis-Floyd 2009, 605).

Such repetitive synchronization is evident at slumber parties in the rhythmic chanting of “Light as a Feather, Stiff as a Board,” the commonly required trebling of “Bloody Mary,” and the rhythmic spiral drawing used to divine in M.A.S.H. It is this collective rhythmic behavior, often in conjunction with dim lighting and kinesthetic tricks, which allow the transformative effects of the games to operate alchemically on the minds of the participants. For instance, after chanting “Bloody Mary” in the dark and then turning on the lights, or using a flashlight, a distorted apparition can appear in the mirror. Though likely a result of the cognitive “disassociated identity effect” (Caputo, 2010, 1007-1008), such activity provides a canvas for a girl’s ritual encounter with the distorted feminine, the mirror’s close connection with identity making it “appropriate for enactment of complex self perceptions” (Tucker 2005, 190). Likewise, the seemingly successful supernatural levitation of another girl, though probably based on kinesthetic illusions arising from mismatched sensory inputs (Barker and Clairborne 2012, 455-458), endows the game with ritual significance. “Because the verbal components of the variant have already set the stage for a visit from the supernatural, all of the participants feel as though—they believe—the actor is floating” (Barker and Clairborne 2012, 457). Masterfully employing such props and effects as candles to create a supernatural ambience with which to summon spirits via the Ouija Board, girls know how to activate the patterned ritual context so firmly entrenched in the popular imagination.

Mechling notes that children are already a marginalized class (1989, 97), and as they are in a constant transitional and liminal state of not yet being adults, they often employ folklore to “create a feeling of egalitarian community” and to experience the “homogeneity and comradeship that they see in certain cultural rituals (1989, 103). The slumber party framework, where girls may relish in their independence from the authoritative hierarchical structures of parents and school, may further deepen a sense of



solidarity and bonding that the ritualistic entraining behaviors often produce. This liminal social container may produce what Victor Turner termed *communitas*, "a direct, total confrontation of human identities which is rather more than the casual camaraderie of ordinary social life, it may be found in the mutual relationships of neophytes in initiation..." (Turner and Turner 1982, 205). The emblematic image of the slumber party pillow fight represents this reality in popular culture, television and film.

During a slumber party, girls engage in many intimate, collaborative activities, including more seemingly solemn rituals like Light as a Feather, Stiff as a Board. Such games play around with death and resurrection themes, and--by placing the girls in a trance and one of the girls in the role of corpse--imitate the death and rebirth experience of a neophyte in an initiation ceremony. The girls play at being socially resurrected by others, as they combine their intangible power and strength and put their hands together in mutual affiliation-- literally and figuratively supporting and lifting each other up. Tucker, in her analysis, feels that trance activities like these reflect that girls this age are "keenly aware of the need to reach out: to grow, change, and develop new social roles for themselves" (1984, 130). She adds that the ritual aspects of levitation play (especially in the case of the actor) tell a symbolic story about their adolescent social structures: "Being lifted is not just an experiment with victimization, but also a symbolic submission to peer pressure...as a dramatic rendition of social adaptation, then, levitation is an activity that has quite a lot of ritualistic potency" (1984, 130). Likewise, in other trance inducing and spirit contacting play such as the mirror gazing of Bloody Mary, and the hypnotic automatism of the Ouija Board and M.A.S.H, girls confront their anxieties and concerns about the unknown together--death, their futures, the boundaries of reality, their vulnerable status--using their strength in numbers and mutual affinities within safe, ritual frameworks to envision their futures and transcend into adulthood together.



Within the liminal space of slumber party rituals, I would argue that girls present socio-cultural and spiritual *sacra* to themselves in many forms. Victor and Edith Turner describe three kinds of *sacra* that are transmitted during an initiation rite, as categorized by classical scholar Jane Harrison: exhibitions, actions, instructions (Turner and Turner 1982, 204). *Sacra* may form “a central cluster of ideas, images, feelings and rhythmic interactions which constitute a kind of symbolic template or master pattern for the communication of a culture’s most cherished beliefs, ideas, values and sentiments” (Turner and Turner 1982, 204). While playing M.A.S.H., girls are presented structurally with cultural norms about what it means to be a woman in our society--“M.A.S.H. both reflects and inculcates American ideologies regarding traditional gender roles, class status, and heterosexual values related to courtship, marriage, and lifestyle” (Kayser 2009, 98 ). Like their historic teenage predecessors, girls who play M.A.S.H. gaze into a surface waiting for the image of their future spouse to appear, around whom the rest of their imagined future life unfolds. This imagined life is playfully conjured in various iterations by populating the structural slots of the game, reifying on paper for the participants a hand drawn microcosmic model or “master pattern” of normative American life. This accretion of ideals and values into a composite image of desired masculine qualities reflects the transmission of more abstract features of society in a graspable form.

Additionally, when young girls test themselves by summoning Bloody Mary, they encounter an archetypally resonant, symbolically rich, iconic figure-- a seemingly mythical symbol of womanhood in both its stigmatized, rejected and powerful aspects. In fact, in archival accounts and interviews I conducted, she has been conflated with various other powerful and brutally victimized feminine figures, symbols and legend characters: the tragic and abusive anti-mother La Llorona, the executed Mary Queen of Scots, the suffering Virgin Mary, a burned “witch” victim of the Salem Witch Trials, and

various other female victims of abuse, murder, insanity, or self-afflicted tragedy. She tends to subsume all female ghost and witch-related motifs and figures as she appears in a proliferation of variants (Bronner 1998, 168; Christian 2016; Flinspach 2016; Klintberg 1998, 160; Langlois 1980 210-219; Leonard 2001). Notably, many accounts of Bloody Mary's origin emphasize her injured face. Jamie Jenson explained that Bloody Mary "tried to mangle their faces because her own face was burned or distorted by some sort of accident (2000), while Rachel Prisbrey similarly recounts, "One day she had a terrible accident and her faced was scratched so badly that she bled to death. But her spirit could not rest" (1993).

The persistent endurance of the need to encounter Bloody Mary is perhaps fulfilling the ritual need for what the Turners describe as an exhibition of "relics or images of deities, heroes, ancestors, or saints" such as sacra "connected with myths about the agrarian mother-goddess Demeter and her daughter Persephone" (Turner and Turner 1982, 204). Elizabeth Tucker noted the analogy between Bloody Mary and an African initiation ritual:

I find the process of daring and testing-an initiation of sorts-to be even more significant. An older woman, a mirror witch, puts children through a fear test that may result in a painful scratch. Like the women in charge of certain girls initiation ceremonies in Africa, the mirror witch inflicts pain when it is appropriate to do so (2005, 3).

One interviewee even reported that Bloody Mary was said to appear in the mirror holding out an apple (Kuan 2016), a symbol surely inextricably intertwined with feminine mysteries and cultic knowledge, whether it be the forbidden knowledge extended to Eve, the agent of powerful transformation handed to Snow White by another witch, or in the apple's ancient use in Celtic divination rituals (Santino 1983, 10). Could Bloody Mary entail a ritualistic confrontation with a displaced mother goddess, a Wise Old Woman archetype, or the grotesque expression of the abject feminine self? Or is she perhaps

operating as the Proppian style donor figure in a ritual drama, such as Alan Dundes observed is activated structurally by other children's games (2007, 156-166)? Victor Turner found that encounters with disfigured and monstrous sacra functioned in adolescent initiation ceremonies to startle neophytes into transforming and thinking about their world in new ways (1964, 52-54). While cognitive scientist Giovanni Caputo concluded that mirror gazing at a low illumination level can be a tool for integration of unconscious contents, which are usually projected, toward individuation of the self (2013, 10).

Slumber party neophytes also receive instruction during their games. They receive advice about the future, and are informed implicitly via contact with spirits of the Ouija board and the mirror that there is, reassuringly, continuity of identity after death. They may attempt to contact historical figures of mythical stature, such as Abraham Lincoln, culturally renowned for his great wisdom (Christian, 2016). One group of teenage girls even asked the spirit of a great aunt if they should go to college right away, or go on a mission:

Then my friend and I who had been debating about whether to go on missions that summer or whether to go to the University for a year decided to ask the spirit what we should do. Instead of a yes or no answer the spirit spelled out: 'for all intents and purposes you may as well wait a year because the people you will come in contact with will all be there a year from now.' After that answer we felt pretty good and that maybe we'd sign up for school (Tometich, 1968).

Or, as reported in other accounts, after a frightening Ouija experience participants may receive mediating religious instruction from parents, missionaries, or a priest (Blackwell, 1965; Hardy 1984; Tometich 1968). The Ouija board may even relay religious symbols:

A few girls were playing with a weeggy-board [sic] and one of the girls had a real funny feeling. The girls looked out and up on the mountain they could see a light in the shape of a cross (Woolfenden, n.d.).

In addition to playing around with personas during a slumber party by trying on each other's clothes and applying each other's makeup, girls experiment with rearranging cultural symbols and social patterns during supernatural rituals, exhibiting another feature of ritual as described by Victor and Edith Turner, *ludic recombination*:

The analysis of culture into factors and their free, playful ('ludic') recombination in any and every possible pattern however deviant, grotesque, unconventional or outrageous. This process is quintessentially liminal, and, in a disconcerting way, makes excellent sense with regard to the new state and status that celebrants or neophytes will enter (1982, 204-205).

In playing the divination game M.A.S.H, girls especially playfully mix and match cultural factors, selecting lives and life partners from both thrilling and grotesque possibilities. Nice cars, dwellings, and desired boys are placed in binary opposition with amusingly horrific choices such as the deadly Ford Pinto and Pee Wee Herman.

All of my collaborators remember that the game blended options that would seemingly provide for an idyllic existence and ones that would make them absolutely miserable, whether that be in a hierarchical form (low, mediocre, and high values corresponding to the types of shelter) or a strict dichotomy of desirable and undesirable choices (Kayser 2009, 100).

Supernatural play can additionally exhibit features of ludic recombination as it seemingly inverts and alters the shared cultural understanding of reality: "Being levitated means, in a symbolic way, being lifted up to a higher level of existence: in other words, rising into a supernatural realm where previously accepted laws are found to be reversible" (Tucker 1984, 130).

Adolescent neophytes may play with the boundaries of self during liminal activity, such as temporarily identifying with the abject, grotesque figure of Bloody Mary --"the use of the mirror in this symbolic transformation is double. In the first place, it literally reflects the identification of the participants with the revenant" (Langlois 1980, 202). Through trance and Ouija Board activities, they may also subconsciously project

personalities that express an experimentation with other types of gender, age, personality and social masks. Commonly, adolescents encounter contrasting negative and positive spirits via the Ouija board, perhaps mirroring symbolically the complexity of their own volatile moods, and allowing them to cathartically contend with and integrate the light and dark sides of their developing personalities. Bill Ellis, in his study of teenage Ouija board memorates reports adolescent frequently describing encounters with contrasting good and evil spirits (1994, 72). In my own recollections with my sister about our Ouija board adventures, we remembered a recurring communication with a spirit duo—"Todd," a happy, positive, loving and playful male figure, and "Amy," a very depressed female personality who usually cursed us, probably reflecting both of our own vacillations in mood at the adolescent ages of twelve and fifteen (Christian 2016).

Supernatural play can also invoke chaotic, antithetical, trickster personalities:

Finally they asked the question 'is this the devil doing this?' At this question the shot glass flew off the board and hit the wall (Cole 1971).

They asked the Ouija board for a sign. They heard all of this noise in the other room. When they walked into the next room, they found a table tipped over and lamps tipped over. Papers were all over the room (Butkus 1977).

And, one of the belts lifted up and started to float, like, like lifted up and starting floating out of the closet. And we both screamed...and jumped off the bed....and hid. And we were holding on to each other. And the belt fell down to the ground, as soon as we screamed. And when we got back on the Ouija, the Ouija board just went, 'ha ha ha ha ha ha,' as if it was laughing at us, and spelled out, 'You guys are funny' (Efstratis 2016).

For Carl Jung, the archetype of the trickster--a mythic carnivalesque figure who often serves a ritual, disorderly, ludic function--is characteristic of preadolescent supernatural play. "...It is not surprising to find certain phenomena in the field of parapsychology which remind us of the trickster. These are the phenomena connected with poltergeists, and they occur at all times and places in the ambience of pre-adolescent children." (Jung

1959, 136). These encounters with destructive, disorderly, chaotic spirits who turn everything topsy-turvy, seem to be both an essential ingredient in children's folklore (Mechling 1989, 96-98) and in the ludic features of many religious and magical rites, historically and cross-culturally (Jung 1959, 140).

### VERNACULAR PUBERTY RITUALS?

Oh! I remember doing it at my birthday party! And one of the things that it said, was, it like, threatened us, but then it said, it threatened us, and it was like, the threat was going to happen on a night when there was no moon. And I, snarkily was like, "Yeah right, there is never not a moon!" Because I was like 12 or 13, so I was like, "Yeah right, there is never not a moon." So, then we went outside and it was the day that there is no moon, which is when I learned that a new moon means no moon--that the moon's not out. But I didn't know that that's what a new moon was, I didn't even know it existed. So, like, to have the Ouija board say that, was like, "What!" We, like, lost it (Christian 2016).

