THE FOIBLES OF PLAY:
THREE CASE STUDIES ON PLAY IN THE INTERWAR YEARS

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ABSTRACT

In the modern era, the academic scale has tipped towards an understanding of play that is reified in the sciences. Yet these perspectives are neither the only ones available, nor the most effective at understanding the concept of playing. How well do we understand the implications of 20th century attitudes towards play? How do we know when something is just play? What kind of cultural work does play perform? This dissertation, focused on the boundary between playing and reality, offers its own answers to problems that arise when we think about, question, or doubt the division between playing and harm.

The following chapters analyze this complex and intimate relationship between playing and harm. My intent is not to define, classify, catalog, ameliorate, moralize, or revise theories of play. Instead, I want to know what is at the heart of the repeated encounters of playing and harm, which reoccur at moments in which play transgresses (or appears to transgress) boundaries between playing and reality. Working across the fields of philosophy, psychoanalysis, clinical psychology, and literature, I explore how the questions, the concerns, the preoccupations (personal and political) of a core group of psychoanalysts working in the mid-20th century have brought us to where we are today.

My chapters focus on psychoanalysts who engage closely with the boundary that separates a potential for harm implicit in play from actual violence. My first chapter moves beyond Freud’s theory of trauma to understand the origins of the relationship between play and psychoanalysis through the story of the fort-da. The following chapters center on four mid-century play theorists, D.W. Winnicott, Harry Harlow, Mary Ainsworth, and John Bowlby, who are linked by their desire to study the child’s mind as
a site through which to respond to social and political problems having to do with war and aggression. Chapter Two situates playing within ethical, historical, and psychoanalytic discourses about cruelty to recover a positive notion of aggression. Chapter Three examines the dangers that result from scientific attempts to control love or play.
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Metaphors We Live In

*The essential feature of my communication is this, that playing is an experience, always a creative experience, and it is an experience in the space-time continuum, a basic form of living.*

– D.W. Winnicott

“The element of *play* is the barrier that separates art from savagery, and playing at human sacrifice seems to be an important theme of ironic comedy. Even in laughter itself some kind of deliverance from the unpleasant, even the horrible, seems to be very important,” writes Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism*. Properties that distinguish literature from “savagery” intrigue Frye. Even more so, elements that seem to distinguish potential forms of injury from actual ones concern him. For Frye, play seems to constitute an important divide between imaginary harm and real harm. Yet the barrier put in place by play seems tenuous at best. Indeed, as Frye acknowledges, “We pass the boundary of art when this symbol becomes existential, as it does in the black man of a lynching, the Jew of a pogrom, the old woman of a witch hunt, or anyone picked up at random by a mob, like Cinna the poet in *Julius Caesar*.”

While Frye provides the beginnings of an ethical model of playing and literature, a model concerned in particular with questions of violence and restraint, his interest in mapping literary form leads him away from a trenchant look at play – its boundaries, its implications. He never answers the question of why play is uniquely situated to mediate tensions between literature and harm. This dissertation, focused on the boundary between playing and reality, offers its own answers to problems that arise when we think

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about, question, or doubt the division between playing and harm. How do we know when something is *just play*? Why do we assume that if something is playful it cannot cause injury? How do we talk about the difference between playing and harm? What kind of cultural work does play perform?

Cultural anthropologist Victor Turner suggests that play performs a very particular kind of cultural work, compensating for rigidity or unfairness in normative structures in society. Writing in the wake of the semiotic theories of Saussure and Barthes, but before the metaphor of play emerged as a central trope in the post-structuralist theory of Lacan and the deconstructivist theory of Derrida, Turner worked on theorizing the ludic capacity of culture. Even though society tends strongly towards the continual reinforcement of normativity and inertia, this ludic capacity represents the unlimited potential for social forms to be broken, split, shattered, and reconfigured.

Turner is best known for exploring the concept of liminality in play. Liminality designates moments of upheaval during which “the liberation of human capacitates of cognition, affect, volition, creativity, etc.,” emerge from “normative constraints,” such as family, lineage, clan tribe, nation, class, caste, sex, or age. Turner argues that playfulness derives from the struggle between social structure and radical alienation from these norms. His concept of liminality is complicated. It describes a ludic-function of society that is present, at least implicitly, at all times, but which erupts at certain key moments in a heightened form. Revolution can be a liminal phase. So can disease, despair, death, suicide, alienation, witchcraft, vengeful spirits, torture, murder, and war. The list goes on.

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The violence that transpires within liminal spaces doesn’t disturb Turner in the same way it bothers Frye. The possibility of crisis, annihilation, or breakdown that this catalog of catastrophes threatens concerns Turner far less than the alternative: the loss of the freedom to categorically defamiliarize and reimagine social meaning. In the nucleus of Turner’s theory unfolds a preoccupation with the ways that culture uses play to regulate power. For Turner, it is exactly the cataclysmic power to destroy that allows for the ability to create, to renew, and to rethink the tired, worn forms of society. Doubt, by comparison, the doubt that the element of play will keep savagery at bay, seems to be an essential part of what it means to be at play for Frye. “At play,” he writes, “mob emotions are boiled in an open pot, so to speak; in the lynching mob they are in a sealed furnace of what Blake would call moral virtue.”

“At play” designates an important difference between the ebullient revolutionary energy of the “open pot” and the absolute moral righteousness of the “sealed furnace.”

How do we know when we have fallen out of the pot and into the furnace?

Both Frye’s and Turner’s theories of play force us to acknowledge the tenuousness of the barrier between order and injury, more often than we would like and in ways that make us feel uncomfortable. This dissertation is about that sense of discomfort. Refusing to ignore that sense of discomfort represents one way to untangle the paradoxes and to confront the ethical line that separates playing from reality.

My introduction begins with a brief genealogy of play, which situates this dissertation within a specific psychological discourse on playing and childhood. Building from questions raised in this genealogy, I sketch out the ethical stakes of this project,

summarize my main argument and chapters, and conclude with a consideration of some of the dissertation’s key terms.

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“The ability to play,” argues Stuart Brown, founder of the National Institute for Play, “is critical not only to being happy, but also to sustaining social relationships and being a creative, innovative person.”5 As the sentiment in Brown’s statement suggests, the 21st century has witnessed an abundance of scholarly and popular books touting the beneficial and recuperative effects of play. Play, as it appears in these books, includes a dazzling range of activities: dreaming, punning, reading, writing, magic tricks, jokes, dancing, sports, theater, jazz, holidays, carnivals, board games, organized sports, kayaking, and gambling (to list only a few).

Across the fields of biology, psychology, anthropology, and even philosophy, scholars seem to have reached a consensus that play is a pleasurable and imaginative activity. The etymological history of the word play supports this interpretation. The OED traces the word back to the Middle Dutch pleyen meaning a gesture or quick bodily movement as in dancing, clapping, or leaping for joy.6 Samuel Johnson, in his famous English Dictionary, also associates play with pleasure, mirth, and merriment.7 Within the field of anthropology, the past century has witnessed the rise of a tradition focused on

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5 Stuart Brown with Christopher Vaughan, Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul (New York: Penguin, 2009), 6.
defining the formal characteristics of play in human culture.⁸ “Summing up the formal characteristics of play,” writes Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga, “we might call it a free activity outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious’, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means.”⁹ For Huizinga, play is synonymous with cultural progress.

Huizinga saw play as a primordial ingredient of culture. His definition of play as a free activity transpiring within a sacred space has influenced cultural and literary critics for the last century. The etymological history of play opens up the possibility for a complex, interdisciplinary study. While producing a comprehensive historical survey of play is beyond the scope of this dissertation, the brief, but necessary genealogy of play that follows frames the gradual emergence of this tension inherited by psychoanalysis and developmental psychology from philosophy. What interests me are the tensions, ruptures, friction, and danger that appear when psychological and psychoanalytic theories


of play become too involved in attempts to court or control playing. For the purposes of this dissertation, this genealogy of play in the modern era, which highlights the growing emphasis that philosophical and social discourses about play have placed on its role in cultivating moral growth in children, will suffice to sketch out the central question at stake in my project.

In philosophy, scholarship has traced a conceptual history of play to its origins in classical times. Mihai Spariosu, philosopher of play, regards this conceptual history of play as a series of vacillations between rational and irrational poles in philosophy. He argues that play has been a vital concept of philosophy and the arts since antiquity. While play represents the irrational violence of nature, Spariosu contends that it also represents a trope for justice and the rational forms of philosophy itself. In the earliest writings in the Western philosophic tradition, play appears as a trope associated with irrationality, fear, and a sense of human powerlessness against the forces of nature and the will of the gods. For instance, traumatic phenomena like war and natural disaster are framed as the will of gods who play cruel games with human dolls. In this example, the trope of men striving against gods – gods whose games have little sense of human justice – stands for a sense of frailty and vulnerability. By comparison, the play and games of

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men symbolize human strength and cunning in the face of an impermeable divide between the world of human life and the unknowable whims of the gods.

Since the 18th century, moral philosophy has increasingly connected play with notions of imagination and moral self-creation. Often play scholars trace the origins of the philosophical discourse on imaginative play to Locke and Rousseau, who tried to prescribe types of normal and deviant play. Locke emphasizes the innocent and spontaneous nature of children’s play, while Rousseau contends that children’s innate imaginative characteristics would organically develop into appropriate moral identity, if not for the corrupting forces of society. While 18th-century philosophical views praise children’s play, they also advocate for regulating the passions expressed through it. Overindulgence in play was thought to lead to the degradation of childhood innocence into decadence or envy. Friedrich Schiller, the German Romantic poet, philosopher, and playwright, is responsible for making the relationship between play and moral identity explicit in philosophy. “Man plays only when he is in the full sense of the word a man, and he is only wholly Man when he is playing,” declares Schiller (italics original).

Schiller’s writings epitomize and foreshadow 20th-century notions of play as free, imaginative, and recuperative. Schiller postulates the existence of a play drive, whose function it is to unify human feeling with the sensible world. “So,” he writes, “the play impulse … will at the same time make our formal and our material constitution, our perfection and our happiness.”

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12 For one perspective, see Jenny Holt, “‘Normal’ versus ‘Deviant’ Play in Children’s Literature: An Historical Overview,” *The Lion and the Unicorn* 34, no. 4 (2010), 34-56.
14 Schiller, *Letters*, 75.
experiences through poetry evidences the play drive’s power to reconcile particular desires with the universal norms. Schiller identifies the play drive as the philosophical mechanism that unifies mind and body. Play, claims Schiller, drives moral behavior.

By comparison, representations of play in the Romantic period explore a tension between desires to understand play and the dangers of exploiting it. A brief comparison of Wordsworth and Coleridge shows how poetry responds to this tension by dramatizing the benefits and dangers of trying to control play. William Wordsworth uses play as a trope to convey the innate and organic moral sensibility in children. In The Prelude, he contemplates his own childhood memories:

Was it for this
That one, the fairest of all rivers, loved
To blend his murmurs with my nurse’s song …
He was a playmate whom we dearly loved:
Oh, many a time have I, a five years’ child,
A naked boy, in one delightful rill,
A little mill-race severed from his stream,
Made one long bathing of a summer’s day,
Basked in the sun, and plunged, and basked again

Wordsworth articulates here a prelapsarian vision of childhood. His use of apostrophe to address and personify nature creates an intimacy between the world and his infant self. Wordsworth depicts the river in which his five-year old self used to paddle as his “playmate.” Basking, plunging, and basking again create a rhythm in which he effortlessly immerses himself in nature. This ability to commune directly with nature signifies a moral wholesomeness innate in childhood. The personification of the river suggests that nature itself contributed to nurturing his childhood play. Wordsworth’s

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imagery embraces imaginative, spontaneous, and unmediated play, which he associates with moral growth.

Whereas Wordsworth portrays play as a fount of organic imaginative sensibility, Samuel Coleridge confronts the danger in exerting too much intentional, human force over play. In “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” the story’s eponymous protagonist is crossing the Drake Passage towards Antarctica when his ship is threatened by fog and ice. Under threat of these dire straits, Coleridge writes:

At length did cross an Albatross,
Thorough the fog it came;
As if it had been a Christian soul,
We hailed it in God’s name …
And a good south wind sprung up behind;
The Albatross did follow,
And every day, for food or play,
Came to the mariner’s hollol!^{16}

In this passage, the Albatross appears as a symbol of Christ. With the bird’s appearance, the elements of nature lift and the mariner’s ship is given clear passage. Coleridge’s reasons for the Albatross’s presence are “food or play,” which he represents as equally essential to the bird. Play, it seems, nurtures the soul as food feeds the body. By associating play with the ethereal power of the Albatross, Coleridge elevates play to a moral sense. Yet in a capricious assertion of the Mariner’s power over nature, he shoots the Albatross. This expression of power causes a moral crisis. “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” frames a conflict, central to my argument, between theories that try to understand children’s play and theories that attempt to exert power over play.

By the Victorian period the use of imaginative play to promote child development had flowed from elite philosophical and poetic discourses into popular educational and social ones. Creative and social play had become the unit by which to measure the development of age-appropriate social behavior and interpersonal skills. Educators studied child’s play as a pedagogical tool, which offered a practical strategy for regulating children’s intellectual and moral development. Manuals describe how teachers should incorporate play into their lessons to teach trade skills. If these texts depict play as a means for adults to control children, they also portray it as a way to teach children how to self-regulate their whims and emotions. Play and toys were utilized in schools in order to cultivate ideas about social mobility and self-discipline. Yet these uses of play in school were not meant to be a way to constrain children, but rather a way to promote exploration and development of socially valued traits. Nonetheless, this movement normalized assumptions about the uses of play to regulate and control children.

In the modern era, play has sustained its close ties with notions of a moral self, creativity, and imagination, in spite of being increasingly appropriated by scientific discourses as a means to cultivate certain notions of intellectual and social-minded behavior in children. Jenny Holt contends that imaginative play has come to be portrayed as natural and intrinsic to childhood, while conversely, solitary, repetitive, and object-focused forms of play have been labeled as “abnormal.” The crux of Holt’s argument is that the social sciences, and developmental psychology in particular, has labeled certain kinds of play as “abnormal,” while fetishizing other kinds of more socially acceptable

18 Holt, “‘Normal’ versus ‘Deviant’ Play,” 37.
kinds of play. Medical literature often pathologizes what it considers “deviant” forms of play, an example of which might be autistic play, which lacks any clearly recognizable form of human content.19 This literature imposes narrow notions of creative and sociable play onto children. To be considered “functional” (Holt does not quite go so far as to say “healthy”), a child must engage in imaginary social play (as opposed to solitary or parallel play). The key to social play is reciprocity: watching others, deducing their motives and desires, learning that others have a different perspective from oneself, and responding appropriately. In the modern era, play that teaches social skills and trains children how to act in situations that require empathy eclipses other types of playing.