In "Bloody Mary in the Mirror: A Ritual Reflection of Pre-Pubescent Anxiety," Alan Dundes unleashed a provocative exegesis of the Bloody Mary ritual, performed so commonly by prepubescent girls. Noting such signifiers that the setting is almost always a bathroom, that it involves the sudden, frightening but exciting appearance of blood, and that it is performed mostly by girls at the age they are beginning to be anxious about the impending onset of menses, he concludes that it may fulfill the function once provided by a formal puberty ritual, a marker of transition common in many societies historically, but absent from our modern American society (Dundes 2002, 84-92). Victor Turner describes a puberty ritual for Ndembu girls when they begin to receive breasts, where "a novice is wrapped in a blanket and laid at the foot white *mudyi* sapling," or what he calls a "milk tree," in order to symbolically enact the nurturing matrilineal lineage that the girl is now ready to assume herself (1967, 20-21). Barbara Tedlock, in her study of the neglected history of women shamans, described the supernatural and

divinatory components of the puberty rituals for young women of certain North American Indian tribes. For instance:

Historically when a young woman reached puberty in Hupa society, there was a celebration during which she lived in a specially constructed "moon lodge" with a holy woman. This woman sat with the girl, burning herbs and roots in a sacred fire. Then she covered the girl's head with a deerskin to help her focus her thoughts. While the young woman prayed for a vision, dancers outside the lodge sang songs in her honor. After two or three days of seclusion she emerged and ran to the river. There she asked the moon and her spiritual helpers, the water beings, to give her protection, wealth, strength, and long life. Upon returning to the lodge, she gazed into an abalone shell filled with water (2009, 181).

Are functionally similar puberty rituals being performed in a vernacular fashion, via the seemingly playful ritual setting of a slumber party? One positive indication may be the recurrence of certain motifs and themes that run through these modern slumber party games: themes about the future, fertility, and new social roles, as girls attempt to ascertain and imagine their future as procreating, working, married adults; themes of collectively supported transformation and elevation to a new position in the oft performed *Light as a Feather, Stiff as a Board*; and the eruption of blood in tales of *Bloody Mary*, suggesting a preoccupation with life, sex, and death--concerns awakened by puberty. This may also explain the recurring motif of the color red which appears not just in the dripping blood of *Bloody Mary*, but in various accounts of her red eyes (McGinnis 1990; Pierce 1995), the blood she elicits through a scratch to the face, a knife, or other supernatural means (Dundes 2002; 82 Hancich 2017; Jensen 2000; Morgan 1985), and the atmospheric employment of red lights and red candles (Dundes 2002, 83; Lubeck 1968; Kuan 2016). Victor Turner finds that actors in initiation rites are genuinely hoping for a direct experience of the supernatural order, and use the symbolic activities of the rite to achieve an inward transformation of personality (1973, 214).



The endurance and widespread prevalence in America of the supernatural games discussed seem to suggest that they can be understood, for many of the girls who participate, to function as rites of passage--as ongoing traditional techniques for imagining their future adult roles and initiating themselves into that sociocultural and ontological reality -- within the safe incubational space of a like-minded collective of their peers. Through slumber parties, girls collectively initiate and stage their own ritual transformation by confronting the supernatural in ways characteristic of the liminal stage of a rite of passage. Through these playful but serious rites, girls gaze into a mirror--of self and culture--and begin to divine their own futures.

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# Adult Reflections on a Childhood Kissing Game: The Case of “King William was King George’s Son”<sup>1</sup>

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*Beyond simple nostalgia, how do the games we play as children affect us as adults? Which hidden rhyming lessons are ripe for mature understanding? Using McLeod and Wright’s “happy childhood narrative” this article examines singing game, “King William was King George’s Son” and its use by two adult sisters for nostalgia, memory recall, historical lessons, enculturation, connecting with others of their generation, and creating new art.*

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King William was King George’s son,  
All of royal race he run,  
And on his breast a star he wore,  
Pointing to the governor’s door.

Come choose to the east,  
Come choose to the west,  
Choose the very one that you love best,  
If she’s not there to take your part,  
Choose another with all your heart.

Down on this carpet you must kneel,  
As the grass grows in the field,  
Kiss your partner, kiss her sweet,  
Rise again upon your feet.  
(Ficken 2004)

Unfettered by the worries of the world, Ficken’s hand-colored stone lithograph below envisions that special childhood feeling of carefree days spent playing favorite games in a safe rural setting with only mild, nurturing supervision. The picture recalls an idealized memory of the “happy childhood narrative” as proposed by education scholars Julie McLeod and Katie Wright (2012) which examines the tendency of adults to minimize the hardships of their younger years and become nostalgic of the good times.





Figure 1. This image depicts a circle of children playing the singing game, "King William was King George's Son" (Ficken ca. 1990).

Children's games are often thought to be left behind in childhood and forgotten until it is time to teach the next generation. This article explores the children's play culture in Princeton, Bonavista Bay, Newfoundland and Labrador (NL), Canada in the 1950s and how the meaning and role of the games have changed in adulthood for sisters Louise Osborne (née Quinton, b. 1947) and Sylvia Ficken (née Quinton, b. 1948). Rather than simply treating Osborne and Ficken as repositories of historical information on children's games,<sup>2</sup> this article reflects upon their experiences as children, their developing interpretations of the rhyme and actions, regional and family connections to the subject matter, and how the game served as a common touchpoint for their generation's nostalgic memories of a simpler time.

#### FROM EVOLUTIONIST SURVIVAL TO CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT:

##### DIRECTIONS IN CHILDLORE AND "KING WILLIAM"

Approaches to studying children's culture have undergone significant shifts in the past 150 years (see overviews by folklorists and ethnomusicologists Grider 1999; Minks 2002; Tucker 2012; Zumwalt 1999). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, scholars often focused on a general evolutionist and dispersion approach, which sought to interpret children's games as fragments of an earlier culture that had survived in an abbreviated form. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, researchers began observing and collecting directly from children themselves and treated their games as their own culture. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there has been a shift towards seeing childhood games as a form of developmental play that prepares the child for adult life in age-appropriate steps.

The primary assumption of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century collectors was that children's games were the remnants of adult customs from decayed "pre-civilized" societies. These traditions were to be found in stunted, simplified forms and were, therefore only suitable for the un-developed minds of children (Coles 1998:15). Darwin's theories inspired a cultural evolutionary approach that saw the child as a "savage" (Tucker 2012: 392; Minks

2002: 381; Zumwalt 1999: 25). If children represented primitive cultures and retained ancient cultural survivals, then studying their games was an ideal opportunity to study the past and find the root source of the tradition (Grider 1999: 11). This Darwinian influence encouraged a linear concept of a “natural movement from simple to complex forms, from children’s rhymes to adult narratives,” while ignoring the complexity of children’s cultures, which shapes today’s scholarship (Bronner 1992: 48).

Folklorists William Wells Newell (1963), Alice Gomme (1964), Ralph Whitlock (1979) and Leslie Daiken (1949), all link the “King William” game to ancient wedding ceremonies and the themes of testing a potential spouse and marriage-by-capture. Whitlock suggests games involving disguise may be related to an “ancient betrothal or wedding ceremony in which the bridegroom was required to pick out his bride from a party of girls all similarly dressed and veiled” (1979: 172). In an Irish variant, a shawl is held over the head of the selected child. This enacts the story by Newell’s informant that King William “had gone to war and promised to marry her when he came back.... She wrapped a shawl around her head, to see if he would recognize her” (Newell 1963: 74). Although disguises are no longer common in the game, the idea of selecting one amongst many is still a primary element of the game.

While the evolutionary approach has fallen out of fashion with scholars, I believe the idea of a “true source” of traditional customs still holds sway with the public. In my folk music fieldwork, I find people readily accept that music travels widely and adapts to new places but are also concerned with discerning its original source and meaning. It is clear that “King William” had a wide diffusion as it has been documented in over forty printed sources from around the North Atlantic, and the Roud Index records 136 examples (2018).<sup>3</sup> In Newfoundland and Labrador alone there are over 200 instances noted in Memorial University of Newfoundland’s Folklore and Language Archive (MUNFLA).<sup>4</sup> Most of the printed sources date from the 19<sup>th</sup> to mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This



game is not commonly noted after the 1960s. For example, folklorist Keith Coles, who studied games in Savage Cove, NL, found "King William" up to 1965 but not in the subsequent decades (1998: 93-4,150-151, 266).<sup>5</sup> A wide-spread change in play activities occurred in the Western world after the 1970s that changed much of the common play repertoire. In this shift, children moved towards supervised, closer to home activities, which involved more branded toys than homemade inventions (Bishop and Marsh 2012: 11-12; Coles 1998: 273-280).

The post-World War II years signaled a methodological shift in childlore research. Scholars, such as Dorothy Howard in the United States (1938), Brian Sutton-Smith in New Zealand (1953), and most famously, Iona and Peter Opie in the United Kingdom (1959; 1969; 1985; 1997), moved towards collecting games directly from observing children at play (Grider 1999: 12). The Opies were able to collect thousands of games from around the UK (Oxford 2018).<sup>6</sup> They noted "King William" in *The Singing Game* and discussed the genealogy of the royal family (1985: 122-125). Their discussion is reflective of my mother's approach to "King William" as she was interested in lining it up with a historical figure to whom she could relate.

The latest shift in scholarship has taken on an enculturation and childhood development slant (Tucker 2012: 405). Knapp and Knapp advocate for maintaining a definite split between childhood and adulthood, suggesting that the enculturation of children is a "secret education" learned outside of adult supervision (1976). Ethnomusicologist Amanda Minks suggests that the former childhood vs. adulthood divide began to dissolve following the ethnographic work of John Blacking (1967) and Richard Waterman (1956) who approached children's musical play as enculturation that flowed naturally into maturity (Minks 2002: 385-386). Similarly, folklorist June Factor bases her research on the assumption that "children's play is a transitional activity, and one that is essential for human development" (1989: 2). In *Folk Stories of Children* (1981),



folklorist Sutton-Smith examines the verbatim stories of children up to ten, and how their story telling and use of language changes as they mature. Through her self-examination of three generations of music in her own family, ethnomusicologist Marisol Berríos-Miranda found that some children's songs taught them age appropriate dance movements they would use as adult women (2013: 307). Berríos-Miranda states that, "in this way we were constantly encouraged to dance and to participate in the musical repertoires of adults as well as children. The musical skills and tastes we developed at this early age stayed with us for the rest of our lives" (Berríos-Miranda 2013: 307-308). Ethnomusicologist Kyra Gaunt discusses how New York African-American girl's skipping games are used as cultural identifiers in adulthood and how these games have influenced adult artistic forms, such as hip hop (2006).<sup>7</sup> If childhood games are forms of enculturation, then gaming experiences will vary globally and yet have some common elements key to human development (See Campbell and Wiggins 2013).

This article follows the path of both reconstructing childhood memories, and examining their changing role throughout the life of the player. Christopher Roberts has pointed out that studying memories of childhood is "challenging" since the adult informants filter these through subsequent experiences (2013: 576), and yet, in my opinion, the reinterpretation of the games by their players in adulthood remains an important and underexamined area. I suggest that reinterpretation can be discussed in a variety of ways. In this article I examine how adults have personalized their understanding by using the "King William" game: to aid their identification with English heritage (as opposed to the current dominant American culture); as a historical document of the English monarchy; to create art which celebrates local, rural culture; and as a nostalgic memory aid of childhood friends and experiences. How adult players relate to childhood games is the main focus of this research, however, reinterpretation could also mean a critical re-examination of folklore scholars' explanation of games as linked back

to ancient survivals. The latter are certainly adult's mappings of meaning, rather than those of children, and one can ask the question, "What do the adults learn, or gain, from their mature interpretations?" I propose that, rather than seeing nostalgia, new readings, and possible selective memories as being inherently problematic, we should instead begin to view adult engagement with memories of childhood play as an integral role of these games in our maturing lives. As McLeod and Wright argue, "Nostalgia... is pivotal to how participants construct a critique of their present and navigate the shifting relations between past and present" (2012: 3).

### INTERVIEWEES

The primary interviewees for this project were my aunt, Sylvia Ficken, and my mother, Louise Osborne, of Princeton, Bonavista Bay, Newfoundland. Their parents were Joliffe Lloyd Quinton (1910-1993) and Edith Quinton (née Hutchins, 1911-1981). There were five children in the family, Joliffe (b.1938), Frank (1945-1953), Louise, Sylvia, and Terry (b. 1949). Before moving to Princeton on the south side of Bonavista Bay in 1947, the family lived in Greenspond on the north side of the bay. Joliffe Lloyd was an Anglican minister but retired due to bad health following a shipwreck. He then worked for Browning-Harvey as a sales representative. Edith came from a musical family and taught piano and violin.

The sisters grew up in Princeton, in a typical two-story "salt-box"<sup>8</sup> styled house with an added back pantry near the water. It was heated by a central, cooktop wood stove in a large kitchen where the majority of activity took place. There was also a front sitting room for formal entertaining and four bedrooms upstairs. There was no electricity or telephone service until the 1960s, and into the 1980s the outhouse was the primary toilet as there was no indoor plumbing. The family maintained a large flower and vegetable garden, as well as chickens. The children attended a one-room, school heated by a pot-bellied wood stove. They helped with chores around the house, tended the animals,

gardened, hauled water from the well, attended church, and had a typical, rural, Newfoundland outport<sup>9</sup> upbringing for the time period.

Osborne graduated from high school early at age 15, and took a job at a bank until she could attend university. She enrolled at Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN) where she received her Bachelor of English and History degree (1969) and pursued a teaching career. Later she took a second degree in English and German (1994). In 1970, she married Jim Osborne (b. 1946), who became a marine biologist with the government. They settled in Chamberlains, Conception Bay South in 1980, and moved to Chelsea, Quebec permanently in 1993.