While interdisciplinary efforts have produced a vast archive of knowledge on the cultural history, formal characteristics, and intellectual uses of play, as Brian Sutton-Smith, anthropologist of play and toys, admits, play remains, to this day, a notoriously slippery concept. Sutton-Smith has proposed that the history of toy-play is a particularly vexed site where the rise of developmental psychology has become inextricable from the appropriation of play as a tool to husband the development of children’s social and moral identity. Since World War II, the developmental sciences have moved beyond charting the development of play stages to trying to understand the role of play in development.20 Sutton-Smith attempts to move the needle within anthropological studies, from describing and classifying types of play-activities, to recognizing underlying patterns in how toys are used. His most well known study of toy-play, Toys as Culture, reveals the

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19 Holt, “‘Normal’ versus ‘Deviant’ Play,” 37.
ways that research on toys has centered on controlling play rather than understanding it.\textsuperscript{21}

Critiquing the place of play in the sciences, Sutton-Smith remarks that “Play continues to be the most neglected and has now become the most exploited arena of child life” (italics original).\textsuperscript{22} The move from defining to exploiting play – using play as a technique to cultivate certain kinds of normative behaviors in children – highlights essential questions about the relationship of playing to dominant forms of power and disempowerment, trauma and history, truth and harm, health and resistance, and the individual and the collective.

Without a doubt, the academic scale has tipped towards an understanding of play reified in the sciences. As this bias becomes more normalized, the stakes of why it is important to engage in reading and interpretive practices that resist prescriptive understandings of play become higher. While educators, policymakers, scientists, and doctors turn to language rooted in the sciences of development without an eye cast either backwards or from side to side to take in the long and complex history of play, scientific theories of play are neither the only ones available, nor the most effective at understanding the concept of playing.

Despite assertions of the positive value of playing and play therapy, Bruno Bettelheim, the child psychologist who famously theorized fairytales, laments that the “tragedy” of child psychology is that “its findings are correct and important but do not benefit the child.”\textsuperscript{23} From this vantage point, the triumphal attitudes that sometimes derive from advances in science and research, which claim to demystify and perhaps even

\textsuperscript{21} Brian Sutton-Smith, \textit{Toys as Culture}, (Mattituck: Gardner Press, 1986).
\textsuperscript{22} Sutton-Smith, \textit{Toys as Culture}, 9.
perfect the recuperative effects of play, seem to me misplaced. At times, they border on dangerous. In the paradigm of play as development, the child develops according to the desires set forth by the adult. How well do we understand the implications of this attitude?

As the disciplines, which have risen to dominate discourses about play – philosophy, sociology, anthropology, medicine, and psychology – have become increasingly specialized and estranged from one another, an interdisciplinary effort is required to understand the complex and intimate relationship between playing and harm. My intent in the following chapters is not to define, classify, catalog, ameliorate, moralize, revise, or rank theories of play. To do so would be to recapitulate the injury of attempting to control play, which I am proposing to study. Instead, I want to know what is at the heart of the repeated encounters of playing and harm, which reoccur at moments in which play transgresses (or appears to transgress) boundaries between playing and reality. The focus of my project is not idealistic but ethical.

The stakes of the debate over the ethics of play are even higher in the modern period when the biological, developmental, and psychological sciences increasingly focus on play as a means of controlling children. Children are an especially vulnerable population because of their inability to resist the kinds of adult intentionality that is focused on them when they become objects of scientific study. While my study focuses on instances in which psychological theories appropriate children’s play, the implications of its findings are not limited to children. To the extent that children have been a historically underrepresented demographic within science and philosophy, taking up questions about harm and ethical responsibility also gestures, indirectly, to the
importance of attending to the experiences of other groups whose voices have been marginalized and the risks involved when researchers fail to listen.

In typical cases, the child’s voice, literal or figurative, is of secondary importance to the intentions of the adult who constructs the system for evaluating childhood and the activities of children. Feminist psychoanalytic critic Jacqueline Rose has made cultural scholars aware of the dangers associated with adult desire directed at children. Her study, *The Case of Peter Pan, or, The Impossibility of Children’s Fiction*, acknowledges injurious instances of disturbing adult desire, both in individual instances of abuse, but also in abstract, institutional, and perhaps more insidious forms of adult desire, which appear especially in disciplines that take children as their object of scientific study. “It is essential,” Rose declares, “that the child’s voice be clear and unequivocal in order to lift the adult burden of disbelief.”

“The child’s voice” here evokes both the figurative voice of the child, the voice that speaks through poetry, literature, and manifesto, and the literal voice of the child, the voice that speaks in doctors’ offices, schoolrooms, and courts of law. Her argument suggests that the disembodied or figurative voice of the child subject is subverted and doubted as often as the literal voice of the child is drowned out and disregarded. I’m attracted to the shape of Rose’s critique. Psychoanalysis is often accused of being ahistorical in its investigation of the mind. Yet Rose reminds the wary critic that there are no extra-political or extra-linguistic grounds from which an originary concept of childhood (or I would argue playing for that matter) can come into being.

The problems of voice and desire are more complex when one takes into account that children, infants, and toddlers often cannot speak for themselves. In the wake of this crisis in the “literature of childhood,” a phrase which Rose applies strictly to a genre of texts within the literary canon, but which I think can be also expanded to apply to a broad range of historical, scientific, and occasional writings addressed towards the topic of children, Rose asserts that children’s literature is not actually about children, their wishes, their thoughts, or their desires. Rather, children’s literature sets up a relationship between the child and the adult in which the adult constructs a vision of society according to his own values and desires. “There is,” she writes, “in one sense, no body of literature which rests so openly on an acknowledged difference, a rupture almost, between writer and addressee. Children’s literature sets up the child as an outsider to its own process, and then aims, unashamedly, to take the child in” (italics original). Once the values and desires of the adult have been established (the example that Rose gives is the desire of the author of children’s literature for the child to always remain the child in the novel), the child is invited to inhabit this vision that has been crafted on his behalf, but without his input. Issues of desire and voice are especially important to my first and third chapters, in which I respond, in the first instance, to adult desires to see play as simply recuperative and healing without acknowledging play’s intimate relationship with trauma and mourning; and, in the second instance, to the frightening consequences that result from scientific experiments to use play to control child development.

25 Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan*, 2
What a literary critic can offer to scientists, philosophers, and anthropologists looking to anatomize and index play is a way to rethink the grounds of our actions.\textsuperscript{26} Rethinking, I argue, requires a more radical form of questioning than reform. This dissertation is not arguing for a reform of clinical or therapeutic practices, but rather a rethinking of the grounds of those practices. This kind of rethinking is what literary critics have contributed to the field of trauma studies, another field that frequently analyzes psychological and psychoanalytic texts. The interventions of trauma theorists proffer a good model for this dissertation. Literary critics have contributed profoundly to the study of trauma by resisting the gravitational pull of the sciences and of medicine towards clearly articulated definitions and metrics whose purpose and function is to eradicate ambiguity. Cathy Caruth returns us to the sense that trauma is mysterious.\textsuperscript{27} Other scholars, including Geoffrey Hartman, Shoshana Felmen, and Harold Bloom, have given forceful readings of trauma that resist narrow definitions of PTSD and strive to articulate an ethics for encountering trauma that leaves room for ambiguity and interpretation of the traumatic experience.\textsuperscript{28} These scholars have brought a strongly

\textsuperscript{26} My thinking about the relationship between literature, ethics, and politics is indebted to Thomas Keenan, in particular his introduction to \textit{Fables of Responsibility: Aberrations and Predicaments in Ethics and Politics} (Stanford University Press, 1997), 1-5.


ethical dimension to a science devoted to caring for people, but which is still in the process of resolving issues around critical listening.

Approaching the subject of playing and childhood from an ethical and historical perspective, I argue that theories of play in the 20th century have been indelibly shaped by psychoanalysis. Yet, psychoanalytic texts, especially those that ask searching and troubling questions about the ethics of playing, have been excluded or marginalized in science and philosophy, in favor of the pursuit of questions of efficacy and effective treatments. This dissertation works across the fields of philosophy, psychoanalysis, clinical psychology, and literature, acknowledging all the while that there is no way to cleanly separate theories of playing from techniques and treatments that use play. And neither, I argue, would it be fruitful to do so. Theories and techniques inform one another, which is why my project is invested in understanding the implications of this mutual influence. The 21st century’s fascination with play, in an era that is increasingly drawn to empirically based practices, metrics, and data analysis, bespeaks a kind of collective cultural desire that eludes simple language or simple perception. My dissertation explores how the questions, the concerns, the preoccupations (personal and political) of a core group of psychoanalysts working in the mid-20th century have brought us to where we are today.

The two world wars of the 20th century left an indelible mark on the history of psychoanalysis as well as on the personal lives of the psychoanalysts studying children and play. My chapters focus on psychoanalysts whose lives were, whether willingly or forcibly, deeply bound up with the wars. During World War I Sigmund Freud and his

family suffered painful losses which, nonetheless, helped to expose the place of aggression, trauma, and mourning in Freud’s thinking, elevating these themes to a privileged place in psychoanalytic theory. My first chapter moves beyond Freud’s theory of trauma to understand the origins of the relationship between play and psychoanalysis through Freud’s story of the *fort-da*. The following two chapters center on four mid-century play theorists, each specializing in the study of children’s mental health while pediatric medicine was still a nascent field. D.W. Winnicott, Harry Harlow, Mary Ainsworth, and John Bowlby are linked by their interest in child psychology and by their desire to study the child’s mind as a site through which to respond to social and political problems having to do with war and aggression.

The cross-section of war, childhood, and psychoanalysis has been taken up most recently by historian of science Michal Shapira, who observes that “analysts operated within a historically specific configuration of childhood which they in turn helped to shape.” Shapira’s argument, that psychoanalysts willingly, even enthusiastically accepted increasing responsibility for the mental health of children, adults, and families, asserts “a link between a real ‘war outside’ and an emotional ‘war inside’.” While Shapira does not discuss play or playing in the fascinating history she gives, she does highlight a group of analysts not often taught or discussed in literary circles. Her historical research shows how active these theorists were at disseminating psychoanalytic knowledge to a general audience during the interwar period. I’m interested in the same group of theorists, which included Winnicott, Bowlby, Melanie Klein, and Anna Freud,

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for their turn outwards, both in the sense of the interest they took in theorizing a relationship between the psyche and the external world, but also in their efforts to establish a dialogue between psychoanalytic theories and the cultural turmoil of their times.\textsuperscript{31} Their efforts to link their theoretical preoccupations, with children, play, aggression, injury, and violence, to the world they saw unfurling around them make them uniquely important for my own investigation of the relationship between playing and harm. These thinkers engage closely with the boundary the separates a potential for harm implicit in play and actual violence.

The task that I have set out for myself in this dissertation is to understand how theories of play are bound up in personal histories and collective desires, partly unconscious, which far exceed the manifest content of each theory. How does attending to the history behind theories of play reveal new ways to conceptualize the relationships between power and injury, playing and harm? What portrayals of society does the discourse of playing provide? Like Frye, I believe that playing typically distinguishes psychical injury from actual violence. Unlike Frye, I do not believe that playing creates a barrier that prevents aesthetic or psychical harm from turning into real harm. The line between playing and harm can be transgressed; when it is, real danger becomes a threat. Some of my chapters deal with moments of transgression and what happens when researchers are blind to the effects of their own experiments.

\textsuperscript{31} Anna Freud and Melanie Klein represented two of the leading voices in child psychoanalysis during the interwar period. Their differences led to what became known as the Controversial Discussions, a schism in the British Psycho-analytic Society. Due to space and time considerations, I have focused my chapters on the seminal theories of Winnicott and Bowlby, both of whom had close and complicated relationships with Anna Freud and Klein. Undoubtedly, should I turn this dissertation into a book, it would not be complete without chapters devoted to these women.
I have structured my dissertation as a set of three case studies examining the concept of play in psychoanalytic theories of the 20th century. The first chapter focuses on play, the game of fort-da, and creative writing both in Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and his earlier essay “Creative-Writers and Day-Dreaming” (1908). The second chapter analyzes Winnicott’s seminal study of playing, *Playing and Reality* (1970). The third chapter offers close readings of two experimental procedures engineered by Harlow and Ainsworth in relation to Bowlby’s theory of attachment. Within this body of writers I discern a tendency to repeat in their theories the underlying concerns and anxieties of their era; or, more peculiarly, for their personal lives to unexpectedly (and in Freud’s case, tragically) dramatize the primary preoccupations that dominate their professional lives and works. The friction created by working across these three levels of interpretation reveals a story about the complex workings of power and normativity, harm and restraint, centers of empowerment, margins, protesting voices (human and animal), health, deviance, noncompliance, and persistence.

In Chapter One, I argue that standard interpretations of fort-da, the game with the wooden spool, need to be questioned. Freudian play is not, as play theorists, psychologists, and literary critics have long assumed, simply an object lesson for the recuperative properties of play, which helps children substitute for a feeling of helplessness. I believe this reading overstates the relationship between play and mastery. The more interesting question, I propose, is not how play helps children master traumatic experiences, but instead what Freudian play and trauma have in common. My reading of fort-da supplements scholarship on Freudian play by decoupling play from trauma and drawing attention to the way that psychical injury leads to art, empathy, and playing.
This chapter culminates with a reading of Melville’s “The Line,” from *Moby Dick*, to illustrate the equivocal relationship between art, injury, and play. “The Line” represents a paradox in which psychical injury leads to memory and ritual, to forms of aesthetic play that acknowledge and accept the persistence of suffering in life.

Chapter Two analyzes the importance of aggression and cruelty in child psychological development. Winnicott’s theory of playing as psychical cruelty presents, I contend, a puzzle that needs to be explained. I approach this puzzle through one of Winnicott’s most perplexing cases. While play is commonly thought to be the antithesis of cruelty, the story of String Boy complicates this assumption. This chapter seeks to recover a positive notion of cruelty by exploring the origins and role of aggression in the infant’s psyche. For Winnicott, playing as cruelty represents notions of psychical rigor, clarity, and necessity apart from physical violence. Playing, the ability to be psychically ruthless and destructive, signifies the infant’s ability to discover external reality, to place inner objects in an intermediate psychical space, and to interact with people and objects. My argument situates playing within ethical, historical, and psychoanalytic discourses about play and cruelty, articulating the consequences if a child fails to develop a capacity for cruelty and exploring the meaning of creative living, when the child learns how to play.

Chapter Three examines the dangers that result from scientific attempts to control children’s play or the child’s love for its caretaker. In this chapter, I analyze two scientific fables to understand what they reveal about cultural anxieties prevalent during the interwar period. Harry Harlow’s experiments on infant rhesus monkeys unearth the dangers of asserting too much power over child development. My reading shows how
Harlow, who subjected the monkeys to severe social and parental deprivation in the hopes of finding a method to maximize infant intellectual development, adopted increasingly sophisticated metaphors to reflect his growing understanding of the complex role that love plays in a child’s development of moral identity. By comparison, lending a new historicist perspective on the stakes of their theory, I analyze Ainsworth’s experimental protocol, the Strange Situation, as a microcosm for timely anxieties about power, play, love, and familial relationships. Deeply informed by the historical tensions of the 1920s and 30s, attachment theory, I suggest, develops an understanding of a relationship between child’s play and war. By offering literary readings of Harlow’s, Bowlby’s, and Ainsworth’s lesser-known theories of parent-child bonding, this chapter fills a gap in literary scholarship on psychoanalysis and play.

In my chapters, I make frequent references to children and their caretakers. For simplicity and to avoid ungainly prose such as “s/he”, I will follow the conventions of the psychoanalytic tradition, by occasionally referring to the caretaker as a “mother” and the child as a “he.” This is not to imply that a caretaker is always a mother, or even the baby’s biological mother; nor does it imply that a male child is somehow different, psychologically, from a female child. Because criticism for many generations has become wary of gendered terminology, and not least because recent critics in particular have taken Winnicott, Harlow, and Bowlby to task for the public roles they play in a government effort to reestablish traditional gendered roles in Britain, it seems vital to say a few words about gender at the outset of this project.

Insofar as the historical evidence reveals, scholars have determined that Winnicott, Harlow, Bowlby, and (it almost goes without saying) Freud were invested in
traditional gender roles. Winnicott and Bowlby both gave radio talks in which they explicitly advocated for women to embrace their role as mothers and homemakers. These broadcasts were part of a wider political effort to reintegrate soldiers returning from the war into a society where most of the longstanding traditions revolving around the traditional nuclear family had been disrupted. We should not forget that, while there are times when these analysts refer to real women, real children, real mothers, and real fathers in problematic ways – Bowlby claimed that, although father and nannies could also raise ‘normal’ children, the biological mother best served her child – these are not the claims in which this dissertation is foremost invested. While I will occasionally take up questions of gender explicitly, for the most part I have acquiesced to using the terminology of “mother” to indicate any primary caretaker (regardless of gender or biological relation to the child in custody) and, for the sake of simplicity and not to confuse the baby with the mother, the male pronoun, “he” or “his,” to indicate the baby.

A handful of my key terms also deserve preliminary explanation. At various points I talk about the infant, the child, the adult, and the individual. When I use the term ‘infant’ I am specifically designating a child in the pre-Oedipal and pre-Symbolic stage. ‘Child’ I use more generally to include toddlers and adolescents. “Adult” denotes any individual who has passed adolescence. And ‘individual’ indicates a broad category of both adults and children.

Throughout my dissertation, but particularly in my chapter on Winnicott, I draw distinctions between psychical and bodily forms of injury or aggression. This distinction, between psychical and physical injury, is extremely important, not least because forms of psychical aggression and violence do not necessarily or always result in either a psychical
injury or a physical one. What concern me are the moments in which play does not prevent psychical aggression from transgressing into bodily harm. My close reading of the case of String Boy in Chapter Two takes up this point explicitly, though, of course, distinguishing playing from trauma (a kind of psychical injury) is at stake in Chapter One as are issues of playing and pathological development in my close reading of Harlow’s experiments on rhesus monkeys in Chapter Three.

Parsing the distinction between play (noun), playing (verbal noun), and to play (verb) is much more difficult. At times, I am interested in all three of these grammatical forms of play. In general, when play relates to a psychical process I am talking about playing (verbal noun) or to play (verb), whereas phenomenological instances of play refer most commonly to the noun, play. Whereas many moments throughout my dissertation do not hinge on distinguishing between the noun and verb forms of play, I have made efforts to explicitly draw attention to any instance in which the distinction is paramount.

One of the reasons that the distinction between play and playing is not a fruitful one to worry over is that the thinkers in my dissertation are, themselves, playful. A recent study of play as a philosophical concept defines play as that which is ordinary, banal, popular, trivial, ubiquitous, everyday, mundane, or taken for granted.32 This definition incorporates play into the woof and the warp of the fabric that clothes our daily understanding of human interactions. Similarly, play, whether in the form of word play, stories, or miniature dramas, plays an important role in the literature I address. It is precisely the ambiguity that arises from the play of language, which necessitates interpretation, that makes play a literary rather than a strictly scientific topic.

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32 The Philosophy of Play, 1-2.
That psychoanalytic theories are built on metaphor is not happenstance.33 “The metaphors,” writes Stephen A. Mitchell, a clinical psychologist and psychoanalyst, “that are chosen to illustrate principles of clinical technique often provide the best indication of the underlying assumptions of each analytic model. Freud’s metaphors all have an adversarial quality: war, chess, hunting, wild beasts.”34 Metaphor, as Mitchell portrays them, opens up one avenue for a literary critic to enter into a discourse dominated by clinicians.

Mitchell’s claim, that metaphors exert a pervasive influence on the assumptions at stake in a clinician’s practices, supports the hypothesis developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. In Metaphors We Live By, Lakoff and Johnson remind us that “our [cultural] values are not independent but must form a coherent system with the metaphorical concepts we live by.”35 Metaphors help to illuminate assumptions about the relationship between knowledge and experience. They highlight the central, and often dismissed, role of the bodily experience in shaping the paradigms (temporal, causal, emotional, economic, technological) by which people perceive, inhabit, and understand the world.

Lakoff and Johnson study the role of metaphor in functional language and thought: how it structures how we speak, how we think, and how we act. Human thought processes are, in large part, dependent on metaphoric structures to ensure their

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33 For a definition of metaphor, see M. H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1999), 154-58. Abrams acknowledges that critics have yet to come to a clear consensus on how to define play, but surveys leading perspectives on the subject.
coherency and usefulness. The essence of metaphor, they suggest, involves

“understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (italics original).  

Perhaps one of the most salient insights made by Lakoff and Johnson is their assertion that metaphors do not follow reality but are equally constitutive of new ways of experiencing reality. “The idea that metaphors can create realities goes against most traditional views of metaphor,” they write. Metaphors do not traffic in defining inherent properties in an object. They are responsible for shaping ranges of experience. When new metaphors come into existence, they highlight some aspects of human experience, while downplaying others. In this model, metaphor is not merely a flight of fancy, a poetic flourish. Metaphor establishes the structure and constraints of a clinical technique. It provides the link between the content of theories of play and the broader historical and biographical circumstances, in which I see them taking part.

My dissertation offers a new perspective on the ways that, for analysts working during the interwar and postwar periods, play was not merely a phenomenon to be discussed. Play is more than an object of study. It is also a method of questioning. Play is a metaphor that informs a set of larger practices and assumptions about a special area of mental life. Metaphor, in the way that I am using the term, exceeds simple analogy. As a metaphor, playing brings a set of concrete terms and questions to bear on a set of mental processes so abstract that they elude any language other than the figurative. It is constitutive of a set of assumptions about these mental processes that guide medical practice. Playing operates as the key figure behind some of the most consequential theories of human behavior and development in the modern period. Winnicott in Playing

36 Lakoff and Johnson, Metaphors We Live By, 5.
37 Lakoff and Johnson, Metaphors We Live By, 145.
"Playing and Reality" wrote that “I wish to examine the place, using the word in an abstract sense, where we most of the time are when we are experiencing life.”

For Winnicott, the mental space he describes is the psychical area for play. To explore play is, quite literally, to read the metaphor we live in.

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Redrawing the Line: A New Perspective on Freudian Play

So the graceful repose of the line, as it silently serpentinaes harmless about the oarsmen before being brought into actual play – this is a thing which carries more of true terror than any other aspect of this dangerous affair.

– Ishmael, “The Line,” Moby-Dick

By now, we all know this story well. In a slim but dense paper, Freud describes a game played by his grandson. While spending an extended vacation with the boy and his parents, Freud observed the child, a ‘good boy’ who never fussed when his mother left him despite his touching devotion to her, had, nonetheless, developed the peculiar and troublesome habit of snatching up any small object left within reach and tossing it out of sight, under sofas and chairs and any number of small dark places where extraction of the lost toy became difficult. At a year and a half of age, this child had not displayed any early signs of promising intellectual development. He could speak but few words and communicated primarily through the use of single sounds, which those around him would interpret. When the child tossed away his makeshift toys, he uttered the sound “o-o-o-o,” which the surrounding adults interpreted as the German word “fort,” meaning “gone.” Freud puzzles that his grandson never thought to play any other game with his toys besides this game of “gone,” until, one day he saw the child happen upon a bit of string, which he pirated and tied to a small wooden reel. Thus grasping the loose end of the string, the child tossed the reel over the edge of his cot, uttering his usual “o-o-o-o.” Aided now by the string, the child pulled the reel back to himself, exclaiming with an expression of joy “a-a-a-a,” which Freud construes as the word “da,” or “there.”
The story of *fort-da*, the game with the wooden spool, has become one of the most well-known psychoanalytic fables. Perhaps it has become too familiar. Through repetition and retelling, the meaning of *fort-da* has been paraphrased, eroded, and popularized. For many, the game of *fort-da* has become synonymous with power, mastery, and a cure for trauma. Yet a close reading of Freud’s paper calls into question the preeminence of this interpretation. Given these circumstances, it is worth de-familiarizing this story to recoup a more nuanced understanding of what play represented for Freud.

Since its publication, critics of Freud have debated whether his interest in the game of *fort-da* was historically and personally timely. On a historical level, scholars have situated *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* within the context of World War I, increasing public recognition of the psychological effects of trauma, and Freud’s growing international reputation.¹ Freud’s 1909 visit to Clark University had brought his ideas to America. Since the 1910s, Ernest Jones had been a key player in the mobilization of British psychoanalysis. A. A. Brill’s 1913 translation of the *Interpretation* made Freud’s psychoanalytic writings widely accessible in the English-speaking world. By 1920, psychoanalysis had gained international recognition in both the minds of the medical community and the popular public. Freud published *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in mid-July 1920, shortly after the conclusion of World War I. In it, he takes up questions of trauma, death, and, paradoxically, of play. The treatment of shell-shocked soldiers in

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the wake of World War I carried psychoanalysis further into the limelight. Longtime supporters of psychoanalysis as well as previously skeptical cultural critics and medical professionals turned to Freud’s writings in the hopes that his exploration of the human mind might offer new understandings of human aggression and human suffering.

Moreover, on a personal level, Freud suffered great family loss in the wake of World War I. During the Great War, Freud’s three sons and his son-in-law, Max Halberstadt, saw action. Miraculously, despite harrowing circumstances, they all returned to him. Having assumed that his family had escaped tragedy, Freud was stricken with grief when his daughter Sophie, his “Sunday child,” weakened by months of rationing and pregnant with his third grandchild, was taken severely ill with Spanish influenza complicated by pneumonia, and died suddenly, leaving behind a husband and two children, the eldest being the child Freud describes playing fort-da. Freud claimed to have begun writing Beyond the Pleasure Principle in 1919, before Sophie’s illness and death.² Despite Freud’s protests, critics have continued to read Beyond the Pleasure Principle as an expression of his own grief.

Historical and biographical readings illuminate possible motives behind Freud’s interest in trauma. However, these perspectives need to be supplemented because they shed little light on the way he viewed the relationship between trauma and play. Certain scholars, especially developmental psychologists, play therapists, and trauma theorists, have failed to treat Freudian play in anything more than a prescriptive fashion. A literary close reading of Freudian play reveals that, rather than prescribing play as an emotional tonic to heal trauma, Freud is actually making an analogical argument about how, at play,

the mind grapples with a set of mental processes, which include trauma. Recovering this critical narrative weaves ethical questions relating to injury and empathy into our understanding of Freud’s investment in play.

In this chapter, I examine the concept of Freudian play to clarify ambiguities in scholarly interpretations of the meaning of *fort-da*, to complicate scholarly understandings of Freudian play and its relationship to the concepts of injury, art, and empathy, and to offer an alternative reading to standard interpretations in which play resolves trauma. The first section situates *fort-da* within the context of Freud’s theoretical and ethical concerns about the therapeutic treatment of trauma, taking a corrective step towards interpreting the relationship between Freudian playing and trauma. The second section offers context for my reading of *fort-da* by framing an alternative critical discourse that resists seeing the game as an object lesson in the recuperative effects of play. Section three develops a theory of Freudian play by using Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgement* to frame a close reading of an early essay by Freud wherein he analyzes the psychological significance of play and its relationship to literature and empathy. In the final section, I give my own critical close reading of the story of *fort-da*. This reading represents the equivocal relationship between injury and art at stake in Freudian play.

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Over the course of the past century, the story of “fort-da” has become famous in the fields of play theory, play therapy, and the history of play. Freud has been indirectly credited with offering one of the most intellectually satisfying explanations for the motive and purpose of play in children. Scholars and practitioners have read *fort-da* through the
lens of trauma, interpreting the story of fort-da as an object lesson in the recuperative properties of play. These standard views argue that Freudian play is compensatory, that it is the child’s way of substituting an expression of mastery for an experience of helplessness.

Since the 1930s, play therapy, a technique used in the treatment of mental illness, disability, and emotional and behavioral disorders in children, has grown out of theories of play. As of 2016, the Association for Play Therapy (APT) defines “Play Therapy” as “the systematic use of a theoretical model to establish an interpersonal process wherein trained Play Therapists use the therapeutic power of play to help clients prevent or resolve psychosocial difficulties and achieve optimal growth and development.”\(^3\) While the APT distinguishes between Play Therapy and spontaneous play, the definition presumes both the naturalness and universality of play as an essential part of normative child development. The “systematic” and “therapeutic” approach to play taken in Play Therapy aims to help children resolve “behavioral problems, such as anger management, grief and loss, divorce and abandonment, and crisis and trauma” and “behavioral disorders, such as anxiety, depression, attention deficit hyperactivity (ADHD), autism or pervasive developmental, academic and social developmental, physical and learning disabilities, and conduct disorders.”\(^4\) Though several treatment models have emerged within the broader category of play therapy, the goal of therapy is to offer children the opportunity to refine skills, learn new skills, and to communicate their feelings, thoughts,

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and experiences. During a session, a trained play therapist leads a child through play-based exercises and interprets the child’s play as an index of the child’s inner memories, thoughts, and feelings. Common exercises include play with a sand tray filled with miniature figurines for the child to arrange or act out scenes; puppets used to act out scenarios; reading, writing, telling, and discussing stories; and drawing or doodling.