Ficken studied art through MUN Extension Services in St. John's and became a well-respected artist. Her primary mediums are watercolour and lithography, and her main subject areas are outport life and native flora watercolours. Ficken was also a medical illustrator with the MUN medical school. In 1969 she married photographer Roy Ficken (b.1944), of London, England. They settled in Topsail, Conception Bay South.

#### NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR, CANADA

Newfoundland and Labrador is Canada's most eastern province. It joined Canada in 1949 after a close referendum. Prior to Confederation it had been a British colony, an independent Dominion of the Commonwealth, and then, due to economic collapse, was ruled by a Commission of Government headed by England.<sup>10</sup> The province is comprised of an island, Newfoundland, and a larger continental portion, Labrador, to the north. The whole province covers an area of 405,720 square kilometers, with a 2016 population of just 519,716. Almost half of the population lives on the Avalon Peninsula in, or near, the capital city of St. John's, North America's most eastern city. There are two-time zones in the province with the island of Newfoundland and the southern shore of Labrador on Newfoundland Standard Time (UTC-3:30) while the majority of Labrador follows

Atlantic Time (UTC-4:00). This article deals with childlore in Newfoundland and does not discuss Labrador.

The island of Newfoundland has four major geographical sections: the east coast, the central island, the west coast, and the south coast. Each of these are divided further by peninsulas and bays. For example, on the east coast, the major area discussed is on the southern side of Bonavista Bay, about a three to four-hour car ride from St. John's. During the time period of continuous European colonization of NL, dated from the official discovery in 1497, the economy has been resource based. The primary resource until the 1990s was the cod fishery. In 1993, there was a moratorium declared on cod, the economy collapsed, and while other fisheries and diversification efforts were made, the economy did not recover until 2008 when offshore oil revenue hit a high. With the recent drop-in oil profits, the province has again hit a downturn, and labor-based outmigration is once again common.

#### PRINCETON, BONAVIDA BAY, NL

Princeton, formerly Seal Cove, is a small outport located on the south side of Bonavista Bay. It is situated around a shallow cove with a river, which runs from a large, nearby, fresh-water pond. The community began as a "winter house"<sup>11</sup> for people from the communities of Tickle Cove, Red Cliff, and Open Haul further up the bay to log and trap in the early 1800s (Prince 2006: np).

The arrival of the railway in 1911 changed this natural resource community into a small, bustling center. By 1913, the outport was described by the *McAlpine Gazetteer* as having a population of 130 people as well as a church, two stores, a post office, and the railway (Prince 2006: np). As the closest train station to the regional economic capital of Bonavista, 100 kilometers to the north, people often arrived to catch the train or ship goods (Osborne, E. 2003: 107).

Following the cod moratorium in the 1990s, industries have declined, and the community has experienced outmigration. The post office closed over a decade ago, and the general store was badly damaged by Hurricane Igor in 2010 and has only recently reopened. Today there is a golf course, a fish plant, and a government wharf, and the residents are either retired, employed in the fishery, or commute to other communities.

#### CHILDREN'S CULTURE AND GAMES IN PRINCETON IN THE 1950s

Children's game culture in 1950's Princeton was focused around the school yard, the church, and whenever children gathered in a garden. The repertoire appears to be based in the British language tradition found in the standard collections with some melodic differences. Singing games included "King William," "Here We Go Gathering Nuts in May," "Green Gravels," and "Ring Around the Rosie." "Red Rosie Apple" and "Engine, Engine Number Nine" were skipping games. There were also hopscotch and other types of games (Ficken, 2004; Osborne L. 2005).

The one-room school was the focus of daily activity for the children. It was designed with large doors that opened to reveal a stage for local concerts and dances (Quinton 2000). Heated by a wood stove, the older boys were expected to carry kindling to school daily. Eventually a two-room school opened to which students of all religious denominations attended (Ficken 2004).<sup>12</sup> Osborne explained that the demographics of play and social integration were strongly affected by the move. At the one-room school, older students were more likely to join in with various games, but at the new school, activities became more segregated by age, and gender (Osborne, L. 2005). Ficken remembers simply learning games from the other children and does not remember if there were any formal instruction from parents (2004). It is unclear if the lines of transmission were also affected when the age range grew smaller.

Below are a few examples of the songs and games played during Ficken and Osborne's childhood:

*Green Gravels*

**Moderately Slow** ♩ = 55

Green gra-vels, green gra-vels the grass is so green, all the fair la-dies are  
a-shamed to be seen, Dear Mar - y, dear Mar - y your  
true love is dead, they sent you a mess-age to turn back your head.

Sung by Sylvia Ficken, December 30, 2014.

Green Gravels, green gravels,

The grass is so green,

All the fair ladies are ashamed to be seen,

Oh (name), oh (name),

Your true love is dead,

(s)he sent you a message to turn back your head.

(Ficken personal communication, Jan. 13, 2006)

"Green Gravels" is a ring game, but instead of kissing, the chosen person turns around and faces the outside of the circle. The game is over when everyone has "turned back their heads."<sup>13</sup>

*Nuts in May*

**Moderate** ♩ = 60

Here we go gath-er-ing nuts and May, nuts and May, nuts and May,

Here we go gath-er-ing nuts and May on a cold and fro-sty morn-ing.

Sung by Sylvia Ficken, December 30, 2014.

Here we go gathering nuts and May,<sup>14</sup>  
 Nuts and May, nuts and May,  
 Here we go gathering nuts and May,  
 On a cold and frosty morning.

Who will we have for nuts and May,  
 Nuts and May, nuts and May,  
 Who will we have for nuts and May,  
 On a cold and frosty morning.

[pick someone from the line]

[name a girl]

Mary for nuts and May,  
 Nuts and May, nuts and May,  
 Mary for nuts and May,  
 On a cold and frosty morning.



Who will we have to take her away?

Take her away, take her away,

Who will we have to take her away?

On a cold and frosty morning.

[Name a boy who comes into the middle]

*Johnny* to take her away,

Take her away, take her away,

*Johnny* to take her away,

On a cold and frosty morning.

(Ficken personal communication December 30, 2014)

Ficken's version of "Nuts in May" is almost identical to Daiken's collection (1949: 73). In this game, two lines face each other, and throughout the verse two participants are selected by the group. One "takes" or "pulls" the other away. Daiken, Gomme, and the Opies all note a tug of war between the pair to see who wins the other person for their line (Daiken 1949: 73; Gomme 1964: 428; Opie 1985:277).<sup>15</sup> Ficken does not remember if there were a tug of war when she played or if the pair simply proceeded to the end of the lines, their part completed (personal communication Jan. 13, 2006).

### *Red Rosie Apple*

♩ = 90

2/4

Red Ros - ie Ap - ple Gin - ger - bread and Tart

Tell me the name of your sweet-heart. A B C D E F G...

Chanted by Sylvia Ficken, December 30, 2014

Red Rosie Apple,

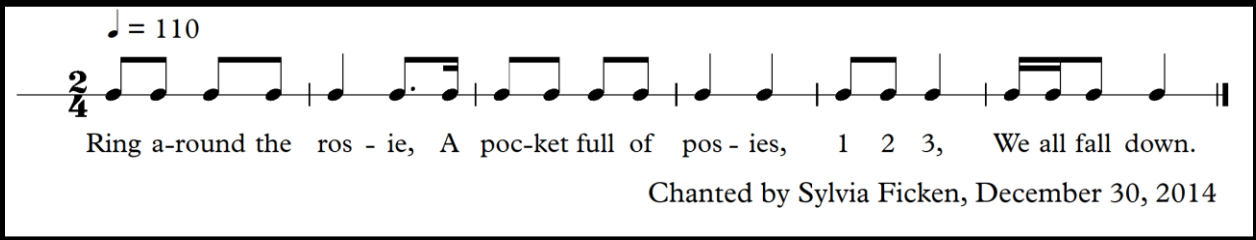
Gingerbread and Tart,

Tell me the name of your sweetheart.

A, B, C, D, E, F, .... (Ficken personal communication January 13, 2006)

"Red Rosie Apple" is a skipping game. The children spun the rope faster and faster until the skipper tripped and a "sweetheart" was picked based on the letter on which the rope stopped (Ficken 2004).<sup>16</sup>

### *Ring Around the Rosie*



♩ = 110

2/4

Ring a-round the ros - ie, A poc-ket full of pos - ies, 1 2 3, We all fall down.

Chanted by Sylvia Ficken, December 30, 2014

"Ring Around the Rosie" was considered a very young child's ring game in Princeton. Gomme explains that the sneezing part of "Ring Around the Rosie" is almost universal and an important action that is usually thought to have supernatural consequences (1964: 111). However, there are variants, Ficken initially sang "1, 2, 3 we all fall down" but said they also sang "Achoo, achoo" and I grew up in Conception Bay singing "Ashes, ashes we all fall down."

### *Engine, Engine Number Nine*

"Engine, Engine Number Nine" is a skipping game. I have left this rhyme until the end as Ficken separated it out from the others due to geographical content. She identified the above rhymes as British games stating they "... didn't really know anything much about the United States, not where we lived."<sup>17</sup> She thought a classmate of hers must have known more about the United States because she knew another choosing game, which

Ficken considered to be "definitely American" (Ficken 2004). The directions were simply to point to children on Y-E-S or N-O, and the person chosen on the S or O had the next turn:

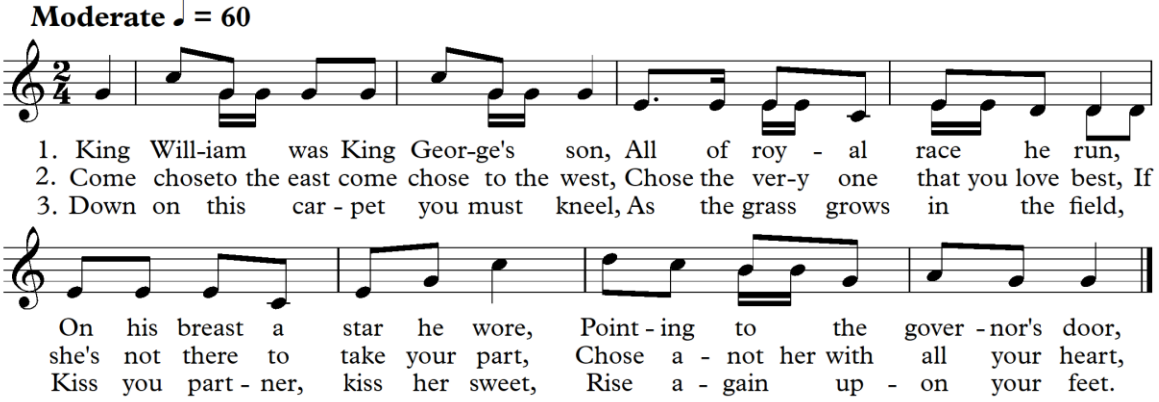
Engine, engine number nine,  
 Going down Chicago line,  
 If the train goes off the track,  
 Do you want your money back?

[if the answer is no]  
 N-O spells no,  
 So out you must go,  
 On your mother's big fat toe.

[if the answer is yes]  
 Y-E-S spells yes,  
 So out you must go,  
 On your mother's big fat toe. (Ficken 2004)

*"King William" as Played in Princeton*

**Moderate** ♩ = 60



1. King Will-iam was King Geor-ge's son, All of roy - al race he run,  
 2. Come choseto the east come chose to the west, Chose the ver-y one that you love best, If  
 3. Down on this car - pet you must kneel, As the grass grows in the field,

On his breast a star he wore, Point - ing to the gover - nor's door,  
 she's not there to take your part, Chose a - not her with all your heart,  
 Kiss you part - ner, kiss her sweet, Rise a - gain up - on your feet.

Sung and played on accordion by Sylvia Ficken, October 24, 2014.

The basic form of “King William” is a circle game with a central figure who selects from the ring and acts out the lyrics. At the third verse, a sweetheart was chosen, and the couple knelt in the grass to kiss before rising to begin again. The “King” returns to the ring and joins back in the fun (Ficken 2004). In Princeton, “King William” was a co-ed game for children up to the approximate age of 10 or 12.<sup>18</sup> For the choosing section, the girls were expected to pick boys to kiss and vice versa (Ficken 2004). However, at the new school, “King William” shifted to being played by girls ages 8-10 (Osborne, L. 2005).<sup>19</sup> These and other games were played outdoors during recess, after school in the garden, or whenever there were at least five or six children. A large ring might include ten or twelve players (Ficken 2004). In Princeton it was strictly an outdoor game.<sup>20</sup> As Osborne pointed out, “You have a group of kids going around and round and round, shouting and laughing and singing out loud in a circle... it isn’t the sort of thing you can do indoors” (Osborne, L. 2005).

#### *Rings, Directions and Choosing*

In Princeton, Ficken stated that they formed a moving ring around a central person and followed the directions given in the verse of choosing, kneeling, kissing and rising. I was interested to know if they changed direction at “Come choose to the east, come choose to the west” as some adult Newfoundland dance forms use east and west as directional commands. Direction changes were not part of the game at the time that Ficken or Osborne played, but in other parts of the island the child in the role of King William did turn one way and then another before choosing a partner (Greene 1967; Kinden 1967; Legge 1967; Reid 1967). One game from St. John’s involved two rings, an outer circle of boys and an inner ring of girls (Browne 1967). This is very similar to the Paul Jones dance performed in Bonavista and Catalina to select dance partners at adult community events (Osborne, E. 2003: 59). The most suspenseful aspects of the game occurred during the choosing phase. Neither Osborne nor Ficken indicated any explicit

rules for choosing a partner. Another Newfoundland version allows the chosen girl to refuse, thus enacting the lines that read:

If she's not there to take your part,  
Choose another with all your heart (Oram 1967).