Play therapy remains controversial, especially for what is considered the lack of empirical evidence justifying its claims to increase positive outcomes for children in therapy. Few well-designed quantitative studies yielding statistically sound results have been undertaken. Rather the evidence in support of its effectiveness is mostly anecdotal or drawn from studies whose small sample size precludes generalizable outcomes. In lieu of large-scale statistical surveys, several meta-analytic reviews, which assess the efficacy of treating children with play therapy, have arisen over the last several decades. Meta-analysis purports to overcome deficiencies in sample size by combining studies and assessing overall effectiveness. While this method does not solve differences, nor

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deficiencies, of methods, these studies synthesize tens, sometimes hundreds of
experiments to draw conclusions. Despite their methodological shortcomings, these
undertakings have, nevertheless, found play therapy to be a statistically viable option.

In part because of the controversial status of play therapy, empirical studies rarely
mention Freud or psychoanalysis explicitly. Yet play therapy has deep ties to
psychoanalytic theory and its earliest practitioners include prominent trained
psychoanalysts including Melanie Klein, D.W. Winnicott, Margaret Lowenfeld, and John
Bowlby.9 Notwithstanding the absence of Freud’s name in these studies, his language
pervades the theory behind play-based interventions in therapy. The rhetoric of mastery,
power, and recuperation suffuses the literature of play therapy. Reddy et. al assert that,
for young children, play is “the natural mode of expression” and that play therapy allows
children to establish a “trusting, therapeutic relationship in which the child, through play,
feels safe to express and explore feelings, deal with stress, problem solve, or master
challenges.”9 Similarly, Sue Bratton et. al echo the claim that “play allows children to
bridge the chasm between their experiences and understanding, thereby providing the
means for insight, learning, problem solving, coping, and mastery.”10 Eric J. Green et. al
declare that “Play therapy affords the child a safe environment to experience the
reenactment [of a traumatic experience] in a reparative way.”11 According to Green and
his team, play therapy allows children to practice “corrective” and “empowering” actions

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8 For an detailed comparison of the analytic methods of two psychoanalysts specializing
in the treatment of children using play therapy, see Madeleine Davis, “Play and
Symbolism in Lowenfeld and Winnicott,” 2, no. 3 (1991), 395-421.
9 Empirically Based Play Interventions for Children, 19.
10 Bratton, “The Efficacy of Play Therapy with Children: A Meta-Analytic Review of
Treatment Outcomes,” 377.
11 Eric Green, J., David A. Crenshaw, and Amie C. Kolos, “Counseling Children with
to confront trauma directly.\textsuperscript{12} For Mary Vicario, power is at the center of play therapy. She says that relational-cultural play therapy is, at its core, “Educating about power.”\textsuperscript{13} By allowing severely abused or neglected children to have the choice in their words and actions that they lacked in their previous environment, play therapy helps them to resolve a traumatic past. Even the prominent trauma scholar and psychiatrist, Robert Jay Lifton, draws a connection between play, trauma, and mastery. In the chapter on survivor experience and traumatic syndrome in The Broken Connection, Lifton argues that many of the symptoms of traumatic syndrome derive from impaired mourning.\textsuperscript{14} The example he cites is children’s play. Children, remarks Lifton, repeat unpleasurable experiences in their play in order to master these traumas.

Like their scientific colleagues, literary critics have adopted the language of mastery to describe the relationship between play and trauma. Unlike play therapists, literary critics have not hesitated to draw an explicit connection between mastery, play, and fort-da. Daniel Dervin claims that fort-da was “aimed at mastering the weaning process.”\textsuperscript{15} For Dervin, the game is about recovery and mastering feelings of loss through play. Using Freud as a lens to read maternal absence in Victorian novels, Carolyn Dever declares that fort-da illustrates a shift from passivity to activity, from

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\textsuperscript{12} Green, “Counseling Children with Preverbal Trauma,” 98.
\textsuperscript{15} Daniel Dervin, “Roland Barthes: The text as Self; the Self as Text,” Psychoanalytic Review 74, no. 2 (1987), 285.
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“victim to master.”¹⁶ The game is, for Dever, a prototype, which shows that the loss of the mother characterizes the conditions for the development of subjectivity in the Victorian novel. In a similar vein of argument, Catherine Bates asserts that the game represents the boy’s mastery of an uncertain world by recreating the experience of his mother leaving, converting a disturbingly passive memory into an experience of active control.¹⁷ Recently, trauma theorist and literary critic Cathy Caruth has placed the game of *fort-da* at the center of her theory of traumatic history. She interprets the game as telling a story about an “attempt to overcome the fact that [the traumatic encounter] was not direct, to master what was never fully grasped in the first place.”¹⁸ Caruth theorizes trauma as an experience so sudden or overwhelming that it bypasses normal modes of perception. Repetition compulsion represents the mind attempting to recapture this “missed” experience in order to incorporate it into narrative memory. Caruth argues that the game of *fort-da* signifies a tension between Freud’s death-drive and what she calls a “life-drive.” While the departure of the mother in the game symbolizes her death, the game itself recreates this traumatic realization in the form of something new, signaling the beginning of a new way of life for the child. While Caruth gives the most complex reading of *fort-da*, there is little evidence that Freud understood play as a “life-drive.” Moreover, Caruth’s reading of *fort-da* relies heavily on the assumption that Freudian play is, at its essence, about mastering trauma.

In spite of numerous interpretations that conflate playing with mastery, I suggest that this relationship has been overstated at the expense of more complex readings of the dynamic between Freudian play and trauma. Freud was perplexed by the difficulty of treating patients with repetition compulsion. “A condition,” Freud declares, “has long been known and described which occurs after severe mechanical concussions, railway disasters and other accidents involving a risk to life; it has been given the name of ‘traumatic neurosis’.”19 Freud refers to the known, but little understood condition of “war neurosis” or “traumatic neurosis.” Traumatic neurosis, he continues, shares similarities with hysteria, hypochondria, and melancholia. The condition results in “enfeeblement” or “disturbance” of the patient’s mental capacities.20

Traumatic neurosis, today known as PTSD, remains controversial. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, or DSM-5, the condition is defined by symptoms which include the repeated, involuntary, and intrusive memories of the traumatic event; distressing dreams of the traumatic event; dissociative episodes wherein the victim feels or reenacts scenes from the traumatic event; psychological distress provoked by symbolic reminders of the traumatic event; avoidance of reminders of the traumatic event; changes in mood or emotional numbness; irritable, reckless, or angry behaviors; and amnesia. The DSM-5 contains a special note for diagnosing PTSD in children: “Note: In children older than 6 years, repetitive play may occur in which themes or aspects of the traumatic event(s) are expressed.”21 Though the

20 Freud, BPP, 10.
function of the DSM-5 is foremost to describe rather than interpret, it calls upon the practitioner to step beyond mere observation and analyze “themes” within a child-patient’s play. The recourse to humanistic language in this passage suggests that play and trauma are deeply and inseparably intertwined in a complex and, I argue, literary relationship.

Up to the First World War, traumatic neurosis had been diagnosed primarily in cases where the patient experienced a gross mechanical accident involving a sudden, unexpected, and overwhelming experience of “fright,” such as a train crash. World War I changed this perception. “The terrible war,” Freud writes, “which has just ended gave rise to a great number of illnesses of this kind, but it at least put an end to the temptation to attribute the cause of the disorder to organic lesions of the nervous system brought about by mechanical force.”

While the psychological casualties of World War I may have dispelled the misconception that traumatic neurosis was a somatic disorder caused by “lesions of the nervous system,” this discovery simultaneously created an urgent dilemma. Freud frets that, “No complete explanation has yet been reached either of war neuroses or of the traumatic neuroses of peace. In the case of the war neuroses, the fact that the same symptoms sometimes came about without the intervention of any gross mechanical force seemed at once enlightening and bewildering.”

In place of traditional somatic and psychoanalytic understandings of traumatic neurosis, Freud struggles to find an explanation for why traumatic dreams force patients to compulsively repeat experiences that cause them great emotional pain. Part of what baffles Freud is trauma’s resistance to the theory of dreams, wish fulfillment, and

unconscious meaning.²⁴ Building on the theory of the psyche that he had pioneered two decades earlier in the Interpretation of Dreams, Freud proposes that the dreams of traumatized patients reveal an injury sustained on a deep level of the psyche. “The study of dreams,” Freud lectures, “may be considered the most trustworthy method of investigating deep mental processes. Now dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright. This astonishes people far too little.”²⁵ Freud directs our attention to a nuance of traumatic dreams: their pattern of bringing the patient back to the scene of fright. In doing so, traumatic dreams prove themselves to be irreducibly literal rather than wishful. Linking the core of trauma neurosis to the hostile invasion of the patient’s dream-state by these frightening and unpleasurable memories, he identifies a need for a psychoanalytic therapy to account for the persistence and tenacity of suffering.²⁶

Paradoxically, Freud proposes to solve this dilemma by juxtaposing the dreams of traumatized patients with the normal activity of child’s play. It is important to note that, in introducing play into Beyond the Pleasure Principle, he is not searching for a cure for trauma. Rather he introduces play as a way to explain the persistence of trauma. The question that interests him is not, as the critical discourse has presumed, how play treats trauma, but rather, what play and trauma have in common.

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²⁴ See Cathy Caruth, introduction to Trauma: Exploration in Memory (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 3-12.
²⁵ Freud, BPP, 11.
“At this point,” Freud writes, “I propose to leave the dark and dismal subject of the traumatic neurosis and pass on to examine the method of working employed by the mental apparatus in one of its earliest normal activities – I mean in children’s play.”

The precision of Freud’s language in this passage should not be lost. Freud’s language makes it clear that he is not interested in the general phenomenon of children’s play, but rather very particularly in the “method of working employed by the mental apparatus in one of its earliest normal activities.” Children’s play is indicative, for Freud, of a mental process. Moreover, Freud’s emphasis on “normal” implies that this mental process is a natural counterpart to the method of working apparent in the pathological symptoms of traumatic neurosis. To this point, Freud explains, “it is to be noted that only in rare instances can we observe the pure effects of the compulsion to repeat, unsupported by other motives. In the case of children’s play we have already laid stress on the other ways in which the emergence of the compulsion may be interpreted; the compulsion to repeat and instinctual satisfaction which is immediately pleasurable seem to converge here into an intimate partnership.” Freud turns to a normal activity, like children’s play, in part because pure instances of repetition compulsion, such as they manifest in trauma, are rare to observe. Given this limitation, he proposes to analyze a normal activity to garner insights into the pathology.

Freud’s argument about fort-da is layered and has led to some ambiguity surrounding the interpretation of Freudian play. Initially Freud suggests that fort-da lends itself to an interpretation of mastery:

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27 Freud, *BPP*, 12. Special thanks to Katja Guenther, Associate Professor of History at Princeton University, who verified the accuracy of Strachey’s translation of this passage from Freud’s original German.

No certain decision can be reached from the analysis of a single case like this. On an unprejudiced view one gets an impression that the child turned his experience into a game from another motive. At the outset he was in a *passive* situation – he was overpowered by the experience; but, by repeating it, unpleasurable through it was, as a game, he took on an *active* part … We are therefore left in doubt as to whether the impulse to work over in the mind some overpowering experience so as to make oneself master of it can find expression as a primary event, and independent of the pleasure principle. For, in the case we have been discussing, the child may, after all, only have been able to repeat his unpleasant experience in play because the repetition carried along with it a yield of pleasure of another sort but none the less a direct one.²⁹

Freud conjectures that the child of *fort-da* played in order to transform an unpleasant situation in which he was a “passive” character into a “game” in which he takes on an “active part”. In doing so, the original, unpleasant situation becomes pleasurable as the child masters his feelings of being “overpowered”. Yet, he continues, “it emerges from this discussion that there is no need to assume the existence of a special imitative instinct in order to provide a motive for play.”³⁰ He laments that this explanation of *fort-da* is entirely consistent with the pleasure principle. Ultimately, Freud concludes that children play for the additional reason that it helps them to master unpleasant experiences by taking an active role in an unpleasurable experience: “In the case of children’s play we seemed to see that children repeat unpleasurable experiences for the *additional reason* that they can master a powerful impression far more thoroughly by being active than they

³⁰ Freud, *BPP*, 17.
could by merely experiencing it passively (italics added).”\textsuperscript{31} The phrase “additional reason” implies that, whatever insights \textit{fort-da} can teach us about the economic motives behind children’s play, they are of secondary importance.

Freud’s bold pairing of trauma and play as complementary activities has surprised scholars far too little. Scholars have preferred to dwell on Freud’s economic reading of play as a treatment for trauma, rather than attending to Freud’s darker claims that play should be viewed as a complimentary activity to the repetitive dreams of trauma patients. Nonetheless, Freud signals the centrality of this reading, which compares playing and trauma, through the essay’s title. The economic approach to aesthetics and play, writes Freud, “are of no use for our purpose, since they presuppose the existence and dominance of the pleasure principle; they give no evidence of the operation of tendencies \textit{beyond} the pleasure principle, that is, of tendencies more primitive than it and independent of it.”\textsuperscript{32} Freud avers that the economic motive behind play is insufficient to account for the persistence of repetition compulsion in traumatic dreams. To accept that play is an assertion of mastery, or revenge, fails to draw a larger connection between play and trauma, to move \textit{“beyond”} the pleasure principle.

In \textit{fort-da}, Freud’s grandson plays a game of \textit{here} and \textit{gone}. Yet, Freud notes, the child plays the game of \textit{gone} much more frequently than he stages the complete drama of exile and return. On one level, this observation hints at the power of absence and its crucial role in engendering play. On a further level, Freud hypothesizes that what play and trauma have in common is a sense of inertia, which he names the \textit{death-drive}. Freud theorizes that all matter began as inert material and that the ultimate wish for organic life

\textsuperscript{31} Freud, \textit{BPP}, 42.  
\textsuperscript{32} Freud, \textit{BPP}, 17.
is to return to this previous state of absent consciousness, or death. The death-drive is, perhaps, a statement of ultimate absence, the absence of life. Scholars have been quick to jump to the conclusion that play embodies a life-drive in opposition to the death-drive.\textsuperscript{33} Yet this conclusion runs counter to what Freud has to say. Indeed, his comparison of play and trauma is intended to emphasize that both of these activities exemplify the same pattern of repetition compulsion motivated by the death-drive.

Freud’s argument implies that to move beyond the pleasure principle would be to theorize what play and trauma have in common. His suggestion, that it is valuable to study child’s play in order to begin to craft a psychoanalytic theory that will explain the phenomenon of repetition compulsion in both play and trauma, fascinates me. Understanding the commonality that connects play and trauma will shed new light on our understanding of Freudian play.

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My close reading of Beyond the Pleasure Principle reveals that the standard interpretation of fort-da hinges on a basic misreading of the game. Attending to Freud’s language provides evidence that, in fact, fort-da does not offer a cure for trauma. Rather, the game describes a process in the mind that sometimes results in trauma and sometimes in other phenomena, including play. To restate, psychic injury may generate either trauma or play. When it results in trauma, it leads to a pathology, which is not easily understood or cured. The normal activity of play originates according to the same mental process as trauma. Yet play, as a psychic phenomenon, exists separately from trauma.

\textsuperscript{33} Most recently, see Cathy Caruth, “Parting Words: Trauma, Silence, and Survival,” Literature in the Ashes of History (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 3-17.
In order to formulate a theory of Freudian play, it is necessary to decouple play from theories of trauma. A handful of critics have resisted standard interpretations of *fort-da*, offering alternative readings of the game with the wooden spool that form the basis for this critical move. These voices are important because they highlight tensions that define the discourse of Freudian play. These theories do not, however, offer what can be considered a true theory of Freudian play. In turning to *fort-da*, these theorists repurpose the story for their own theories about subjectivity or aesthetics. By contrast, my argument grapples with understanding the internal complexities and paradoxes of Freudian play.

Famously, Jacques Lacan interpreted *fort-da* and its connection to trauma during his eleventh seminar, delivered at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris on February 12, 1964. The seminar focused on the *tuché*, or the “encounter with the real” and the *automaton*, the experience of every-day life as it is governed by the pleasure principle. Lacan argues that the *tuché* first presented itself in the history of psychoanalysis in the form of trauma. Trauma, he contends, is the result of facing something that the mind is not able to assimilate. The *tuché* creates a psychic rupture between perception and consciousness, disrupting the *automaton* and leading to repetition, or “ironic play.”

By dismissing notions of *fort-da* as an object lesson used by Freud to illustrate the recuperative effects of play, Lacan draws a distinction between the psychic meaning of the game and the child’s phenomenological experience of separation from his mother. Lacan does not quite conceal a touch of haughtiness in his declaration that “When Freud

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grasps the repetition involved in the game played by his grandson, in the reiterated *fort-da*, he may indeed point out that the child makes up for the effect of his mother’s disappearance by making himself the agent of it – but, this phenomenon is of secondary importance.  

Offering general remarks on the game of *fort-da*, without moving to cite specific textual evidence, Lacan nonetheless summarily dismisses claims that the significance of *fort-da* derives primarily from its observation that, in making himself the agent of his mother’s disappearance, the child of the story masters and recuperates from an unpleasurable event. “This reel,” Lacan attests, “is not the mother reduced to a little ball by some magical game worthy of the Jivaros.” Lacan argues that *fort-da* is symbolic rather than descriptive, revelatory rather than reductive.

According to Lacan, the game of *fort-da* reveals a drama of deep mental processes. He attests that the game symbolizes a formative psychic encounter for the child:

The ever-open gap introduced by the absence indicated remains the cause of a centrifugal tracing in which that which falls is not the other *qua* face in which the subject is projected, but that cotton-reel linked to itself by the thread that it holds – in which is expressed that which, of itself, detaches itself in this trial, self-mutilation on the basis of which the order of significance will be put in perspective. For the game of the cotton-reel is the subject’s answer to what the mother’s absence has created on the frontier of his domain – the edge of his cradle – namely, a *ditch*, around which one can only play at jumping.

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Introducing the game as a narrative about the “ever-open gap,” Lacan depicts the game of *fort-da* as a retelling of the *tuché*, the traumatic encounter. Lacan restates that the cotton reel in the game is not a symbol of a second person, the mother, but of the “self-mutilation” of the ego. If Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage describes the infant’s first experience of discovering himself, of self-consciously perceiving the existence of his own subjectivity through the alienated image of his reflection in the mirror, we might think of the game of *fort-da* as the second stage of the infant’s psychic development. In the game, the infant discovers the existence of other people in the photo-negative created by the absence of his mother. Recognizing that the mother is not a part of himself, the infant who tosses the cotton reel learns that his mind is separated from the minds of other by the “*ditch*”. He can only attempt to cross this “*ditch*” by playing, by psychically jumping across the space that separates himself from others.

Lacan’s true interest in *fort-da* diverges from a theory of Freudian play. Lacan is interested in articulating a stage of psychic development during which an infant discovers the existence of symbol and he seems strangely disinterested in interrogating the implications of his assertions about *fort-da* as an originary psychic injury which cannot be undone. The wooden spool, he states matter of factly, represents “a small part of the subject that detaches itself from him while still remaining his, still retained.” In the story of *fort-da*, it is the mother’s absence, literally the empty space in which she previously existed, that creates the gap in the infant’s perception that is the *tuché*. The cotton reel, far from denoting the “mother reduced to a little ball” symbolizes a piece of the infant’s consciousness, broken off by this encounter with the gap. The string that

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attaches the reel to the little boy embodies the infant’s new relationship to a psyche that is no longer whole, but which has been splintered. In Lacan’s theory it is the tuché that necessitates psychic play, not as a resolution to the trauma, but as the mind’s barest way of holding itself together, as if by a string.

By contrast, Freud’s theory of play seems inseparable from the problem of how the mind grapples with a psychic injury that never fully heals. Steven Connor reads this “stringing-together” of the psyche through the figures of cuts, scratches, scabs, and scars. He argues that the desire of children to pick at their scabs, to reveal the underlying wound and watch as the skin magically repairs itself speaks to a psychological desire to witness renewal, to be reassured that the mind, like the body, possesses the resources to heal oneself. “The scab,” he writes “thus offers the pleasure of an averted threat; by reopening the wound, the child may play with and master the trivial but symbolic (symbolic because it is trivial) risk to its psychic wholeness. Picking scabs is therefore in part to be understood as a variant of the fort-da procedure of playing with danger, absence or negativity in order to bind it into a kind of syntax. This gathering together of the self is achieved, not in the face of potential loss or trauma, but through it.”

To be blunt, I disagree with most of Connor’s argument. First, he falls into the trap of forcing recuperative meaning out of fort-da. In the second place, to see the appearance and disappearance of the scab as simply equivalent to the “here” and “gone” of fort-da is too facile. Pick a scab one too many times and it festers. The scab fails to be the sign of miraculous healing and psychic renewal that Connor makes it out to be. Finally, Connor conflates several kinds of injuries – the scar, the scab, the cut, the piercing, which I argue

have very different connotations. Yet in spite of its shortcomings, Connor’s reading of *fort-da* intrigues me. It helps direct attention to a point of divergence, where the quality of play marks a difference between the static repetition of trauma and a more complex understanding of repetition that occurs in mourning. In mourning, play involves the mind’s creative response to psychical injury. Building on this reading, I contend that the figure of the scar differs from and complicates the figure of the scab. Psychic scarring represents an intriguing metaphor for the way that *fort-da* depicts psychical injury as inseparable from play and creativity.

Scarring raises the question of whether injury is always, troublingly, at stake in the production of playing, writing, and art. The figure of the scar represents an injury that has only partially resolved. While it may appear to be healed, the scar preserves a memory of injury. The scar leaves a trace, quite literally, of the original wound, which must be confronted and interpreted. Injury is a prerequisite for a scar. A scar tells this story. The scar represents the memory of a trauma and the beginning of aesthetic representation and writing.

Play is a pervasive trope for aesthetic creation in Jacques Derrida’s thinking. He theorizes the philosophical conditions for aesthetic representation as an expression of play. In Derrida’s theory of semiotics, poetic meaning results from the play of presence and absence. “Play is the disruption of presence. The presence of an element is always a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and the movement of a chain. Play is always about the play of absence and presence, but if it is to be thought radically, play must be conceived as presence or absence on the basis of the
possibility of play and not the other way around,” he expounds.40 Derrida rejects the
notion of absolute meaning in art, that language derives its meaning from a true and
reliable center against which meaning can be finitely measured. He replaces the notion
of total meaning with one of absence; of a rupture or breach. The tension between
absence and presence, the impossibility of synthesizing this binary pair, opens up the
possibility for memory and for writing by creating a space for interpretation, ambiguity,
and playfulness. Play, for Derrida, represents parsing the infinite substitutions and
supplements which arise from the process of compensating for a disruption in absolute
meaning. Meaning results from the play, which happens in and around a rupture.

While play opens up the possibility for art and writing, it also creates the problem
of the scar. Scarring provides a way of questioning the relationship between play and
injury fort-da depicts. Reading Freud, Derrida contends that as the science of
psychoanalysis progressed, it became what he calls “a problematic of breaching.” For
writing to take place there must first be a decentering, a disruption, or a rupture which
opens up the possibility for memory and writing when the breach, or injury, transforms
into a signifier. And according to Derrida, “there is no breaching without a beginning of
pain.”41 In suggesting that writing is based on a rupture, Derrida’s theory is consistent
with Lacan and Freud who likewise base their remarks about play on the assumption of a
traumatic encounter that leaves a violent trace.

Writing and Difference, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press,
1978), 292.
41 Jacques Derrida, “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” Writing and Difference, trans. Alan
Lacan, Connor, and Derrida help me to articulate an alternative discourse to the one that views Freudian play as an expression of mastery. Thinking about play through the metaphor of scarring de-familiarizes the concept. This technique reveals an equivocal relationship between play and injury. Art does not heal or resolve trauma, but rather it helps to create something new while preserving an injury or breech. In examining this dynamic, I discern a complex relationship between play, injury, and art. Situating my reading of fort-da in this metaphor sets up a larger argument about Freudian play and literature.

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Play, far from resolving trauma, seems inseparable from psychic injury. Paradoxically, the tension between play and injury also opens up the possibility for art and empathy. In the previous section, I began to develop a theory of Freudian play as a mental process that begins in injury, but ends in aesthetic representation. Turning back to an early paper by Freud, I argue that Freudian play belongs to a suite of psychic activities, which includes dreams, daydreams, and poetry. Play, art, and poetry hold special significance to Freud because in them he discerns evidence of empathy and an ability to relate to others.

Freud’s most explicit comments on playing and poetry occur in an early and often underestimated essay. “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming,” published as a paper in 1908, was originally delivered as a lecture to a crowd of just under one hundred intellectuals in 1907. Ethel Spector argues that, although the paper ultimately focuses more on fantasy than on creative writers, it is still “Freud’s most straightforward
exploration of the creative process.”⁴² Because this is an early paper, Freud’s structural theory is still nascent. Nonetheless, in it Freud makes rich and bold claims about the psychological and aesthetic significance of play.

Evidence from this paper shows that as early as 1907 Freud had begun to draw connections between play and art. “Language,” Freud asserts, “has preserved this relationship between children’s play and poetic creation. It gives [in German] the name of ‘Spiel’ [‘play’] to those forms of imaginative writing which require to be linked to tangible objects and which are capable of representation. It speaks of a ‘Lustspiel’ or ‘Trauerspiel’ [‘comedy’ or ‘tragedy’: literally, ‘pleasure play’ or ‘mourning play’] and describes those who carry out the representation as ‘Schauspieler’ [‘players’: literally ‘show-players’].”⁴³ The German language, Freud contends, links the concept of imagination with dramatic literature through synecdochic pun. The word for comedic drama is formed from the combination of the German words for pleasure and child’s play, while the word for tragic drama results from a combination of the words for mourning and play. The punning quality of Freud’s analysis foregrounds his point that literature is not merely like play; it is play.

Drawing on Immanuel Kant’s theory of the free play of imagination to bridge a gap between Freud’s early theory of play in “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming” and his writings on play and trauma in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, I contend that a theory of Freudian play occasions a larger consideration of the relationship between injury and

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⁴² Ethel Spector-Person, introduction to On Freud’s ‘Creative Writers and Day-dreaming,’ (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), ix.
art. In *The Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant analyzes the universality of two psychological experiences, the encounter with the sublime and the free play of the imagination.

As readers of Kant know full well, the third *Critique* is divided into the “Analytic of the Beautiful” and the “Analytic of the Sublime.” This treatise functions rather like a geometric proof. Discoveries that Kant tests in the “Analytic of the Sublime” function as building blocks for his theory of the free play of the imagination. Kant asserts that the sublime is not the inverse of the Beautiful. Rather we might say that the claims made in the “Analytic of the Beautiful” are contingent on our understanding of the sublime as a universal subjective experience. Whereas the Beautiful proposes the capacity to feel in relation to particular objects, the sublime discovers the capacity for feeling itself. The Beautiful is a science of forms, shapes, and apprehension. The sublime, by contrast, is a mechanism that does violence to the imagination. It is a visceral and overwhelming experience of formlessness, infinity, and totality. It is the sensation that the imagination experiences when it confronts a situation which strains the limits of thought.⁴⁴

One way to think about the Kantian sublime is through the metaphor of the scar. Kant’s deduction of the capacity for aesthetic judgment is, I argue, premised on the necessity of a psychic injury. The Kantian encounter with the sublime produces a wound. This wound is not yet a signifier, but it is the necessary prerequisite for a scar to form. Kant frames the experience of the sublime as an injury, but not one that results in a pathology, or trauma. Rather, the sublime encounter forces the imagination to grow and expand. The sublime is, in a sense, an analogy for thinking itself. When an individual

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confronts the sublime, what is revealed cannot be misperceived as a quality belonging to infinity, but rather must be acknowledged as the mind experiencing the limits of its own subjectivity. The significance of this model is that it creates the theoretical groundwork to conjecture that psychic injury can result in mental processes other than trauma.

Having established the psychological capacity for self-awareness, Kant claims that the “Analytic of the Beautiful” demonstrates an individual’s power to recognize the thoughts of others as alien to one’s own, but still empathize with them. “This state of a free play,” reasons Kant, “of the faculties of cognition with a representation through which an object is given must be able to be universally communicated, because cognition, as a determination of the object with which given representation (in whatever subject it may be) should agree, is the only kind of representation that is valid for everyone.” Kant asserts that the state of free play indicates the universal communicability of an object. In other words, multiple people can share in an experience of an object even though they are psychologically distinct subjects. In the state of free play, Kant discovers the capacity of human beings to think across an epistemological gap. The free play of the imagination, which grants this power of aesthetic judgment, is, Kant maintains, “the only kind of representation that is valid for everyone.”

Although subjects in Kant’s universe do not relate directly to the feelings of others, empathy is mediated through beautiful objects. Jennifer McMahon, professor of philosophy, contends that Kant’s theory of free play is important because in it he proves that it is possible to relate to one another, even in a psychological world based on

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individual, subjective judgments. Kant argues that when a subject confronts an object, he experiences pleasure or displeasure. Yet we understand that in this transaction, the subject’s judgment of the object informs us about the subject’s feelings, but not at all about a quality inherent in the object. Feelings, Kant argues, belong to subjects, while qualities belong to objects. Kant places free play, the capacity to imaginatively construe the feelings of others, in a privileged position. In doing so, he casts imagination as the key to unlocking a capacity for empathy.