### *Kneeling and Kissing*

The kissing line was no doubt the most fun of all! In 1950s Newfoundland there were no indications of parental disapproval (an idea at which Osborne heartily laughed). There was, however, a strong element of this in the United States variants, particularly at supervised play-parties in the mid-west (Randolph 1949: 346).<sup>21</sup> In Princeton, the kiss consisted of a "peck on the cheek" which could still cause a lot of commotion depending on who was kissing whom (Osborne, L. 2005). Ficken, noted that they really did kiss, "It was just what you did" (2004).<sup>22</sup> Attitudes in NL have changed. In 2015, I taught "King William" to a class in St. John's, ages 5 to 8, and it was clear that kissing would not be approved of by the parents, so we substituted hand shaking.

In two Newfoundland variants, the middle children either closed their eyes or wore a blindfold. Unaware of faces, they must then reach out when the ring stops and kiss an unknown person in front of them (Browne 1967; Butler, A. 1967; Butler, S. 1967; Coles 1997: 150; Wilson 1967). Two St. John's versions did not involve kissing but rather simply turning around akin to "Green Gravels," the game ended when all players in the circle were facing outward (Smith 1967; Windsor 1967). Outside of Newfoundland, the interactive part of the song included rising, saluting, and asking the girl to follow the fife and drum.

### *Switching Central Player*

The final part of the game involves changing the monarch in the middle. In several communities, "King William" was an elimination game in which the previous king

would leave the ring, and the game finished when there was no one left (Sansome 1967; Smith 1967; Snow 1967; Tilley 1967; Windsor 1967). Ficken stated that, in their games children simply rejoined the ring as:

There wasn't really enough children in the community so that we could leave the ring, there wouldn't be enough left to play... we just got back in the ring and then the game was over I guess when everybody had had a turn. (Ficken 2004)

In Princeton both girls and boys could be "King William" without any gender considerations. However, in a version from Montana, only the boys acted as king in the middle, once they had selected a girl and kissed her hand, they took the place of the boy beside her, who then became King William (Randolph 1949: 345).

#### KISSING DANCE-GAMES IN BONAVIDA BAY

Kissing games and dances for various ages are known throughout Newfoundland and have been documented in Bonavista Bay by Karpeles (1971: 256-257), Quigley (1985: 46-50), and my own work (2003: 55-57; 2005). While in Princeton, "King William" was a young child's game; in other areas it was played by teenagers or "marriageable young people" (Anthony 1967; Feltham 1967; Murray 1979: 68; Coles 1997: 93), and it was danced by adults in St. John's, Salmon Cove, and Clarke's Beach (Butler, A. 1967; Parsons 1967; Pinsent 1967; Riche 1967).

There appear to be two formats for kissing dances in Bonavista Bay, additive inclusive and exclusive variants in which people are kissed out of the game. On the other hand, in nearby Red Cliff, the inclusive version was danced as a sort of front-loading conga line. The person with the handkerchief would kiss someone; the kissed would then join in front and kiss another (Osborne, E. 2003: 55-57). As Capt. Russell of Tickle Cove explained, the dancers kissed through the cloth "or they thought they did!" He also pointed out that cultural expectations dictated that if a girl had a boyfriend he wouldn't

kiss her with a loud kissing sound (Russell 2002). This particular kissing dance was performed during or after the adult community dances. Gomme describes a similar line pattern for Cushion Dance from Northumberland, England (1964: 88).

On the other hand, the exclusive versions of the kissing dances are much closer to the form of "King William" as they include a ring of participants and kneeling to kiss. In Stock Cove, Karpeles danced a ring game in which the center person chose a girl to kiss behind a handkerchief. In an older form of the dance, they knelt upon a cushion (Karpeles 1971: 256-257). At other dances, including Keels and Plate Cove, there was a ring with a central figure, and the participants were kissed out until the ring was gone (Osborne, E. 2003: 54; Quigley 1985: 48). In St. Ryan's, Placentia Bay adults sang the verse for "King William" and knelt upon the handkerchief to kiss (Leonard 1967). In Pickering, UK, a version called "King Henry" was played after a wedding ceremony (Opie and Opie 1985: 124). In *The Singing Game*, the Opies link "King William" directly to the "Cushion Dance" as a "mating" game (1985: 123). Quigley also suggests that the "Kissing Dance" of Bonavista Bay developed from the "Cushion Dance" and that several dances such as "Spin the Bottle," "Musical Chairs," and "Sir Roger," used to be games (1985: 49). One can see easily "King William" as part of this enculturation progression of childhood to adult courtship with the social rules and norms taught through age appropriate dance-games.

#### ADULT REFLECTIONS AND INTERPRETATIONS OF "KING WILLIAM"

One of the most interesting aspects of this study was not only learning about my mother's childhood but discovering how the meaning of the rhyme has changed over time. Instead of dismissing it as a silly game, "King William" has arisen in conversations over the years, not just as a fond memory of childhood, but as a reflective exercise into its potential deeper meanings.



*"King William was King George's Son": Rhyme as Historical Document*

Who was King William? Was he King George's son or King James' son?<sup>23</sup> In preparation for her interview, my mother took this question very seriously and treated the lyrics as historical description.<sup>24</sup> Osborne explained that King William IV (1765-1837) was the third son of King George III, also known as "Mad George." According to Osborne, "of royal race he run," refers to William's pure royal bloodlines (Osborne, L. 2005). The Opies also note that "King William" is a game that acts as a memory aid for the royal succession (1985: 122).

William was known as the Sailor King and was not expected to gain the throne. However, he was coroneted at the age of 60, as his two eldest brothers, including King George IV, had died without any children recognized by the family. Despite many biological children, William also passed away without any legitimate heirs, and his niece Victoria succeeded him (Osborne, L. 2005).

Osborne is convinced that the rhyme is connected to this particular King William as he was the only William that was a son of a George, although she does recognize that the game or tune might be related back to an earlier game. Due to the British tendency to satirize their royalty, she believes that the rhyme would have surfaced around his coronation in 1830 (Osborne, L. 2005).<sup>25</sup>

*Prince William in Newfoundland*

In 1786, William began a three-year tour dividing his time between Newfoundland, the West Indies, Nova Scotia and Jamaica. Sent out with his own ship, *The Pegasus*, a 28-gun frigate, William celebrated his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday in Placentia, Newfoundland, where he stayed for the summer to act as magistrate and to preside over the fishery. Reputedly, he was a fair and good magistrate; however, he was harsh on the Roman Catholic population, attempting to stop the construction of a church and banning

them from the hall they had been using to conduct mass. His birthday revelry was the subject of much talk as he became exceptionally inebriated aboard ship and carried on with the crew, who very nearly killed him with their antics. As well as Placentia, Prince William also visited Trepassey, St. Lawrence, and St. John's (Rollmann 1999: np).

During his time in Newfoundland, gossip started about William's temper and his "carousing." According to Osborne's father, William was known as an eccentric throughout his life. He was prone to drinking, associating with the "wrong" types of people, "spitting in public," "inviting people into his carriage," and "saying inappropriate things." Osborne told a tale that William had sent a serving girl outside during a storm and would not allow anyone to let her in, resulting in her death (Osborne, L. 2005). Surprisingly, she also related a story with a family connection! Apparently, her aunt's husband's first wife, who had "gone mad," was rumored to be descendent of one of William's early escapades.<sup>26</sup> In the family house in Trinity, Trinity Bay, there was a sword hanging in the front hall:

I recall a sword hanging in their hallway as you came in thru the front door, they had a large, not exactly a chair, I don't even know what it was called, but it was a seat with a high, high back it was over six feet high or more. And hanging on that was a very elaborate sword (Osborne, L. 2005).

Although she said that nothing was ever specifically stated about the sword, it was implied that it had belonged to King William (Osborne, L. 2005).<sup>27</sup>

### *"Pointing to the Governor's/Arbour Door": Politics or Love?*

Both Ficken and Osborne thought that there might be a political element to the rhyme. Osborne stated that the choosing section might refer to his tendency to choose whichever political party worked in his favor at the time. She thought that the "governor's door" was particularly political since as King, William would have to be

Careful to speak to the governors properly in order to have his laws enforced (personal communication, May 11, 2006).

Another version Osborne knows is “*arbour door*,” which she suggests might refer to his complex love life. She stated that the *arbour*, or *garden door*, might refer to his illicit love affair with actress Mrs. Jordon as the garden was a place where you might stroll with a young lady and “sneak a kiss.” Osborne thought that the lines “If she’s not there to take your part/Choose another with all your heart” also referred to his affair and subsequent marriage to a “suitable” wife, Adelaide of Saxe-Meiningen (1792-1849) in 1820 (Osborne, L. 2005). Finally, she also suggested that many children may have said “*Labrador*” as it would have made the most sense to them (Osborne 2005). Going to “*The Labrador*” was a common seasonal labor activity in rural Newfoundland and referred to taking a berth on a large fishing vessel for a few months to fish off the coast of Labrador, the northern part of the province.

### *Art and Nostalgia*

At a family gathering, Ficken pointed out a copy of her lithograph which depicts children playing “*King William*” in a garden. This artwork is indicative of her style and attention to local subjects and characters. On the back of her framed copy, she had penciled the words of the verse. Ficken said that she chose to depict “*King William*” as it was “one of the good games, one of the favorites.” Evidently others held the same opinion as, after she had finished the artwork, Ficken stated that strangers phoned her just to say, “‘We used to play that,’ anybody my age will know what you’re talking about if you said, ‘*King William* was *King George’s Son*,’ so I think it was played widely” (Ficken 2004).

Her art depicts five children in a ring with a younger child in the center. There is a dog trying to join the fun and a woman watching from a doorway. In the background

are hills, boats, a fishing stage, men on the wharf, and the garden. It shows a very pleasant and idealized childhood setting in outport Newfoundland.

This game seems to act as a sentimental trigger for some members of this generation. I have heard Osborne, Ficken and another family friend, Norma Pike (née Prince), sing and discuss "King William" at dinner parties, nostalgically in conversation with old childhood friends, and sometimes just when they happen to think of it. These occasions have often been in connection with a version on a CD by the Newfoundland musical group Bristol's Hope (1997). Reminiscing not only allows them to recall the game itself and people and experiences connected to it but acts as an "invitation to look back on their younger selves" (McLeod and Wright 2012: 15). In the case of "King William" the "invitation" to remember seems to be very welcome and appears to be more significant than other games.

### CONCLUSIONS

This article has touched upon how "King William was King George's Son" lightly and playfully introduced children to the serious issues of courtship, love and loss, marriage, history, and politics. It also discussed issues of age related social integration, independence of play, and transmission by observation as well as how "King William" related to more mature kissing games.

Unlike the other games they had played as children, "King William" has stayed in the sisters' minds as a favourite and has occasioned their reflection on its meaning as adults. Osborne has primarily considered its historical context and how the life of the real King William can be read between the lines, while Ficken was moved to create art about the game to represent a happy childhood memory. Indeed, this game sits well in the hearts of many people as illustrated by the communications Ficken received from strangers regarding her art. "King William" provides a point of reference for old friends

to reminisce about their childhood, both on the games and on other people and related experiences.

How do childhood games influence us as adults? Are they simply left-over survivals from ancient rituals as suggested by the 19<sup>th</sup>-century writers, in this case? Is “King William” celebrating marriage-by-capture? Or are they rather age-appropriate and developmentally progressive exercises that act to enculturate the child into the expectations, norms, and behaviours of their society? Considering the various kissing games and dances on the southern Bonavista Peninsula, I’d suggest the latter for “King William” as it would seem that children progressed from “King William” to “Spin the Bottle” and onto adult kissing dances in the region.

We now understand that our childhood experiences can influence our adult lives; however, it is generally considered to be a simple one-way interaction. We teach children to learn skills, social norms, and emotional intelligence with a look forward to how it will help them become functioning and successful adults; but do we ever look back and consider how our childhood memories of play change and get reinterpreted throughout our lives and become enriched with new experiences and deeper understandings? Generally, the folklore we learn as children is considered a sort of foundation on which to grow, rather than as a text with continually evolving understandings. Bronner advocates for “no sharp break with our” younger lives as childhood “Lore, customs, and games have helped shape who we are, and the values and attitudes they foster take us through our lives” (1988: 34). However, I suggest that there is a subtle reinterpretation and deepening of our childhood experiences as we age, that we come to understand them in different ways. McLeod and Wright states that, “The happy school days narrative offers a ready-made formulation for capturing the complex experience and memory of growing up and of bringing those memories into the present” (2012: 16). This happy memory is integral to our feelings of connection throughout our lives; Berríos-Miranda

discusses how childhood musical experiences affect her as an adult, despite other difficulties in her life, when she thinks of them: "I dance, I remember, I survive, I belong, I am happy" (2013: 313). It clearly affects her daily life as an adult. Therefore, we need to not only understand how childhood games help us become adults but how the experiences and memories of those games function for us *as* adults, the role they continue to play in shaping how we think about our own childhood, our children's childhoods, and how we more deeply understand our current situations as adults through these memories.

It is easy to see the value of children's games during childhood as they encourage life skills, such as team work, taking turns, following a leader, following directions, and even basic courtship skills. However, the continuing influence of those skills and the pleasant memories of the games themselves should also be considered in the literature.<sup>28</sup> Many adults even forget their childhood games until they hear the next generation playing them however, "King William" is just one example of a game that has been well recalled, and has positively affected the adult lives of two sisters with evolving interpretations alongside pleasant nostalgia.

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<sup>1</sup> Earlier, and very different, versions of this article were presented at the Folklore Studies Association of Canada conference (2005) and a non-scholarly version was published online with the *Newfoundland Quarterly* (2008), but it is no longer available.

<sup>2</sup> McNeil notes that many collectors of childlore have treated their adult interviewees as simply uncritical holders of historical knowledge rather than someone who "reshapes a text" (McNeil 1988: 15).

<sup>3</sup> Collections have covered various areas of England, Ireland, Canada, and the USA. For space considerations I have not included all of these in the bibliography, however, I can easily provide them upon request.

<sup>4</sup> These are primarily found in the large Questionnaire 1967 (Q67), gathered by students of Herbert Halpert and G.M. Storey. All Q67 citations refer to NL variants and are available at MUNFLA. The original questionnaire is available for download at <https://www.mun.ca/folklore/research/munfla/Questionnaires.php> It generated 1,317 responses about Newfoundland folklore from student families. Under Section V "Singing Game, Rhymes, Chants and Riddles" the first point reads: "Singing Games: Ring games, line games, hiding games, such as: London

Bridge; Green Gravel(s); King \_\_\_\_ was King \_\_\_\_\_'s Son; Little Sally \_\_\_\_; Hoist your sails/tails and run; and any others. Please give the words, and describe how each game is played" (1967: 6). Individual cards are cited by collector.

<sup>5</sup> One of the most influential childlore studies was conducted in Newfoundland by John Widdowson (1977). It examined adult speech patterns aimed at children regarding threatening figures.

<sup>6</sup> The Opie Collection is currently being updated (Spring 2018) and can be found online at the Bodleian Library <http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/dept/scwmss/wmss/online/modern/opie-pi/opie-pi.html>. Examples of "King William" being sung for Iona Opie can be found at <https://sounds.bl.uk/Oral-history/Opie-collection-of-children-s-games-and-songs-/021M-C0898X0014XX-0300V0> and <https://sounds.bl.uk/Oral-history/Opie-collection-of-children-s-games-and-songs-/021M-C0898X0001XX-0100V0>

<sup>7</sup> Gaunt published a short Ted Talk via YouTube in March in 2018 summarizing her research. The video can be viewed here: [https://www.ted.com/talks/kyra\\_gaunt\\_how\\_the\\_jump\\_rope\\_got\\_its\\_rhythm](https://www.ted.com/talks/kyra_gaunt_how_the_jump_rope_got_its_rhythm)

<sup>8</sup> The "salt-box" is a typical vernacular architecture style house in rural Newfoundland. An explanation can be found here: <https://www.heritage.nf.ca/articles/arts/newfoundland-folk-architecture.php>

<sup>9</sup> Outport is the common parlance for small fishing village in Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada. It is defined in *The Dictionary of Newfoundland English* as "DC 1 Nfld (1820-). A coastal settlement other than the chief port of St John's; OUT-HARBOUR" (Storey, Kirwin, Widdowson 1982 s.v. "outport"). The Merriam-Webster defines "outport" as "a small fishing village especially in Newfoundland."

<sup>10</sup> In 1933, a Royal Commission was struck to examine how to deal with Newfoundland's finances and it recommended dissolving the parliament and placing control in the hands of an unelected Commission of Government appointed by the British government (Bishop-Sterling and Webb 2008, 115-117; O'Flaherty 2005, 318-375; Rowe 1980, 403). This "holiday" from democracy lasted 15 years until confederation with Canada in 1949 (O'Flaherty 2005, 408).

<sup>11</sup> A "winter house" is a location to which men, and families, move in the winter which is more sheltered from winter storms, often inland, in order to cut timber and set trap lines for hunting. See the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* under "Winter" section 3, <https://www.heritage.nf.ca/dictionary/#5451> (Storey, Kirwin, Widdowson 1982, s.v. "winter")

<sup>12</sup> Previously there had been Anglican and Catholic schools depending on the majority demographic of a given community, Anglican in Princeton and Roman Catholic in nearby Southern Bay (Ficken 2004).

<sup>13</sup> Gomme links the action to a funeral custom of turning your back during the dirge, and that the "green gravel" suggests a fresh grave (1964: 177, 182). Ficken's version is somewhat abbreviated compared to Gomme's variants, but appears to be a combination of Newell's "all the free masons are ashamed to be seen" and Gomme which use "fair ladies" (Ficken 2004; Gomme 1964: 170-183, Newell 1883 cited in Opie and Opie 1985: 241). The Opies classify "Green Gravels" as a "witch dance" (1985: 239-242).

<sup>14</sup> Ficken realized when she sung the song for me that it "should" be "nuts *in* May" but as a child sang it as "nuts *and* may" as if May was type of plant to be collected (Ficken personal communication December 30, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> The Opies discuss "Nuts in May" as being potentially related to the playful marriage by capture games celebrated throughout the world, noting that despite earlier folklorists claims of the game being a survival of "real marriage-by-capture" there is little evidence that is true, and it is generally a consensual kidnapping (1985: 278-279).



<sup>16</sup> Daiken's version is extended and has a series of questions and answers concerning marriage and weddings (1949: 77).

<sup>17</sup> The distinction between English and American games by Ficken is important to note as during her childhood Newfoundland was undergoing significant political and cultural change due to its recent confederation with Canada. During 1940s, the Commission of Government run by London, granted permission to Canada and the United States to establish military bases in NL. In fact, in the early to mid-1940s there were fifteen American soldiers stationed between Princeton and Southern Bay to protect a telephone line (Cook 1999: 99-100). In the 1950s, the influence of American culture was being felt all over the island. There was an American base in Bonavista, which influenced the dance musicians on the nearby towns through new repertoire and amplification technology (Osborne, E. 2003: 109). There was also music from the US broadcast over the radio, which introduced rock and roll, new Irish music and more (Osborne, E. 2007; 2013: 189-192; Webb 1994). Prior to Confederation with Canada in 1949, there had been significant labour ties along the eastern seaboard with many Newfoundlanders working in New York and Boston. While the word of "Chicago" may not indicate any more knowledge about the United States on behalf of her classmate it gave Ficken the childhood impression that it did. The noting of variant words may seem trivial, however, throughout this study both Ficken and Osborne discussed particular lyrics as having significant local, historical, or political meaning.

<sup>18</sup> This age range was also noted in *Renews* and St. John's (Halpert and Story, MUNFLA Q67-611; Q67-675)

<sup>19</sup> An informant of Iona Opie also noted an age group of 8 year old girls who played "King William" in the 1940s in England <https://sounds.bl.uk/Oral-history/Opie-collection-of-children-s-games-and-songs-/021M-C0898X0014XX-0300V0>

<sup>20</sup> In Savage Cove, NL it was played indoors (Coles 1998: 93-94)

<sup>21</sup> A respondent from Montana explained that, "The kissing part... was always optional. If you were in a frivolous mood, and the old folks were not frowning too darkly, we left out nothing, but it all depended." (Randolph 1949: 346). However, in Little Rock, Arkansas the couple shook hands rather than kiss (Randolph 1949: 347).

<sup>22</sup> Osborne noted that the older children played "Spin the Bottle" outside of school (Osborne L, 2005).

<sup>23</sup> In the majority of non-Newfoundland sources the first line reads "King William was King James' Son." In NL the first line is consistently William and George with the exception of four variants using the names Richard, Arthur, Louis, Billy and Edward (Bartlett 1967; Bennett 1967; Beresford 1967; Wakeham 1967).

<sup>24</sup> With a background in history and an interest in the monarchy, Osborne's knowledge of the English Royal Family history is reasonably extensive.

<sup>25</sup> Osborne refers to rhymes such as "The Grand Old Duke of York" and "Mary, Mary Quite Contrary" as examples of satire of the royal family. "The Grand Old Duke" is noted by the Opies in *The Singing Game* calling it a "lampoon" of Frederick Duke of York (1985: 214-215)

<sup>26</sup> Osborne was unsure if it was her uncle by marriage or his first wife who was a descendent of King William, but she thought perhaps it was the wife due to her mental illness and the ancestral connection to Mad King George (Osborne, L. 2005).

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<sup>27</sup> The sword disappeared from the house after a death in the family and before the belongings could be accounted for (Osborne, L. 2005).

<sup>28</sup> Of course, not all childhood memories are pleasant, however, McLeod and Wright found that the older people are more likely to remember their childhood positively even when hardship was evident (2012: 15). The scope of this paper did not allow for addressing unhappy childhood memories.



# **“Collage of Colors”: Processing Place through Fantasy Play**

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*In this article, I examine an episode of fantasy play, and a related theatrical production, as arenas for the creative processing of a child's experience. My five-year-old son, Michael, constructs a microcosm of our field site in Acapulco, Mexico, and animates a drama featuring dinosaurs in mortal conflict. My intention is to explore the ways a child makes sense of place through imaginative play, and, further, to address the role of artistic expression in the child's growing mastery over his material and social environments.*

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Adjacent to the many familiar facets of children's folklore is a domain of play that is variously called symbolic play, pretend play, or fantasy play, wherein children engage in imaginative routines that displace them from their actual selves and surroundings; they engage in this form of play at times by themselves, at times in the company of other children or of adults. I will reserve the term “fantasy play” for symbolic play engaged in the task of telling a story, and in this essay I discuss an episode of fantasy play to see, first, how a child might use it to make sense of place, and second, what sense a folklorist might make of it. In addition, the episode in question implicates another familiar domain of children's expressive culture, the dramatic performance or show, and I will have something to say about this feature as well.

As this play arena often lacks the flavor of the social aesthetics associated with tradition, it has not garnered much attention from folklorists (but see Elizabeth Wein 1991, Gary Alan Fine 2002, and K. Brandon Barker and Claiborne Rice 2012, among other exceptions to this claim). But, if folklorists have stayed on the fringe of children's fantasy play, others, particularly psychologists and child development specialists, have waded

right into the middle of it. Psychologists since Freud have looked to fantasy play as a forum where children can work through issues of concern and gain a mastery over them; in addition, many psychologists and others working with children have been absorbed with the child's ability to distinguish fantasy from reality. Students of child development have devoted a great deal of attention to what they term "symbolic play," in which signifiers (words, actions, objects) are attached to unorthodox referents (Pellegrini and Galda 1993). Jean Piaget, the Swiss pioneer in this line of inquiry, famously pondered the interplay of assimilation and accommodation as two drivers of the learning process, arguing that in symbolic play the child "transforms reality in its own manner without submitting that transformation to the criterion of objective fact" (1971: 338). Lev Vygotsky, another pioneer in this area, but from Russia, argued that symbolic play could be a zone of "proximal development," where children anticipate future behavioral gains, identifying "an imaginary, illusory world in which the unrealizable desires can be realized" (Vygotsky 1978: 92). For these scholars, as for their followers unto the present day, symbolic play is "a hallmark of the early childhood period" (Pellegrini and Galda 1993: 165) and consequently a focus of child development research.

Contemporary research in this field is ambivalent regarding the social and cognitive contributions of symbolic play. Vivian Gussin Paley's influential *A Child's Work: The Importance of Fantasy Play* (2004) makes a strong case for the importance of fantasy play in the early years of life in the development of the child, and Doris Bergen (2002: 1) points to "a growing body of evidence supporting the many connections between cognitive competence and high-quality pretend play." On the other side of the ledger, Lillard et al. (2013: 1) assemble research findings to argue that "existing evidence does not support strong causal claims about the unique importance of pretend play for development." It seems an opportune moment for the folklorist to enter the discussion

and provide situated case studies that illuminate the actual character and consequences of fantasy play in the lives of children closely observed in their natural habitats.

To this end, I offer here a careful inspection of an episode of fantasy play that I happened to capture on videotape in which my son, Michael, locates a dinosaur drama with mythical overtones in a microcosm of the field site where his mother, Patricia (Pat), and I are conducting folkloristic ethnography. This play is not solitary, since Michael has prepared a show, that is, a staged drama, for the benefit of his parents as audience. But it does have an idiosyncratic quality that distinguishes it from the public verbal exchanges of riddles, for example (McDowell 1979). I see Michael's show, which he titled "Collage of Colors," as a production lying at the periphery of children's folklore yet nonetheless of great interest to the folklorist as a parallel arena hosting the same social and cognitive progressions we like to trace in more central folkloristic environments (see Sutton-Smith 1971). Yet, as I hope to demonstrate, the discourses in "Collage of Colors" are also, inevitably, socially formed.

Our entryway into this fanciful realm is a short video segment I made in 1996, in the town of Tepoztlán, in the cool mountains of Morelos, where we had ensconced ourselves to take stock of field materials after several months of ethnographic research along the coasts of Guerrero and Oaxaca.<sup>1</sup> The scene is as follows: during a leisure moment, Michael has established a fantasy play arena that initially eludes our comprehension.<sup>2</sup> A polka-dot shirt is draped over a chair to simulate a volcano and at the base of the chair a number of items are arranged to simulate the natural and man-made landscapes. This ensemble approximates the physical setting where we have spent the last several months. In this rendering of the cosmos, a drama takes place featuring

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<sup>1</sup> This footage can be accessed in my collection, "Music, Song, and Dance on Mexico's Costa Chica," located in the Ethnographic Video for Instruction and Analysis Digital Archive (EVIADA), at this site: <https://media.eviada.org/eviadasb/home>.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix 1 for a rough sketch of this constructed environment.

dinosaurs in deadly intrigue. He has created a sign with the show's title and the information that there will be a five dollar admission charge. It is worth noting that Michael at this stage was an avid fan of James Gurney's *Dinotopia* series, which features dinosaurs and humans establishing and defending civilization on an isolated island. Also, with regard to Michael's title for the drama, please recall that Mexico is a very colorful place, especially in comparison to the bleak Midwest we had left behind in January.