Kant’s argument in the third Critique foreshadows Freud’s argument in “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming” by offering more of a psychology of free play than a philosophy of it. The power of judgment is the faculty of the mind that assures us of our ability to perceive these objects of the world around us. It is a proof of the possibility of shared experiences, even if Kant does not go so far as to assert that the universality of aesthetic feeling is real or normal. Aesthetics are a science of feelings rather than of logic and reason. They prove a concept of the free play of imagination or, in other words, that subjects are able to transcend the limitations of individual judgment to collectively share the feeling of an object’s qualities. Aesthetic feeling, or free play reconciles the distance between individuals, creating the possibility for shared cultural, aesthetic, or empathetic experiences.

In “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming,” Freud articulates a Kantian sentiment when describing his interest in anatomizing the mind of the creative writer. “If we could at least discover in ourselves or in people like ourselves an activity which was in some way akin to creative writing!” he exclaims: “An examination of it would then give us a

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hope of obtaining the beginnings of an explanation of the creative work of writers …

After all, creative writers themselves like to lessen the distance between their kind and the common run of humanity; they so often assure us that every man is a poet at heart and that the last poet will not perish till the last man does.” While Kant’s treatise examines the epistemological grounds for presuming a capacity for empathy, Freud’s purports to discover a psychological explanation for empathy. In these remarks, Freud frames this paper as a case study aimed at discovering how creative writers, through their craft, overcome psychic alienation and “lessen the distance between their kind and the common run of humanity.”

Tracing creativity to its earliest origins in childhood, Freud establishes a connection between the creative writer and the child at play. Launching his investigation from the starting point of creativity in childhood, he writes:

Should we not look for the first traces of imaginative activity as early as in childhood? The child’s best-loved and most intense occupation is with his play or games. Might we not say that every child at play behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or, rather re-arranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him? It would be wrong to think he does not take that world seriously, on the contrary, he takes his play very seriously and he expends large amounts of emotion in it. The opposite of play is not what is serious but what is real.48

Freud argues that play expresses imagination in childhood. The child at play demonstrates agency in imaginatively re-arranging the external world to coincide with

47 Freud, CWD, 143.
48 Freud, CWD, 143-44.
inner desires. Furthermore, the child invests emotionally in his play. The opposite of
play, argues Freud, is not the serious, but the real (a binary that has since given rise to the
title for Winnicott’s famous collection of essays on playing). Unlike Winnicott, Freud
does not theorize the development of a capacity for play in the infant psyche. Rather, he presumes the capacity for play and focuses instead on understanding the psychological pattern exemplified in play. Play is not, for Freud, a phenomenological or motor activity. Rather play represents a psychological activity. It is symptomatic of a psychic state, the contours of which can be discerned in multiple activities.

Having established a connection between playing and creativity, Freud extends the analogy between the creativity evidenced by child’s play and the imagination of the creative writer. Freud insists, “The creative writer does the same as the child at play. He creates a world of phantasy which he takes very seriously – that is, which he invests with large amounts of emotion – while separating it sharply from reality.” Creative writing, like play, requires a large investment of emotional and psychological energy, but one that does not confuse or blur the lines between what constitutes reality and what is part of the imagined- or play- world. The creative writer tells a story, which illustrates a relationship between a person’s inner world and external reality. In fiction, the creative writer is able to, like the child at play, re-arrange reality into an alterative that satisfies an inner logic and desires.

49 Notably, Freud assumes that the child at play already possesses a certain degree of psychological structure, or in other words, has developed to the point of having subjecthood. Klein, Lacan, and Winnicott have argued that play can be detected much earlier in the child’s psychic development and indeed, that play itself plays a formative role in the child’s development of subjectivity.
50 Freud, CWD, 144.
Freud argues that play, poetry, and dreams are, at their essence, cut from the same cloth. In childhood, children use concrete objects to facilitate the re-arranging of the world to fit with their phantasies, but as adults they learn to feel ashamed of their games and begin to hide them. But they do not give up play. Rather play becomes dreams and adults forgo the use of props to act out their daydreams, except in the case of stage-actors. In this schema, the primary difference between day-dreams and night-dreams is that the latter are based on repression material.

The novelist is a special kind of dreamer, what Freud calls a “dreamer in broad daylight.”\(^{51}\) By describing the novelist as a day-dreamer, Freud appears to accuse the creative writer of mental illness. Freud implies that the creative writer’s stories represent a compulsion to share inner wishes and fantasies with an audience, much in the same way that neurotics are compelled to speak to therapists. Such a reading would be consistent with Freud’s argument about play and repetition compulsion in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.\(^{52}\) But the day-dreams of novelists are different and special. The novelist creates day-dreams in which others can partake. These stories share more in common with games in which children include their peers than with the idiosyncratic and abstruse phantasies of analytic patients.

The consonance between the child at play and the creative writer is so strong that Freud portrays the novelistic protagonist as a variant of the individual’s Ego. Analyzing the reader’s ability to relate to the protagonist of a psychological novel, Freud writes that “It seems to me, however, that through this revealing characteristic of invulnerability we can immediately recognize His Majesty the Ego, the hero alike of every day-dream and

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\(^{51}\) Freud, *CWD*, 149.

\(^{52}\) See Freud, *BPP*, 18-25.
of every story.”\(^{53}\) Freud suggests that in reading about the trials of the novel’s protagonist, we begin to feel secure in our relationship to his thinking. When the protagonist acts, we experience his triumphs as though we had lived his experiences. We psychically relate to the protagonist and by extension, with the author’s desires, wishes, and day-dreams.

Literature, myths, poetry, and novels, capture a technique for creating empathy. “How the writer accomplishes this is his innermost secret,” Freud declares: “the essential \textit{ars poetica} in the technique of overcoming the feeling of repulsion in us which is undoubtedly connected with the barriers that rise between each single ego and the others.”\(^{54}\) The \textit{ars poetica} represents a technique to overcome the “feeling of repulsion” that stems from “barriers that arise between each single ego and others.” Freud is clear in this passage that unmediated empathy is not possible because his mind creates barriers that prevent people from relating directly to one another. But literature is a tonic that eases these barriers. Literature, like play, is a process that affects the method of working of the mind. The result: literature, the play of language, generates a capacity to relate to the minds and feelings of others.

“Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming” contains the kernel of the argument that literature playfully mediates the psychological process of empathy. “The study,” Freud muses, “of constructions of folk-psychology such as these is far from being complete, but it is extremely probable that myths, for instance, are distorted vestiges of the wishful phantasies of whole nations, the \textit{secular dreams} of youthful humanity.”\(^{55}\) Freud

\(^{53}\) Freud, \textit{CWD}, 150.  
\(^{54}\) Freud, \textit{CWD}, 153.  
\(^{55}\) Freud, \textit{CWD}, 152.
tentatively claims that literature embodies the “secular dreams” not of an individual, but of an entire culture, a “youthful humanity,” asserting a psychological capacity for men to empathize through play. This section develops a theory of Freudian play by analyzing the relationship between injury, art, and empathy. Using Kant to frame my reading of Freud, I argue that his theory of the free play of imagination helps to bridge a gap between Freud’s two main statements on play. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud contends that play is a mental process that shares symptoms of trauma, primarily repetition compulsion. Kant’s examination of the sublime gives evidence to suggest that not all psychic injuries end in trauma or mental illness. For Kant, the free play of the imagination is a mental process that starts with an overwhelming psychological experience, but ends in an ability to make aesthetic judgements. Comparatively, Freud, in “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming,” analyzes the psychic significance of play and its relationship to literature and empathy. Freud’s case study examines the power of literature, myth, and poetry to facilitate empathetic relationships between readers and authors. What begins in childhood as a capacity to relate to the desires and wishes of other playmates through shared play with toys becomes in adulthood an ability to empathize with the day-dreams of creative writers, poets, and novelists through their stories. Literature is the grown-up version of child’s play. For Freud, to enjoy a good book is to play. This enjoyment of literature, poetry, drama, and novels speaks to an ability to relate to others, or to empathize with them.

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By now, we all know this story well. A little boy tosses away his toys shouting “fort!” and “da!” His grandfather, a doctor on holiday visiting with his daughter and her
family, indulges his grandson in the game, while being equally perplexed by it. The doctor watching the child, does not just see a little boy coping with a bout of separation anxiety. Embodied in the child’s game, the doctor discerns a perfect analogy for another problem that has been troubling him: the problem of repetition compulsion in traumatized patients. The child’s play gives the doctor a clue that helps him understand the repetitive behaviors of patients suffering from traumatic neurosis.

Standard interpretations of *fort-da* have emphasized the recuperative properties of play, especially the perception that play helps victims of trauma master feelings of powerlessness. In this chapter I have argued against this reading, showing how it overstates the relationship between play and mastery while simultaneously omitting a more complex reading of Freudian play and its relationship to art, literature, and empathy. A more sensitive close reading of Freud’s writings on play reveals that play and trauma share a connection to psychic injury, which manifests itself through repetition compulsion in play and in the dreams of victims of trauma. What the concept of play as mastery fails to represent is that trauma and play are two distinct psychic processes, one of which culminates in illness, while the other opens up the possibility for creativity, imagination, and empathy. Up to this point, we have read *fort-da* as a theoretical text. The reading I’m suggesting snaps into focus if we step back and situate *fort-da* within a larger literary context. By turning to Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, we discover an example of the *fort-da* paradigm *avant la lettre*. This literary example offers insight into

Representing the equivocal relationship between injury and art, I use Melville to offer critical insight into the story of fort-da. I suggest that in his chapter, “The Line” from Moby Dick, Melville’s description of the “magical, sometimes horrible whale-line” illustrates a paradox at the heart of Freudian play and the story of fort-da.\footnote{Herman Melville, “The Line,” Moby Dick (New York: W.W. Norton and Company: 1967), 238.} On the one hand, Melville uses the motifs of rituals, geometric patterns, and repetitions to portray the rope as a symbolic object that exerts an aesthetic power over the sailors. They tar, store, and treat the rope with reverence that conveys their respect for its power. On the other hand, the rope itself is alive and dangerous. At play during a whale chase, it creates the conditions for mastery of nature, but also for death and dismemberment.

Melville crafts a mythology around the line, portraying it as both a source of power, but also of danger. At first, the line seems to represent strength, power, and a sense of mastery over nature. Describing the line, the novel’s narrator explains that, “The whale line is only two thirds of an inch in thickness. At first sight, you would not think it so strong as it really is. By experiment its one and fifty yarns will each suspend a weight of one hundred and twenty pounds; so that the whole rope will bear a strain nearly equal
to three tons.”\textsuperscript{58} Despite its slender and delicate appearance, the line contains surprising strength. Once harpooned, a whale will dive or flee in pain or panic. The line, attached to the end of the harpoon, must act as a leash of sorts, allowing the whale to expend its awful strength, while allowing the hunters to control and restrain its freedom.

Enumerating the statistical strength of the line, the narrator offers evidence of its hidden power. The line’s strength is essential to the sailors’ ability to overpower and assert their mastery over the whales that are their prey. The narrator’s description of the line portrays it as a symbol of strength and power.

Melville portrays the line’s power over life and death as seductive. Although traditionally, the whale-line was made of hemp, over the course of time, the narrator explains, American Manilla rope came to replaced hemp rope, “for, though not so durable as hemp, it is stronger, and far more soft and elastic; and I will add (since there is an aesthetics in all things), is much more handsome and becoming to the boat than hemp. Hemp is a dusky, dark fellow, a sort of Indian; but Manilla is as a golden-haired Circassian to behold.”\textsuperscript{59} By personifying the hemp line as “a dusky, dark fellow, a sort of Indian” Melville draws on contemporary stereotypes of indigenous persons, insinuating that the traditional line holds a raw, savage, and unmediated power over nature.

Meanwhile, by associating the fair Manilla line with “a golden-haired Circassian,” Melville both eroticizes and elevates it. He implies that the rope extrudes a tantalizing, mythological power, like Circassians, women of legendary, classical beauty. By depicting the line as figures who are marginalized by race or gender, Melville implies that both the hemp and Manilla lines are still within the control of the sailors.

\textsuperscript{58} Melville, “The Line,” 238.
\textsuperscript{59} Melville, “The Line,” 238.
Yet the line retains a deeply ambivalent symbolism, posing as much of a threat to the sailors as enabling them to overpower and kill the whales. The narrator notes that whalers prefer line which has been “slightly vaporized with tar, not impregnated with it,” ensuring pliability rather than stiffness. Yet the narrator quickly concedes that “tar in general by no means adds to the rope’s durability or strength, however much it may give it compactness and gloss.”60 Tar makes the rope compact and glossy, imbuing it with an illusion of impenetrability, but also an appearance of tameness and tractability. In truth, the line is far from benign. The narrator describes how a good sailor will spend an entire day carefully, reverently, almost slavishly laboring to store the line in “concentric spiralizations” around the “heart,” or a small vertical axel at the center of the rope.61 This ritualistic handling of the rope is both practical, but also necessary. “As,” the narrator notes, “the least tangle or kink in the coiling would, in running out, infallibly take somebody’s arm, leg, or entire body off, the utmost precaution is used in stowing the line in its tub.”62 Despite appearances, the line presents a source of danger to the sailors. It is an equivocal object, which can be bent temporarily to the will of the sailors, but retains its lethal power to kill hunted or hunter.

Melville’s rendering of the line represents a flirtation between the illusion of mastery and an underlying sense of powerlessness. Daniel Hoffman-Schwartz, Barbara Natalie Nagel, and Lauren Shizuko Stone edit a collection of essays that theorize the

60 Melville, “The Line,” 238.
psychoanalytic and aesthetic stakes of flirtation. The critics in this collection suggest that flirtation is both a theory and a practice. Flirtation transpires as an intersection of play and power. Flirtation, the critics argue, is an analogy for aesthetic representation, while at the same time, producing doubt, ambiguity, and uncertainty. The ritualized treatment of the line mediates this paradox. Flirtation and ritual have a counterpart in literature in the form of style.

Style, Melville’s but also Freud’s, marks a key distinction between static repetition and play, echoing the difference between static repetition in trama and creative repetition in mourning. Melville’s description of the line transgresses boundaries between theory and poetry, injury and art, play and power that produces fascination and uncertainty. Illustrating the play of the line, the narrator remarks:

Thus the whale-line folds the whole boat in its complicated coils, twisting and writhing around it in almost every direction. All the oarsmen are involved in its perilous contortions; so that to the timid eye of the landsman, they seem as Indian jugglers, with the deadliest snakes sportively festooning their limbs. Not can any son of mortal woman, for the first time, seat himself amid those hempen intricacies, and while straining his utmost at the oar, bethink him that at any unknown instant the harpoon may be darted, and all these horrible contortions be put in play like ringed lightings; he cannot be thus circumstanced without a shudder that makes the very marrow in his bones to quiver in him like a shaken jelly. Yet habit – strange thing! What cannot habit accomplish? – Gayer sallies,

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more merry mirth, better jokes, and brighter repartees, you never heard over your mahogany, than you will hear over the half-inch white cedar of the whale-boat, when thus hung in hangman’s nooses; and, like the six burghers of Calais before King Edward, the six men composing the crew pull into the jaws of death, with a halter around every neck, as you may say.64

The line “folds” the boat within its intricate loops, connecting the sailors to one another. This imagery conveys a sense of interrelatedness, but also of dependency and even helplessness. The line is not merely a passive object, but rather, like a noose waiting for a hidden door to spring open to be “put in play,” threatens to injure the bodies it encircles. Inside of their boat, the crew must not act rashly or independently, but for the survival of all, must cooperate, acting as six organs of one, fragmented body. Yet, what should be a horrifying situation has quite the opposite effect on the sailors. The play of the line leads to “mirth,” “jokes,” “gay sallies,” and “bright repartees.”