As a properly engaged father, I videotaped this show, performed with me, my wife, and the video camera (and its implication of wider dissemination) as the target audience. Very much a family affair, Michael's show is punctuated with side episodes of family banter that evoke a great deal of laughter. But in this presentation I want to focus on a sequence of three key segments tied to "Collage of Colors": first, a prologue in which Michael sets the scene, explaining the microcosm of the field setting that he has fabricated out of available resources; second, the show itself, in three acts; and third, Michael's summary of the show's plot and his enunciation of its morals (there are two of these).

I view this video footage as a rich repository of evidence speaking to the significance of fantasy play in the life of young children – Michael was five-and-one-half years old at the time that he created and performed "Collage of Colors." I am interested in the imaginative processes that converted a corner of our room in Tepoztlán into a microcosm of south-central Mexico, in the staging of a mythic drama in this constructed environment, and in the tidy exegesis Michael crafts at the end of the drama. Both the scale-model of Mexico and the dinosaur drama that transpires within it exhibit the impact of the field setting, and a specific focus of this inquiry is to assess the ways children of ethnographers process the environments they are exposed to when they accompany their parents to the field. But this inquiry proposes a rich perspective on assimilation and accommodation in children's fantasy play, where we contemplate the child adapting to

the reality of the world or adapting its realities to his own purposes. In this vein I want to raise two additional questions: what logical operations are entailed in fabrications like Michael's "Collage of Colors," and how does Michael position himself as creator of this magic circle of play? Finally, I want to ask why this type of play invites the folklorist's attention.

### THE VIDEO SEGMENTS

We are dealing here with just less than twenty minutes of video that I shot in our Tepoztlán lodgings that May day of 1996. The three segments that concern us are the setting of the scene, the performance of the drama, and the plot summary and moral Michael offers when the play is concluded. We can think of these segments as prologue, performance, and epilogue.<sup>3</sup>

#### *The Prologue*

The prologue occupies about five minutes and features a question-answer session in which Michael provides an orientation to the scene he has created. There are sixteen pieces to the prologue, taking us from the road, river, fields, and town at the foot of the volcano to the slopes and peak of the volcano itself.

Let's take a stroll through Michael's elaborated setting, sorting its sixteen pieces into eight composite zones, and making note of attributes that will figure in the analysis.

1. *The pyramid.* Michael has built a pyramid out of empty film boxes; we learn that it is "Teotihuacán," the famous archaeological site near Mexico City, home to the pyramids of the sun and the moon among other wonders. We had previously visited this site with Michael, who now helpfully points out that the stacked film boxes create the "steps" of the pyramids.

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<sup>3</sup> The full transcript of this performance is appended to this paper.

2. *Fields and stream and pine trees.* Lying along the flank of the volcano are a field of flowers ("This dress right here? This is the flower fields"), a farmer's field ("The lines on it [the fabric] make it look like corn"), and a stream (a blue sheet) with rocks. It is notable that Michael has placed an actual rock on the sheet that represents this stream, mixing the semiotic modes of symbolization and ostension. The same is true of the pine cone he holds up to the camera, which reminds him that the pine tree forest still needs to be constructed – he dashes off to return with some tissue paper which he uses to represent the pine-tree forest, like the one on the road between Mexico City and Cuernavaca.
3. *Animals.* Michael injects three of his favorite animal figures into the scene: monkey, turtle, and *delfine* (he names the fish in quasi-Spanish). These figures are handled with loving care.
4. *Highway and cars.* Pointing to an area just beyond the features he has mentioned, Michael tells us that a series of miniature cars (and one van) are positioned on the "Alcapulco"-Mexico City highway (that's how he pronounces "Acapulco"), and specifies that it is "the toll road." We get a close look at four vehicles, three cars and a van. When I inquire if the cars are going fast he replies: "Oh yes, they are driving very fast. But I made it so they are not moving." He insists on showing and talking about each of the cars – like the animals, each car is dear to him. But neither animals nor cars will figure in the dinosaur drama.
5. *Volcano with rainbow.* Michael indicates the volcano, a colorful shirt draped over a chair, and a rainbow upon it, in the form of a long piece of yellow crepe paper.
6. *Town.*

"The shirt.

That's the town."

[J: Which town is it?]

"Tepoztlán."

7. *"The Weirdo of Colors" and "Color Craziness."* These are fanciful characters, not native to the Mexican or any other known landscape. Michael acknowledges their peripheral status, calling "The Weirdo of Colors" "just a decoration," and saying of "Color Craziness," "he speaks English but it sounds like a screech."

8. *Drum.* Michael takes up the drum and beats a regular rhythm on it. I have this exchange with him:

[J: Does that mean the start of the show?]

"Well, I usually do it when I start my shows.

But sometimes if I can't find it, I just shriek."

[J: Well, I'm glad you found the drum.]

"Yes, 'cause it would be more horrible."

What is most striking about this assemblage is that it models, to a surprising degree of accuracy and completeness, the topography of the Mexican region where we were doing our fieldwork. Setting aside such fanciful elements as "Weirdo of Color" and "Color Craziness" and the beloved-to-Michael monkey and delfine, all of these features are present there, and moreover, in conjunction they compose a sufficient schema of the zone. Michael's creation approaches what Alison Gopnik (2005) terms *paracosms*, that is, "entire fictional universes with their own politics, economics, and sociology."

Equally interesting is the fluidity and flexibility of the modeling logic connecting signifier to signified. In two instances, the volcanic rock and the pine cone, an object signifies itself, activating the semiotic mode of ostension. In all the other instances, we move into the realm of iconicity, precise in the case of the cars and animals, for which toy miniatures serve as signifiers, much looser in the case of the pine trees and town, where

the sense of iconicity is much attenuated. The two fields, the flower field and the farmer field are intermediate in this spectrum of iconicity – the black dress that stands in for the farmer field has lines that resemble rows of corn, and the dress that stands for the flower field is sprinkled with prints of flowers. Likewise, while a colorful shirt can hardly be seen as iconic of a volcano, the way Michael positions it on a chair above the other signifiers does capture the sharp rise of Mexico's volcanic peaks from the plain below, and the shirt's decorative white puffs could be taken for clouds surrounding the peak. The rainbow as yellow crepe paper is a reasonable approximation to the real thing, as it contains one rainbow color and is thin and long and can be molded into an extended curve. But the verisimilitude stops there – the other colors are absent and the crepe rests lightly across the volcano, not across the sky. Michael's role as demigod in this paracosm is made explicit when he takes the rainbow in his hand to hold it out for our inspection and then replaces it along the crest of the volcano. The tissue paper as pine forest is the most whimsical of Michael's fabrications, but the pine cone placed on top of the tissue lends the arrangement an aura of authenticity.

Surfing this spectrum of iconicity is one way to measure the relative degree of assimilation and accommodation in Michael's microcosm of Mexico. Where the iconicity is strong, the prevalent operation is accommodation – the signer has activated the real properties of objects. Where the iconicity is weak, the child has willfully assimilated objects in the world to his own designs. This particular episode of fantasy play militates against drawing overly broad judgments on this count, since both mental operations are activated in this play. Michael is keen to point out the places where symbolization is roughly accurate, but he seems little troubled when his proposed linkages require a leap of faith from the audience.

A third detail to pause over in the prologue is Michael's sense of authority over the microcosm he has created. The telling evidence here is his assertion that the cars are,



in reality, speeding down the toll road, but that he, as the prime mover in this universe, has the ability to make it "so they are not moving." We see in this statement that Michael is fully cognizant of the constructed character of the microcosm and comfortable with his role as its guiding force. Scholars have been interested in the capacity of children "to move in and out of fantasy roles" (Goldman and Smith 1998: 219), and we observe in this fantasy play episode that the player appears to have no difficulty retaining the intra-play frame and the extra-play frame as simultaneous options. This feature is clearly evidenced in the discussion of the rainbow -- Michael assents that it is the rainy season and counsels us, "Just to be careful, don't get your camera rained on."

### *The Performance*

The performance of the drama, "Collage of Colors," begins with the beating of the drum and moves rather tediously (a father can be honest here) through three acts over a stretch of roughly ten minutes. Michael delineates the acts for us, and within them I have designated scenes. Act 1 sets the stage and has two scenes, which I label "A Walk" and "Sleeping." Act 2 presents the core action and can be said to have three scenes: "Walking to the Volcano," "Tyranno Come Out," and "The Feather." Michael does not clearly signal a third act, but I detect a pastoral concluding act with two scenes: "Dinos at Play" and "The Trick." What we have here is the transportation of a well-worn dinosaur game into the paracosm of Michael's south-central Mexico. As in other playings of this routine, there is much scuffling about as realistic plastic models of dinosaurs are made to interact, at the foot of the volcano and at times near its peak. Indeed, it isn't until Pat calls out, well into the first scene, "Dialogue!" that we begin to hear the voices of the story's protagonists.

But if the dinosaur plot is familiar, its relocation to the Mexican paracosm is quite deliberate. The volcano figures prominently in the plot as revised for this setting, and the dinosaurs make incursions into the flower field and the stream with rocks at the foot of

the volcano. (Fortunately, they do not venture into the town or attempt to cross the toll road.) There are three central players – an unnamed dinosaur, a dinosaur named Corythosaurus, and Tyrannosaurus Rex (who is given no turn at speaking). It is the first two of these who keep us informed of the plot's progress. It is not terribly clear in the course of the play, but the plot revolves around some "awful mice" who are consuming the fruit trees that the dinosaurs feed on. Corythosaurus and his friend consult "the plant wizard" who tells them they must secure the gall bladder of Tyrannosaurus and throw it into the volcano. In this way they can rid themselves of the awful mice. This clean explication of plot only emerges in the epilogue, when Michael neatly ties together the loose threads of a somewhat rambling dramatization. "Collage of Colors" comes to an end with dinosaurs choosing their favorite activities, now that Tyranno and the mice are gone:

"I guess I'll just graze for a few minutes."

"I guess I'll just eat plants."

"I guess I'll just eat a little bit of plants."

"I'll just swim in the water for a while."

"I guess I'll just go around and exercise my leg."

"I'll just go to bed."

A final episode is more dynamic – one dinosaur goes to the top of the volcano to do his cord trick. Michael twists a cord tied to this dino's neck and then lets the cord unwind so the dino can spin about above the volcano. He calls out, gleefully, "Me clama, mira; oh, me clama, mira," which appears to be a pseudo-Spanish phrase (the "mira" is actual Spanish). Then, this player goes, "Oh, gulllll," and throws up; as Michael explains it, "He threw up; he threw up all over the volcano ash." The drama ends as this spinning dinosaur is tossed from the volcano's top down to the fields at the volcano's base, saying, "Instead of just going down the volcano, I guess I'll just fly down there."

There are a number of moves in the performance of the drama that tie into present concerns. I find it intriguing that Michael is able to create and maintain two very distinct voices, that of the narrator, explaining on-stage events ("Right now they're going to the flower field") and declaring the end and beginning of acts; and that of the two main story protagonists in conversation with one another. Segmenting "Collage of Colors" into acts, Michael evinces awareness of the dramaturgical model and his responsibility to maintain its conventions. As many researchers have noted, fantasy play is rule-bound, even if the rules are sometimes *sui generis*. In this instance, Michael adheres to the classical unities of action, place, and time; moreover, his dinosaur drama conserves a number of Axel Olrik's oral epic laws (Olrik 1965).<sup>4</sup>

The voicing of the two principal characters is striking on two counts. First, I can detect no clear differentiation of voices; each speaks much the same as the other. Second, they both talk in a stilted, artificial manner. This artifice is evident in the sing-song intonations of their utterances and in their favoring of circumlocution and a quaint lexicon. Consider this example, in which one of the dinos makes references to Tyranno:

"That's very huffy what he says every day.

I shouldn't like his comments."

Here we sense the intrusion of the social into this relatively private discourse. But where did Michael find this speech style? In children's literature? In the fairy tales we read to him?

Still, this artifice can swiftly modulate into accents closer to childhood, as we see in the following example:

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<sup>4</sup> In this vein, it is worth noting that Michael shows awareness of storytelling genres as well (see Appendix 2, lines 3 and 4), when the story protagonists observe that this is not "a bedtime story" and also reference "my father's dream stories," an interesting cross-over into the child's own experience, in which his father is known to create stories about running with various animals.

"Oh yes, Corythosaurus, you are very huffy."

"Well, you shouldn't judge me by my books, like that."

"I don't care about your silly book. Just let me rest."

"Whee, I'm having a nice little piggyback.

Whee, whee, whee, wheeee."

"Oh, ah, ah, ah, ah, ah, ah, ah. (Tuneful)

The stuffy dialogue gets derailed over a flawed effort to insert a proverbial phrase into the mix ("don't judge a book by its cover"), though this misfiring oddly retains some sense, in view of Michael's attachment to story-book dinosaurs. In any case, talk swiftly shifts into a gleeful game of piggyback and the exuberant and tuneful sound of children at play.

### *The Epilogue*

The epilogue is a tight summing up and clever attribution of meaning produced in response to requests from both parents (who were left a bit puzzled by the play). There are two components to the epilogue, a story synopsis and an attribution of the moral to the story. The synopsis seems to take shape in the telling, but it does effectively gather the scattered events in the performance into a coherent narrative of questing and release. A key detail is the story's "feather" that gets redefined as a dinosaur's "bladder" in the synopsis. I reproduce the synopsis in its entirety.

[P: Is there a moral to your story?]

"A moral."

[J: Could you tell us about the story a bit?]

"I'll tell you the moral.

It's about the story.

There's some, there's some awful mice that are eating the fruit trees where the dinosaurs eat.

And they want to get rid of the mice.

So, they go to the plant wizard.

And, he says, that if you kill the tyrannosaurus and take his gall bladder,  
and throw it in the volcano,

it will start a small eruption,

and the mice will be gotten rid of in a no time.

And, I didn't have a picture of the, I shouldn't say it, the gall bladder,

Well I could have put it down."

[P: You could have drawn one.]

I didn't want to – it's too weird.

And, at the end,

They're all just doing what they want to do,

out in the field, eating, drinking, swimming, eating.

And that crazy guy down there that fell off the cliff,

was pushed down by Corythosaurus,

and Corythosaurus was being mean

'cause he wanted to see how angry that dinosaur could be.

He was tenting him." (taunting? testing? tempting?)

The plant wizard was not included in the performance, but we did hear one oblique reference to "those awful mice." The killing of tyranno was enacted for us, but there was no talk of a bladder at that moment in the drama. Instead, if I hear the word correctly, Michael tells us that "a feather" is dropped into the volcano to trigger an eruption. I take it that the plot is a work in progress and I must say that bringing in the detail of tyranno's bladder is a deft touch for enhancing the tale's mythical reach. It is worth noting, in passing, that Michael's mother had had her gall bladder removed not long before we embarked on this field trip to Mexico.

Now, for the moral of the story. Michael seems to call it “the mirror” or possibly “the mural,” but despite confusing the terminology, he has a good grasp of what morals to stories are supposed to sound like.

“And the mirror of the story is, not to hurt others.

And the other mirror is, don’t, don’t eat other people’s things without asking.”

[J: That’s a very good point.]

His first effort comes across as a little bland, but he nails it with his second effort, for it was the mice eating the dinosaur fruits that set into motion the whole plot of “Collage of Colors.”

## DISCUSSION

In this paper I examine the intersection of fantasy and reality for the perspectives it might offer on the child’s processing of place through fantasy play. Michael McDowell at five-point-five years of age finds himself far from the familiar comforts of home in Bloomington, Indiana. There have been multiple dislocations – taken out of Bloomington Montessori to land in Real del Monte, his Mexican school; from a world dominated by English to a world permeated by Spanish; from humid lowlands to the dry Pacific slopes; and many others. He has also been witness to many episodes of documenting culture as he joins his father and mother in attending festivals and performances of music and dance and observes them as they interview and photograph performers and their families and talk to *curanderos* and other cultural specialists. In short, over a half-year period, Michael has been imbibing the cultural milieu of the field setting. “Collage of Colors” and the setting where it is performed must be viewed as a child’s attempt to model, make sense of, and manipulate the curiosities he encounters in this novel environment.

Let’s pursue this idea of modeling. In the microcosm laid out in our Tepoztlán room, Michael recreates salient aspects of the physical environment he now inhabits.

Relying mainly on processes of iconic representation, he creates a generalized scale model of this brave new world. Into this microcosm he introduces a dinosaur drama, and elements of the microcosm, especially the volcano but also the fields and stream, figure prominently in the drama's plot. Moreover, this plot is evidently influenced by the kinds of stories Michael has been overhearing as his parents investigate and discuss the spiritual beliefs and practices of the local population. There is an episode in the play where one dinosaur complains to his companion, "Well I think they're some spirits bopping my head." This detail, as well as the mythical substrate of the drama's plot, argues for a penetration of the parent's research agenda into the child's fantasy play. Clearly, Michael has been soaking up information and his performance of "Collage of Colors" affords him a venue to probe his mastery of significant physical and conceptual elements.

It seems indisputable that "Collage of Colors" is a model of the child's experience of the field setting of his parent's research. But certainly it is more than that. As in other dinosaur dramas from this stage of Michael's childhood, here it is the herbivores who win out over the carnivores, and specifically, Corythosaurus, one of Michael's favorites, who vanquishes the brute, Tyrannosaurus Rex. Michael was struggling with the rapacity of the meat eaters and this drama, like others from this period, celebrates the triumph of good over evil with the demise of Tyrannosaurus Rex. Other components of "Collage of Colors" transcend the field setting. For example, the play's final episode where Corythosaurus "tests" or "taunts" his companion dinosaur, speaks to Michael's continuing efforts to fathom the dynamics of friendship. Michael's exegesis of that episode, presented above, envisions peer-group episodes of teasing and taunting, where the boundaries of friendship are tested. Recent scholarship has cast doubts on fantasy play as a medium for working out problems and issues confronting the child (Gopnik 2005), but it is difficult not to see this dynamic at work in Michael's "Collage of Colors."



Finally, I return to a question posed at the outset: what business does the folklorist have with children's fantasy play? In spite of its idiosyncratic tendencies, fantasy play contains, I'd argue, ample social and artistic elements to attract the notice of the folklorist. The designing of paracosms reveals the child as bricoleur, working with available artifacts to create viable scenarios. The discourse of the child's pretend play reveals the child as mimic, sampling from available public registers to garner the voicing he wants to implant in his characters. Employing the semiotic modes of ostension and iconicity, stepping in and out of fantasy, and exercising a godlike control over the fabricated environment, the child exercises and extends the same cognitive skills we find activated in riddling and other forms of children's folklore. Even when the fantasy play is somewhat solitary, the child can include scenes where one character tries out anger and tests another character, as Michael does in "Collage of Colors" to explore the mechanics of social relationships. In these and other ways, children's fantasy play holds riches for the folklorist concerned with children's folklore as an avenue of insight into the mental and affective life of the child.

Elizabeth Wein (1991: 23) finds a pattern in the "shows" she performed as a child, noting that "over the years they grow more oriented towards a written text and less towards play...becoming more like 'a play' than 'play.'" Michael's "Collage of Colors" seems transitional on this scale, not scripted in advance though made comprehensible in retrospect, yet reasonably well-formed and intentional in the pursuit of its fantasy plot. His attention to staging instructions, and his persistence in portraying the demise of the awful mice, though admitting the intrusion of some side-plots, reveal (a father can be proud here) a creative mind and a determined will, mustering an impressive set of resources to enact a complex dramatic performance. We see the young artist at work, at play, demonstrating to himself and to his parents his engagement with the world around him and his increasing mastery over its multiple elements.

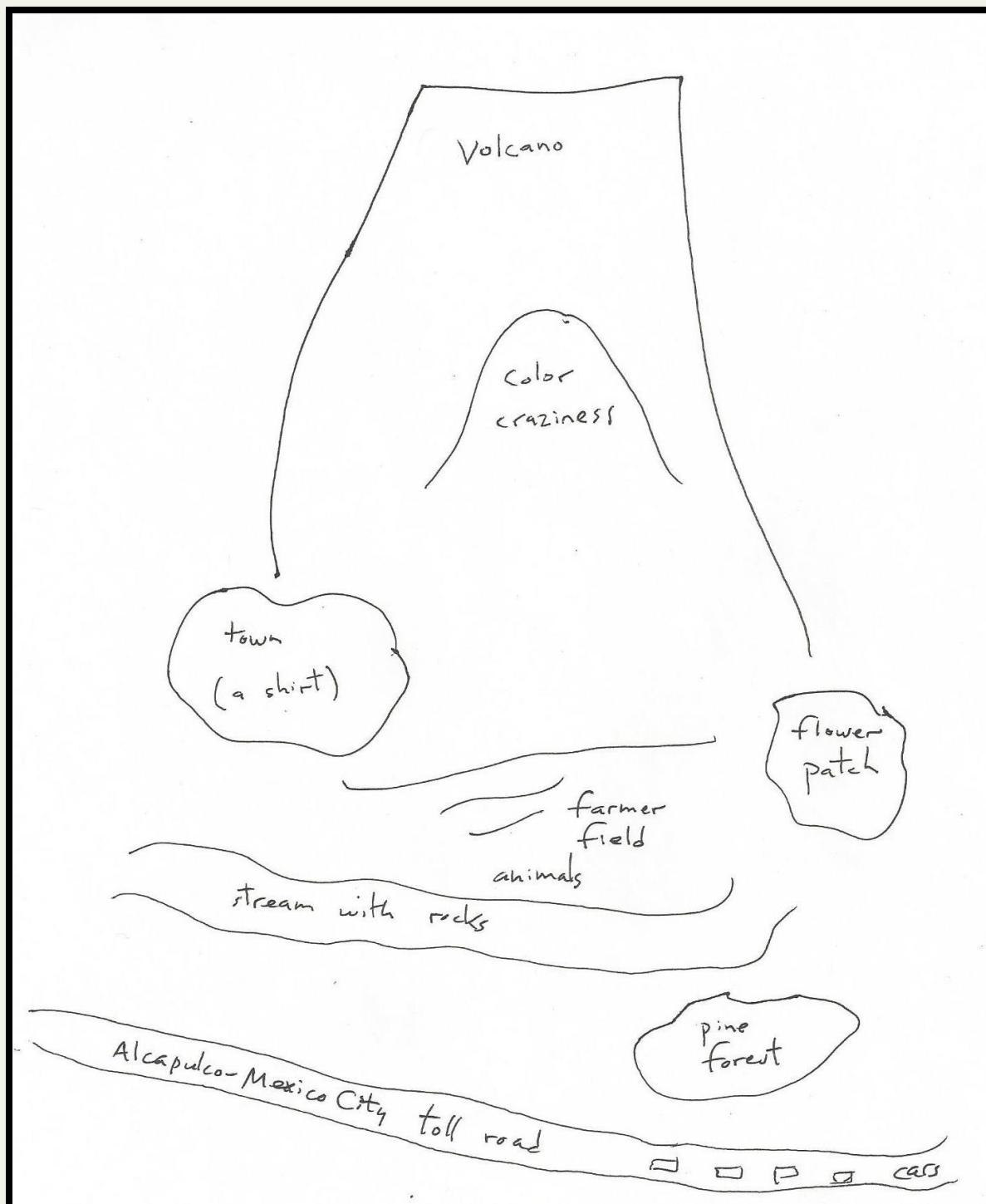
*John McDowell, professor of folklore and ethnomusicology at Indiana University, looks closely at speech play and verbal art as instruments of social process in a variety of settings, including children's peer-group interaction.*

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## APPENDIX 1: Sketch of the Constructed Terrain



**APPENDIX 2: Transcript**

[Note: The transcript consists of three episodes: "The Scene," "The Show," and "The Mirror." J and P are John and Pat, Michael's father and mother, respectively. Their contributions are enclosed in square brackets. I have labeled in bold font and numbered the components of episode 1, "The Scene," to capture the features in Michael's exposition of the play landscape. In episode 2, "The Show," I have labeled in bold and numbered the action elements.]

**EPISODE 1: THE SCENE****1. Pyramid:**

[J: OK, Michael, what do you have to tell us about this?]

"That's a pyramid right there.

And yellow steps."

[P: What pyramid is it?]

"Teotihuacán."

**2. Flower fields.**

"This dress right here?

[J: Yes.]

This is the flower fields."

[J: Lovely.]

"And underneath -- this is the flower patch, I'm sorry."

**INTERLUDE: FOCUSING THE CAMERA**

[J: A field of flowers.

What else do you have there, Mikey?]

"A pyramid."

[J: Yes, we saw the pyramids.]

### 3. Farmer fields.

"And here's the farmer fields."

[J: Which one, the black one there?]

"This one right here."

[P: What's the difference between the flower fields and the farmer fields?]

"Cause the flower fields have flowers and the farmer fields have corn."

"There's lines on it that make it look like corn."

### 4. Stream with rocks.

[J: And what else is down there?]

"Well right here is the stream with rocks,  
as you can see, there's a little bit of rocks."

Right here was from a volcano that's mostly up here.

That shoots out lava and comes down below.

This is the little piece of rock."

### 5. Animals.

"These are all the animals.

One, monkey,

two, turtle,

three, *delfine*."

### 6. Highway.

"And here's the Alcapulco highway,  
Mexico City."

[J: I see some cars on it.]

"Yes, and there's....

It's the Alcapulco-Mexico City, it's the toll road."

[J: Are they driving very fast?]

"Oh yes, they're driving very fast,  
But I made it so they're not moving."

**7. Volcano.**

[J: Now can you show me the volcano?]

"The volcano.

Right here."

[P: And who's that creature under the volcano?]

"Oh, that's just a decoration.

That's the bird who has all this weird stuff.

He's called, 'The Weirdo of Colors.'"

**8. Town.**

"The shirt.

That's the town."

[J: Which town is it?]

"Tepotztlán."

**9. Rainbow.**

[J: Is there anything else you need to explain?]

"Yes, there is.

This is the rainbow.

See this yellow thing?

[P: Is it the rainy season?]

"Yes, it is the rainy season.

Just to be careful, don't get your camera rained on."

[J: OK, I'll watch out.]

**10. Pine trees.**

"Now these...are from pine trees.

And the pine trees are right here, but you just can't see them.



I'll be back in a minute.

I'm going to make the palm trees, the pine trees deal.

To mark the pine trees."

#### INTERLUDE WITH PAT AND JOHN TALKING

[J: So the toilet paper down there is the pine tree,  
it's a whole forest of pine trees?]

"Yeah, it's a whole forest of pine trees."

[J: Like the one between Cuernavaca and Mexico City?]

"Yes."

[J: Very good.]

#### 11. Car with saw.

"Now, can you see that on the front this it has a little bit of a saw on it?"

[J: If you say so.

Let me get a little closer look at it.

No, actually, if you leave it still back where you were.

This one up front?]

"Yeah, this one."