Through the formal characteristics of the written line, Melville’s style marks a tension that elevates objects to symbols, language to poetry. The repetition of literary forms in his writing adds an element of surprise and pleasure to this passage. Commas delicately stitch together clauses to form twisting and looping sentences. Alliteration, “complicated coils” and “more merry mirth”, and punctuation convey Melville’s flirtation with language. His use of dashes and punctuation (“Yet habit – strange thing! What cannot habit accomplish? –”) add staccato elements to the sinuous sentences. The play of his lines envelops the reader’s mind. For the sailors, style also has the power to transform horror into beauty. Whale line’s and Melville’s sentences flirt with death and

aesthetics, mirroring the relationship between injury and art depicted by the game of fort-da. Whereas Freud’s statement is psychological, Melville’s statement is poetic. Notwithstanding differences in medium, they both make statements about human motivation.

“The Line” encapsulates the paradox on which play and empathy rests. Uniting the men, the line depicts an ethical tie binding them together. The play of the line represents a strange equilibrium between injury and danger, on the one hand, and whimsy, joy, and imagination on the other. Play mediates the binary between danger and mirth. As a symbol, the line becomes tolerable. Freudian play signifies a mental process, or a condition of living, that is inevitable and pervasive. We might call this empathy. It is the recognition of our own fragility and the imagination required to surpass this limitation. At play, Melville writes, “All men live enveloped in whale-lines. All are born with halters round their necks; but it is only when caught in the swift, sudden turn of death, that mortals realize the silent, subtle, ever-present perils of life.”

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Using String: A Discourse on Cruelty, Creativity, and Playing

*It is cruelty that cements matter together, cruelty that molds the features of the created world.*

– Antoid Artaud

In the spring of 1955, a boy, not more than seven years of age, visited a doctor at the Paddington Green Children’s Hospital with his mother and father. The boy’s parents had brought him to this particular doctor at the recommendation of their family pediatrician who, suspecting a character disorder in the boy, had referred the family to one of the few doctors of the day specializing in children’s mental health. The doctor to whom they had been referred was D. W. Winnicott.

The child patient, identified by Winnicott only as “String Boy,” had, as his pseudonym implies, a peculiar and striking relationship to string. This Winnicott discovered immediately during the consultation when he engaged the boy in a Squiggle Game. The boy’s squiggles revealed a preoccupation with string. His drawings included a lasso, a whip, a crop, a yo-yo string, and a knot.

Broaching the topic of this discovery to the boy’s parents, much to their relief, Winnicott further learned that the boy’s drawings of string belonged to a larger pattern of behaviors. He played compulsively with bits of string. He would frequently use string to tie together pieces of furniture around the house. Occasionally, his games took on a sinister tone. Recently, the parents recounted, they had been disturbed to find that their son had tied a piece of string around his younger sister’s throat.

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2 Winnicott invented many protocols and diagnostic tools that he used when working with child patients. The Squiggle Game involves the doctor and the child taking turns drawing doodles and interpreting what the other has made.
Play is often thought of as the antithesis to cruelty. And yet, in no uncertain terms, String Boy’s string play is threatening. It implies hatred, aggression, a desire to cause harm, and perhaps, even, to engage in torture. String Boy’s play expresses a range of emotions that challenge current notions of child’s play. We might say that his play expresses cruelty.

In a series of manifestos published as a book in the 1930s, Antoin Artaud lauded what he called a “Theater of Cruelty.”  

Artaud obsessively defined, clarified, illustrated, and then redefined his concept of cruelty. Maddeningly for him, his compulsive struggle to stave off any possible misconceptions about what he meant by the term produced as much ambiguity as lucidity. Cruelty, for Artaud, is not a simple matter of bloodshed or savagery, though his own examples do little to elucidate this distinction. Indeed, in his own example, the play he imagines being staged on the Theater of Cruelty depicts a scene in which:

An emaciated man eats soup as fast as he can, with a presentiment that the siege is approaching the city, and as the rebellion breaks out, the stage space is gorged with a brawling mosaic where sometimes men, sometime compact troops tightly pressed together, limb to limb, clash frenetically. Space is stuffed with whirling gestures, horrible faces, dying eyes, clenched fists, manes, breastplates, and from all levels of the scene fall limbs, breastplates, heads, stomachs like a hailstorm bombarding the earth with supernatural explosions.

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For Artaud, the process of aesthetic annihilation is so elementary that the imagery he chooses to represent this concept is that of literal bloodshed. In this scene of massacre, Artaud unintentionally romanticizes brutality. As a concept, however, I argue that the Theater of Cruelty represents a space for philosophical thought experiments; a space for smashing and reforming aesthetic forms rather than human bodies. To be an actor on Artaud’s stage is to possess a singular clarity of mind, a trenchant insight into how to manipulate aesthetic forms. The discrepancy between Artaud’s philosophical aims and his blood- and guts-soaked imagery problematizes a tension, which this chapter addresses, between what constitutes cruelty, psychical or aesthetic, and physical violence.

Though at first blush it might seem that the ravings of a mad French playwright would have little to contribute to the task of understanding the work of a demur English pediatrician, Artaud’s notion of cruelty shares striking similarities to Winnicott’s definition of playing. Cruelty, for both thinkers, connotes the positive psychical and aesthetic power that accompanies the capacity to ruthlessly inflict destruction on mental or aesthetic objects. For Winnicott, cruelty signifies a mental capacity for self-creation and the power to exist as an independent psychical entity. For Artaud, cruelty represents aesthetic clarity and the power of art to make people think in new ways and from new perspectives.

Artaud’s understanding of cruelty describes a strictly aesthetic process, a mode of relating to an outside world. Cruelty marks an ability to cut through a world of appearances and access a deeper level of the underlying principles that motivate human behavior. “Cruelty,” he declares, “is above all lucid, a kind of rigid control and submission to necessity. There is no cruelty without consciousness and without the
His words, “rigid control,” “submission to necessity,” and “the application of consciousness,” portray cruelty as more akin to self-awareness than a sadistic desire to cause harm. Cruelty, conceptualized as the capacity to ruthlessly shatter mental limitations, is simultaneously destructive and creative experiences. “From the point of view of the mind,” contends Artaud, “cruelty signifies rigor, implacable intention and decision, irreversible and absolute determination.” Cruelty breaks the mind out of the conventional, lethargic patterns of thought that characterize quotidian life. It lays the groundwork for a capacity to transform hidden inner desires into conscious thought-processes and to reveal new ways of perceiving worn, familiar forms. The qualities of this mental fortitude include rigor, intention, and determination. The aim of cruelty is not to inflict suffering, but, paradoxically, to explore life’s options.

By comparison, Winnicott once observed that an infant must be ruthless in his destruction of the objective world if he is to successfully shoulder the eternal burden of keeping the inner life of the mind and outer reality separate yet interrelated. While scholars have acknowledged the impact of Winnicott’s work and ideas on the history of play and techniques of psychoanalysis the issue of cruelty in his theory of playing has not been systematically studied. For instance, Rachael Peltz, a practicing psychologist and psychoanalyst, praises Winnicottian play as a psychotherapeutic technique, stating that his theory offers a dynamic space in which therapist and patient can overcome “clinical impasses, which represent breakdowns in the ability to mutually and meaningfully reflect

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within the dialectic of presence of absence.”⁷ According to Peltz, psychoanalytic patients often experience this dialectic with horror or humiliation. Winnicott’s emphasis on creativity and playing makes room for a sense of freedom within this binary. William Borden, psychiatrist, applauds Winnicott as “a seminal figure in contemporary psychoanalysis,” whose work has informed psychotherapeutic practice.⁸ Borden claims that Winnicott’s developmental theory has framed the task of the therapist as an effort “to foster the emergence of the self.”⁹ Clinical psychologist and psychoanalyst Stephen A. Mitchell claims that, “Winnicott, although he never explicitly broke with Freudian tradition, introduced an evocative vision of early development that has had broad impact both within and outside psychoanalysis proper. And Winnicott’s depictions of parental functions such as the holding environment provided powerful new developmental metaphors for thinking about the analytic relationship and the analytic process.”¹⁰ Similarly, Lewis Kirshner, psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, commends Winnicott “for breaking psychoanalysis out of a reductionist view of the ego and its mechanisms of defense.”¹¹ Kirshner pits Winnicott against Lacan’s ‘impersonal’ style of psychoanalytic treatment, which gained popularity in the Cold War era. Winnicott’s work on the significant function of playing has laid the groundwork for advances in notions of exchange between analyst and patient in the therapeutic setting. These accounts have

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focused on the healing effects of Winnicott’s theory of playing, while, nonetheless, omitting a rigorous understanding of the essential role that cruelty plays in producing psychic health.

The concepts of cruelty and playing frame a philosophical dilemma, a variant on the mind-body problem. Both playing and cruelty imply an ability to self-consciously think through one’s actions and make decisions based on a rigorous evaluation of what is absolutely necessary in any given situation. We take for granted that playing is the antithesis to cruelty. But is there a more complicated relationship, ethically and historically, between playing and cruelty than scholars have yet to acknowledge or fully comprehend? Is Winnicottian play a kind of cruelty that enacts psychical injury without threat of physical violence?

My chapter argues that Winnicottian playing poses a puzzle that needs to be resolved in order to come to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between mental health and cruelty. Playing presents a tension between the necessity of psychical cruelty and the boundary that separates cruelty from physical violence. The first part of this chapter analyzes Winnicott’s theory, while the latter portion raises ethical, historical, and psychoanalytic questions that arise from the comparison of playing and cruelty.

Winnicott’s concern with playing is inextricably tied up with his belief that psychical aggression is absolutely necessary if infants are to discover external reality and interact with people or objects that are real. My analysis shows how playing signifies this process, which includes the development of a psychical apparatus, the organization of the infant’s psyche, and the origins of the capacity to play. In particular, I attend to the way that Winnicott’s theory describes playing as a specific kind of psychical cruelty. While
Winnicott’s theory aims to recover a notion of the positive value of cruelty, my discussion considers the ethical dilemmas that arise in using people as objects. The case of String Boy illustrates problems that appear when individuals exhibit too much or too little psychical cruelty. My argument looks for places to resolve problems in theorizing playing as cruelty and builds towards an understanding of the way that cruelty is key to Winnicott’s concept of adult mental health and creative living.

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Winnicott originally published the case of String Boy in the *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* in 1960 under the title “String: A Technique of Communication.” Over the course of his career, he referred to the case at least three times, suggesting that it held particular significance to him.12 He used String Boy’s story to exemplify the theoretical principle he outlines in his famous essay, “Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena.” It is the metaphor of string, I propose, that best illustrates Winnicott’s theory of playing as cruelty. Playing in infancy, which according to Winnicott’s theory becomes the template for all interpersonal human relationships throughout an individual’s life, is predicated on an assumption that inflicting psychical injury on others is necessary to the maintenance of one’s self. As Artaud would argue: cruelty is a necessity of life.

This section explores the role of cruelty and aggression in Winnicott’s theory of playing by analyzing the origins of the capacity to play in the infant. Beginning with a close reading of String Boy’s case, my argument expands into a broader discussion of

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transitional objects, non-pathological aggression, and the role of playing in the earliest stages of an infant’s psychic development. My analysis reveals that playing precedes the Freudian distinctions of Oedipal or pre-Oedipal stages, the Lacanian categories of Symbolic or pre-Symbolic knowledge, and even the Kleinian phases of the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions. Rather Winnicott’s theory of playing marks the first, most fundamental and basic psychic infrastructure that defines a difference between self and others. This psychical process of differentiation, which Winnicott calls playing, must take place in order to make way for the subsequent mental developments of object relations, interpersonal relations, and the adult capacity for creative living.

String Boy’s difficulties began, Winnicott surmises, as an infant.\textsuperscript{13} The boy came from a family of three children. At the time of his first consultation with Winnicott, his elder sister was ten years old and suffered from a learning disability, while the younger sister was four years old. In the case history Winnicott relates several separations that had taken place between String Boy and his mother when he was a young child. The first separation occurred when the boy was three years and three months of age, when his little sister was born. The second separation was at three years and eleven months of age when the mother was hospitalized for an operation. A third separation was necessitated when the mother was hospitalized for two months for depression. By the time the boy was brought to Winnicott for treatment, he displayed several aggressive behaviors in addition to his troubling string play. These behaviors include verbalizing a desire to cut up his aunt (his caretaker during his mother’s absences) into little pieces; a compulsion to lick

\textsuperscript{13} Winnicott, \textit{Playing and Reality}, 21-26.
people and objects; a compulsion to make sounds in his throat; and a refusal to defecate coupled with a preference to pass motions in his trousers.

String Boy’s case represents an exemplary and atypical instance of an otherwise normal psychological process. Because of the manifest hyperbole which characterizes String Boy’s interest in string, the boy’s pathology dramatizes one account of a child’s ability to discover, to know, to relate to, and to use objects and people who exist in external reality. “String,” Winnicott observes, “can be looked upon as an extension of all other techniques of communication. String joins, just as it also helps in the wrapping up of objects and in the holding together of unintegrated material. In this respect string has a symbolic meaning for everyone; an exaggeration of the use of string can easily belong to the beginnings of a sense of insecurity or the idea of a lack of communication.”

String represents a relationship between an individual’s mental life and external reality. It “joins,” “wraps,” and “holds” separate objects together. As André Green remarks, string is “a positive materialisation of an absent, negative bond.” The psychical process of relating to people or objects constitutes this “absent, negative bond.” As a symbol of this psychical relationship, string is a “positive” representation of an otherwise ineffable process. String Boy’s use of string to tether objects expresses his feeling of “insecurity” over a “lack of communication” between the objects that populate his mental life and the objects of objective reality. Winnicott suggests that the boy’s exaggerated use of string is

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14 Winnicott, Playing and Reality, 25.
tied to the real life separations from his mother: her preoccupation with the boy’s younger sister, her hospitalizations, and her own depression.\textsuperscript{16}

String Boy’s dilemma, which he expresses through his use of string, represents quite poignantly his mistrust that his psychical bonds with others are strong enough to prevent them from forgetting or abandoning him. Yet his impulse to tie together objects (and family members) is, of course, problematic because it transforms purely psychical aggression into physical danger. String Boy’s need to make what should be a purely psychical process into a phenomenological one displays the child’s pathology, while at the same time opening up questions, not only about what went wrong in this one instance, but also about what constitutes the normal development of the ability to play.