[J: It has some kind of a saw?]

"It has some blades on it."

[OK, fine.]

"It also has a number up here."

[Yes, it does, very good.]

#### 12. Car with snake.

"This is a snake that was cemented into a car."

[J: How interesting.

What a concept.]

**13. Car with chicken.**

[J: OK, well, would you like to begin the show now?]

“Well, as soon as I show you all the cars.

This has a chicken on it.”

[J: Are you sure?]

“A red chicken.”

[J: It sure does.]

INTERLUDE WITH PAT MAKING HEN NOISES

**14. Van with sun on it.**

[OK, what else, Michael?

Shall we begin the show?]

“This is a van with some sun on it.”

[J: My, what a vehicle.

OK, thank you.]

**15. Drum.**

[P: The drum.]

“The drum.”

[J: Does that mean the start of the show?]

“Well, I usually do it when I start my shows.

But sometimes if I can’t find it, I just shriek.”

[J: Well, I’m glad you found the drum.]

“Yes, ‘cause it would be more horrible.”

**16. Color Crazyiness.**

[J: Yes, tell me about this guy]

"Well, he's the Color Craziness.

He wears earrings, and you can see sunglasses.

And all that stuff.

[J: Does he speak Spanish?]

"He speaks English but it sounds like a screech."

## EPISODE TWO: THE SHOW

### Act I

#### 1. A walk.

(Dinosaurs jumping)

[P: Dialogue!]

"Well, we're having a nice walk, aren't we?"

"Yes."

"Well, I often do like to have this walk."

"I wonder if they're any animals around here.

Let's go see."

{"Right now they're going to the flower field."}

"You didn't move there."

"I guess I'll just go back to bed."

#### 2. Sleeping.

"Yesterday, this/

{"Pat, what's this one's name?"}

[P: Corythosaurus.]

"Oh yes, Corythosaurus, you are very huffy."

"Well, you shouldn't judge me by my books, like that."

"I don't care about your silly book. Just let me rest."

"Whee, I'm having a nice little piggyback.

Whee, whee, whee, wheeee."

"Oh, ah, ah, ah, ah, ah, ah, ah. (Tuneful)

*"That's the end of number one."*

## Act II

### **1. Walking to the volcano.**

"Oh yes, I'm having a very nice day, aren't you?"

"Oh my dear Corythosaurus, you musn't talk like that.

Tyrannosaurus might hear us and eat us for sure."

"Well, I don't see him."

*"Oh wait, it's act number two."*

"I hope Tyrannosaurus Rex is not about right now.

Oh, I'll just sneak under the curtain.

—

"That's very huffy what he says everyday.

I shouldn't like his comments."

"We must walk to the volcano."

"OK."

"Ow!"

"Well I think they're some spirits bopping my head."

"Let's go to the volcano now."

(They appear on top of volcano.)

"Well, drop the bladder(?) in."

"Well, I think this will start a little eruption, I hope.

Get rid of those awful, awful mice."

"Well, I haven't seen any yet, but they're probably some around here."

"Well, I guess I'll just go back to sleep."

(They lie down at base of volcano.)

## 2. Tyranno come out

"Now, I'd rather get up, I should say.

"Well, I don't think you want to go to bed.

This is not a bedtime story."

"Well, I would say, I really do like my father's dream stories."

"Well, I didn't know about that."

"But just come over here."

"What are you going to say?"

"Tyranno is coming out in two minutes."

(There is some scuffling.)

"Oh, so you're out."

"Beeeep." {This is a bopping.}

"*Tyranno died.*" {Announcing voice}

[J: Yaaaah. Is that the end?]

"No, *this was just the second.*

*There's one more part.*"

## 3. The feather

(There is much stomping about.)

"Oh, I'm so worn out I can't even move."

"Well, I shouldn't run so fast as I am.

I usually don't."

"Well, just put your arms up high so you can run faster."

(Dino comes out and snaps its moving jaws several times.)

"OK, well we must do up the bladder (feather?) in the lava."

"Well, I don't know about that so much, but I guess we should."

*"Did you see that dinosaur?"*

*"Well, I guess I'll just go to bed."*

### Act III

#### **1. Dinos at play**

(There is a dino above on the volcano and some tramping around down below.)

(Humming sound.)

*"I guess I'll just graze for a few minutes."*

*"I guess I'll just eat plants."*

*"I guess I'll just eat a little bit of plants."*

*"I'll just swim in the water for a while."*

*"I guess I'll just go around and exercise my leg."*

*"I'll just go to bed."*

#### **2. The Trick**

*"Oh stop, you better do some tricks or I'm going up the volcano."*

*"I'll do my cord."*

(Dino swings on a cord above volcano.)

[J: Wow, what a cool trick!]

*"Me clama, mira; oh, me clama, mira;*

*Oh, gulllll."*

*"He threw up; he threw up all over the volcano ash."*

*"Instead of just going down the volcano, I guess I'll just fly down there."*

(Dino is dropped in front of volcano.)

*"Wheee."*

*"He jumped – that's the end."*

[J and P: Yeeaaaah!!!] (clapping)

### EPISODE 3: THE MIRROR

"Now I'll have to clean up all this mess."

[J: That's right.]

[P: Is there a moral to your story?]

"A moral."

[J: Could you tell us about the story a bit?]

"I'll tell you the moral.

It's about the story.

There's some, there's some awful mice that are eating the fruit trees where the dinosaurs eat.

And they want to get rid of the mice.

So, they go to the plant wizard.

And, he says, that if you kill the tyrannosaurus and take his gall bladder, and throw it in the volcano,

it will start a small eruption,

and the mice will be gotten rid of in a no time.

And, I didn't have a picture of the, I shouldn't say it, the gall bladder,

Well I could have put it down."

[P: You could have drawn one.]

I didn't want to – it's too weird.

And, at the end,

They're all just doing what they want to do,

out in the field, eating, drinking, swimming, eating.

And that crazy guy down there that fell off the cliff,

was pushed down by Corythosaurus,

and Corythosaurus was being mean



‘cause he wanted to see how angry that dinosaur could be.  
He was tenting him.”

“And the mirror of the story is, not to hurt others.

And the other mirror is, don’t, don’t eat other people’s things without asking.”

[J: That’s a very good point.]

*Yo' Mama, Mary Mack, and Boudreaux and Thibodeaux: Louisiana Children's Folklore and Play.* By Jeanne Pitre Soileau. (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2016. pp. 193 + 23 black-and-white images, 1 black-and-white map, acknowledgments, introduction, conclusion, appendix 1, 2, 3, notes, works cited, index.)

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If the great benefit of extended fieldwork remains attention and interaction over time, then Jeanne Pitre Soileau's book is clearly a success. In *Yo Mama, Mary Mack, and Boudreaux and Thibodeaux: Louisiana Children's Folklore and Play*, Soileau describes and analyzes childhood in the Bayou State based upon more than forty years of observing and recording children's and youths' cultures across the region. Much of what is at stake in the book can be gleaned from the items-in-a-series that appears in the title. Soileau's central subjects are American, African-American, Cajun, and Creole children, between the ages of three and twelve. Her topics constitute a wide band of those children's expressive forms. The book begins just after desegregation in the urban spaces of New Orleans in 1967 with Soileau's experiences at William Frantz Elementary School; the book ends in 2009 on the other side of the Mississippi in the heart of Acadiana at Lafayette High School, where Soileau interviewed a small group of teenage girls about growing up in the electronic world of the twenty-first century. Along the way, Soileau features fieldwork at other locales, including Violet, New Iberia, and Baton Rouge.

Within this general historical procession from past to present, Soileau's focus also progresses from typical folkloristic analyses to more inclusive considerations of children's culture in the contexts of media and technology, and though the book's "chapters" are curiously unnumbered, Soileau generally organizes her study into two halves. After an initial chapter explicating the "History and Scope of this Project," the first half of the book is devoted to gender-based case studies—"Boys' Verbal Play" and

"Girls' Verbal Play." The second half of the book moves away from these familiar categories to focus on "The African American Child and the Media" and, finally, "Children's Play in the Electronic Age." *Yo Mama* also includes three appendices, featuring (1) a complete transcription of the interviews that comprise the bulk of the "Children's Play in the Electronic Age" chapter; (2) additional rhymes and songs from Soileau's collection of children's folklore in south Louisiana; and (3) additional examples of hand-clapping and other lyrical forms of "play from girls." Between the final chapter on the electronic age and the book's short, punchy conclusion, twenty-three black-and-white images depict an impressive array of children's play from tap-dancers and jazz bands on the streets of New Orleans in the seventies to recent pictures of children performing hand-clapping routines and playing on one of Amazon's Kindle tablets in Lafayette.

Probably, it goes without saying that Soileau's book comprises an important resource for the study of folklore in Louisiana. *Yo Mama* can be shelved alongside other important works on the region; indeed, the first half of the book affirms previous folkloristic attention to ethnic interaction (especially between whites and blacks) in New Orleans, Baton Rouge, and Acadiana. As Soileau notes early in her discussion of William Frantz Elementary, group play among black and white children has been a mainstay since the social movements of the nineteen-sixties: "How, one might ask, did the children of New Orleans and south Louisiana, both black and white, survive the turmoil of integration? Surprisingly, they not only survived it, but they began to play with one another almost immediately" (4). In the two early chapters on boys and girls verbal play, Soileau provides several fine examples of group performances—including black, white, female, and male performers—of the dozens, yo-mama joke cycles, hand-clapping games, jump-rope rhymes, and other well-known genres of children's folklore. Those chapters also reinforce central theoretical underpinnings of children's folklore. Soileau, for

examples, remains intrigued by the breadth of empirical evidence for both *conservation* and *creativity* in children's play forms just as she relentlessly smashes any notions of *triviality* (125).

It is worth noting, here, the fact that blacks and whites play together in Louisiana never supersedes Soileau's nuanced attention to differences of style and intent between black and white performers. She is quick to assert, for examples, that black children are frequently more adept in their verbal performances, which are always oriented toward in-group approval. And black girls infuse their hand-clapping activities and lyrical performances of folkloric standards such as "Little Sally Walker" and "When I was a Baby" with powerful gestures and bodily action. Describing a group of girls who performed "When I Was a Baby" at Baton Rouge's University Terrace Elementary in 1974, Soileau makes no efforts to hide her enthusiasm: "The pantomime of old age in verse 13, 'I say a-cripple, a-cripple...' was a masterpiece. Several girls stepped into the center of the ring and walked all bent over, holding their backs, shuffling along, and looking extremely decrepit" (71).

At other times, Soileau reminds her readers that even though black and white children do play together, the possibility that one or the other group might be ostracized always remains. In a particularly poignant example, Soileau relays how in 1999, she witnessed a group of three elementary-aged black girls in Lafayette shrewdly pass a tetherball too high for a white girl who also wanted to play: "She [the white girl] maintained her position and flailed a few times at the ball in an effort to enter play. The ball remained outside her reach" (74). Likening the maneuvers of the black girls to other *shucking* traditions in African American culture, Soileau concludes the section with a nod toward the girls' skills for subtle evasion: "At no time did they indicate animosity toward the shunned girl. They did not put their hands up to their mouths and whisper... They

simply entertained each other with their own chitchat and calmly ignored the white girl's presence" (75).

The care and attention devoted to recognized folkloric forms in the first half of *Yo Mama* eventually gives way to the feeling of awe that accompanies Soileau's observations of the great influx of media and technology into youth cultures over the previous forty years. Plainly stating that Marshall McLuhan's predictions about the dominance of electronic technologies have come to pass, Soileau notes the prevalence of children acting out the roles of television characters, of the hyper-real shimmies and wiggles that accompany self-recorded videos, and of the constant "drivel" uploaded to YouTube in hopes of Internet fame. In these contexts, it seems that Soileau's subjects are much like the rest of American youth culture: "The electronic world has enfolded the young of south Louisiana, like the young worldwide, into its eerie, flickering light" (124).

Folklorists will find more than poetic flourish in Soileau's discussion of media and culture. Of special importance to scholars of popular culture, embodiment, and bodylore, for example, are the sections devoted to the influence of martial-arts films on youth culture: "For many black inner-city children, especially boys, the martial arts became a dazzling dream fantasy, yet a dream some felt they could achieve" (9). That martial-arts stars like Bruce Lee rose to meteoric heights of stardom in the second half of the twentieth century is nothing new to suggest, but again, it is Soileau's attention to martial arts' influence on children's play over such a long period of time that imbues her observations with efficacious thrust: "What first characterized the allure of the martial arts for the children I observed? The elements were numerous... Perhaps most appealing was the excitement of seeing a little guy who was not white beat up everybody in sight with just his finely tuned mind and body—and his wits" (85). Occasionally Soileau goes so far as to relate pre-existing traditions in African-American youth culture to the rise of martial

arts, especially the overlapping admiration for speed and agility inherent in both the martial arts and African-American forms of dance, such as break-dancing.

Despite the conservative tendencies of children's folklore and the incessant waves of mediated popular culture, children and youths in Louisiana do not stop changing old forms or creating new ones. This is Soileau's lasting message. And as is the case with all folklorists, Soileau happily admits that much work remains out in front of her: "I continue to collect children's folklore because I believe it is a form of ephemeral art" (125). *Yo Mama, Mary Mack, and Boudreaux and Thibodeaux* will be welcomed by those who yearn for situated, contextualized studies of children's folklore and by those who are interested in the intersections of mass-mediated, technological, and folkloric play forms. Ultimately, the book stands on its own as a gift to history, for Soileau's work captures many inflections of children's folklore in Louisiana that, otherwise, would have disappeared into the past.