Playing, for Winnicott, begins with the earliest experiences of infant life. “From birth,” he writes, “the human being is concerned with the problem of the relationship between what is objectively perceived and what is subjectively conceived of.”\textsuperscript{17} At birth, the infant’s mental apparatus as yet lacks any kind of psychical structure or organization. As Winnicott famously put it: There is no baby. What he means is that the newborn’s psyche is totally undifferentiated. It lacks a limiting membrane, a psychical container that contains one’s self and separates a sense of self from alien, “not-me” objects. A limiting membrane fulfills many psychical functions in later life including the support and defense of the ego and the ongoing differentiation of subjective reality from external reality. Psychically speaking, however, before the limiting membrane comes into

\textsuperscript{16} For a definition of maternal deprivation see John Bowlby, \textit{Child Care and the Growth of Love}, edited by Margery Fry (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965), 14. Bowlby is responsible for theorizing the different forms that maternal deprivation can take. He argues that “a child is deprived even though living at home if his mother (or permanent mother-substitute) is unable to give him the loving care small children need.”

\textsuperscript{17} Winnicott, \textit{Playing and Reality}, 15.
existence the baby’s psyche has not yet been bounded off from his environment. Lacan refers to this condition in “The Mirror Stage” as the “specific prematurity of birth.” Yet Winnicottian play is not to be confused with Lacanian symbol. The Lacanian question of whether or not a child is able to judge whether an image is literal or symbolic presupposes the child’s ability to make the more basic differentiation between itself and external objects. Put another way, Winnicott’s interest in the psychical process that leads to a distinction between me and not-me objects is quite different and much more elementary than the psychical processes of interest to Lacan.

An etiology of playing describes the psychical process though which infants gradually develop a limiting membrane, a self, and an ability to tell the difference between me and not-me objects. In psychoanalytic terms, omnipotence represents the condition of the unbounded infant psyche at birth. During this initial, highly fragile period, the infant is dependent on his mother’s care to protect him from psychic trauma. At first, the mother protects her infant from psychical trauma by predicting and satisfying his every need and desire. Winnicott called the mother’s role in caring for her infant’s needs “almost complete adaptation.” Within a brief period of time, however, the mother’s adaptation gradually begins to falter and diminish. As the mother’s almost complete adaptation subsides, so too does the infant’s initial experience of subjective omnipotence. In concert with this shift, the infant becomes aware of an objective reality, which is outside of his immediate and magical control. As Stephen Mitchell clarifies, “To the child’s experience of subjective omnipotence is eventually added an experience

19 Winnicott, Playing and Reality, 14.
of objective reality. The latter does not replace the former, but rather exists alongside or in dialectical relation to it.”

The “dialectical relation” Mitchell describes is the tension between omnipotence and objective reality that the good-enough mother shields the infant from during the first weeks of life. The mother’s adaptation to her infant’s needs temporarily solves the problem of the relationship between “what is subjectively conceived of” and “what is objectively perceived.” Yet as the good-enough mother gradually begins to disillusion the infant of its perceived omnipotence, the infant must begin to shoulder the weight of the problem.

Winnicott’s theory of playing deals with a paradox, the ability to understand that mental life and objective reality are not one in the same. This paradox comes into focus as the infant begins to experience frustration at the limits to which he is able to magically manipulate objects in the external world or make them perform his bidding. The mother’s progressive failure to adapt to the infant’s unvoiced needs results in a mental process akin to the phenomenological act of weaning. Winnicott adopts this analogy to describe the transitional phenomenon:

If things go well, in this gradual disillusionment process, the stage is set for the frustrations that we gather together under the word ‘weaning’; but it should be remembered that when we talk about the phenomena (which Klein (1940) has specifically illuminated in her concept of the depressive position) that cluster round weaning we are assuming the underlying process, the process by which opportunity for illusion and gradual disillusionment is provided.

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20 Mitchell and Black, *Freud and Beyond*, 127.
What is important for Winnicott is the feeling of frustration that the infant feels when he learns external objects can resist him. The transitional phenomenon is about the infant’s “disillusionment,” the necessity of learning that he cannot wish for an object and thereby make it come to him. In healthy infants, psychical weaning culminates in the establishment of the intermediate space whose purpose is to help the individual sustain the ability to tolerate this paradox.

The problem of the intermediate zone of psychical life stages a psychoanalytic dilemma relating to the space in between mental life and objective reality where not-me objects live and interpersonal relations transpire. In Winnicott’s words:

It is generally acknowledged that a statement of human nature in terms of interpersonal relationships is not good enough even when the imaginative elaboration of function and the whole of fantasy both conscious and unconscious, including the repressed unconscious, are allowed for. There is another way of describing persons that comes out of the researches of the past two decades. Of every individual who has reached the stage of being a unit with a limiting membrane and an outside and an inside, it can be said that there is an inner reality to that individual, an inner world that can be rich or poor and can be at peace or in a state of war. This helps, but is it enough?

My claim is that if there is a need for this double statement, there is also need for a triple one: the third part of the life of a human being, a part that we cannot ignore, is an intermediate area of experiencing, to which inner reality and external life both contribute. It is an area that is not challenged, because no claim is made on its behalf except that it shall exist as a resting-place for the individual.
engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated. (italics original)\textsuperscript{22}

Winnicott argues that “even when the imaginative elaboration of function and the whole of fantasy both conscious and unconscious … are allowed for,” there is not enough evidence for “a statement of human nature in terms of interpersonal relationships.”

Consciousness and unconscious drives provide motives for an individual’s behavior. But he contends that a double statement about the conscious and unconscious zones of an individual’s mental life, child or adult, fails to provide a psychoanalytic explanation for the phenomenon of interpersonal or object relations. Theories of the individual’s psyche fall short of describing what it means for two people to interact, or even what it means, psychically, for one person to encounter a not-me object. Drives may determine what a person instinctually wants from an object or demands of another person, but not how these not-me objects come to be present in the psyche or how a person copes with their resistance to omnipotent control.

The problem of intersubjectivity originated with Freud.\textsuperscript{23} Winnicott takes up the Freudian problem of intersubjectivity by theorizing an entirely new terrain on the outermost edges of Freud’s map of the psyche. Winnicott’s theory of the transitional object has been called an alternative to Freud’s theory of the drives.\textsuperscript{24} Winnicott asserts the need for a triple statement about the nature of psychical life by identifying an entirely separate area of psychical life, the intermediate area of play, to explain interpersonal and object relations. It is significant that this intermediate area is neither part of an

\textsuperscript{22} Winnicott, \textit{Playing and Reality}, 3.
\textsuperscript{24} Green, “The Intuition of the Negative in \textit{Playing and Reality},” 1073.
individual’s inner conscious or unconscious life, nor part of external reality. This intermediate area is devoted to the psychical problem of sorting out interpersonal and object relations. If this intermediate space were merely an extension of subjective or objective reality, it would inherently cease to be a neutral zone capable of sustaining the paradox of intersubjectivity. Should this neutral zone be overrun by instinctual conflicts or unconscious desires, the paradox could collapse. Turning back to the long passage quoted above, Winnicott characterizes the intermediate space as an “area of experiencing” because it enables individuals to experience an illusion of contact between inner and external realities. Despite the absolute separation of the activities of mental life from actions and objects of the external world, the ability to play is the ability to take advantage of this intermediate zone, to experience an overlap between mental and objective realms.

In Playing and Reality, Winnicott argues that infants learn to play, by which he means to psychically inhabit the intermediate space, by developing a capacity to recognize and, more importantly, to use transitional objects. In the introduction to Playing and Reality, Winnicott insists that the transitional object “is not the cloth or the teddy bear that the baby uses – not so much the object used as the use of the object. I am drawing attention to the paradox involved in the use by the infant of what I have called the transitional object.”25 What must be understood about the transitional object is that the object is not a symbol to the child. Once again, Winnicottian play is not an issue of the Lacanian Symbolic. Rather, it is a problem of psychical zones. The puzzle of the

25 Winnicott, Playing and Reality xvi. Part of Winnicott’s reticence to allow the word “Objects” to stand on its own derives from his desire to forestall a process of classification of types of objects thought to be transitional. He repudiates this impulse, which he disparages as an “unnatural” and “arbitrary” endeavor.
transitional object is a question of how infants learn to place external objects within the intermediate area of experiencing. Transitional objects are not symbols to the child. They are *real*, by which I mean external, objects, that the child must learn how to use, rather than magically command. The object’s realness is what is important because realness places an object outside of the child’s omnipotent projection of the world.

Playing proceeds from what Winnicott calls the transitional phenomenon, or the child’s recognition of objects as real and external to mental life. This capacity is not inborn. Rather the ability to use a transitional object constitutes a benchmark in healthy psychic development. As French philosopher and psychoanalyst Jean-Bertrand Pontalis points out, the transitional phenomenon is present when the infant’s ego’s existence can be posited by an external observer (rather than by the subject experiencing it).²⁶ In some sense, the transitional object is most relevant to Winnicott as a sign that a healthy and normal developmental process is taking place within the child’s psyche – the process of relating to objects. For example, a baby of 10 months holds a spoon.²⁷ He mouths the spoon, plays at putting the spoon to his mother’s mouth, hides it in his mother’s blouse, rediscovers it, mimics eating broth from a bowl, and then drops the spoon to the floor. In this miniature drama, the child manipulates the spoon – putting it in his mouth, hiding it in his mother’s blouse, dropping it to the floor – to test if it can be brought into the domain of his mental life, only to discovery that the spoon is an object in the external world. “The object,” writes Winnicott, “represents the infant’s transition from a state of being merged with the mother to a state of being in relation to the mother as something

outside and separate.” By playing with the spoon, an acknowledgement that the spoon is “outside and separate” from either himself or his mother, this infant demonstrates his ability to bear the weight of the paradox of the intermediate zone.

As an infant develops an ability to recognize objects as transitional, the next psychological task is for the infant to learn how to ruthlessly wield a transitional object. And for Winnicott, the use of a transitional object indicates something very specific: the roots of aggression.

In Winnicott’s theory, playing indicates the infant’s capacity to be psychically aggressive towards psychical objects, to ruthlessly destroy objects in the mind in order to reconstitute them as belonging to an external and objective world beyond the pale of the subject’s omnipotent control. In a letter to a colleague, the Kleinian psychoanalyst Roger Money-Kyrle, Winnicott comments on the necessity of this type of aggression:

I think we must take it for granted that emotionally there is no contribution from the individual to the environment or from the environment to the individual. The individual only communicates with a self-created world and the people in the environment only communicate with the individual in so far as they can create him or her. Nevertheless, in health there is the illusion of contact and it is this which provides the high spots of human life and which makes the arts among the most important parts of human experience.

Winnicott opines that the individual’s psyche is always absolutely and irreconcilably separate from the persons and objects of objective reality. Yet there is a way out of this

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conundrum. Individuals in good psychological health must be able to destroy their mental representations of a person and recreate that person as an object in the intermediary zone. Destruction of mental objects places them outside of the realm of psychical life. It makes them real, as it were. Individuals who become proficient at the mental task of destroying psychical objects graduate on to being able to establish an “illusion of contact” with objects in the external world. The illusion of contact signifies an individual’s implicit, psychical acknowledgement that objects owned by objective reality are, nonetheless, still available for use.

Not only does Winnicott portray mental aggression directed at psychical objects as normal, he argues that this type of cruelty is healthy. Healthy psychical aggression opens up a space of experiencing where individual subjects are able to overcome difference and relate to other subjects (or alternatively use objects) in the world. Cruelty, ruthlessly destroying objects and placing them in the intermediary zone, is what enables the infant to play, to bear the paradox of the separation between mental life and objective reality.

My argument to this point has explored the origins of playing in the infant psyche. Playing, signified by the transitional phenomenon, describes the process through which the infant’s mind gradually becomes organized into three parts: the psyche, the external world, and an intermediate zone of interpersonal and object relations. Winnicott enumerates the important role that psychical aggression plays in empowering infants to take full advantage of these three psychical zones. Successfully negotiating the transitional phenomenon requires infants to direct large quantities of psychical aggression at internal objects in order to place them in an intermediate space. Infants must learn
how to be ruthless and to destroy internal representations, simultaneously establishing
them as real external objects and placing them outside the realm of omnipotent control.
Indeed, argues Winnicott, completion of the transition from object-relating to object-use
is the ultimate function of aggression in human behavior.

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One of Winnicott’s most significant contributions to psychoanalytic theory was
his call for a “rewriting of the theory of the roots of aggression.”30 He wanted to clarify
the necessity of cruelty within human behavior. But he also wanted to elucidate the
psychological problems that arise when an individual lacks an adequate capacity to be
destructive. The human capacity to be cruel “cannot be said to be inborn, nor can its
development in an individual be taken for granted,” he warns us.31 Winnicott contends
that the growth of psychical aggression cannot be guaranteed. If we accept his claims
that cruelty is essential to psychological health, his uncertainty about the maturation of
aggression within the infant’s mind represents a problem, which his late career was
devoted to understanding. Drawing out a tension in Winnicott’s “rewriting” of a
psychoanalytic theory of cruelty, this section situates questions about playing and cruelty
within ethical, historical, and psychoanalytic discourses.

Winnicott’s theory demands that human objects be subjected to the same
psychical aggression and destruction as their inanimate counterparts. The skill of
psychically using people, far from forbidding cruelty, requires a mental capacity to be
ruthlessly cruel in the destruction and use of transitional objects, which we should not
forget, include mental representations of people. And while aggression and destructive

30 Winnicott, Playing and Reality, 125.
31 Winnicott, Playing and Reality, 119.
urges directed at inanimate objects are one thing, what happens when these same urges
are directed at other people or, as in case of the rope String Boy tied around his sister’s
neck, cannot be limited to symbolic or psychical acts of cruelty? Examining the problem
of cruelty and playing through this example illuminates a double bind. One the one hand,
Winnicott’s theory mandates cruelty. Without this capacity we face the possibility of
winding up unintentionally hurting the people we love. But, on the other hand, how can
we be sure that psychical cruelty is just that? Psychical. How do we define the limits of
psychical cruelty so that we can be sure to know when it transgresses the boundary into
actual harm?

Ethicists balk when confronted with a mandate to use other people. In “Using
People: Kant with Winnicott,” Barbara Johnson responds to this challenge put forth by
Winnicott’s theory of playing. She begins her essay by pointing out that using people,
“transforming others into a means for obtaining an end for oneself,” has been vetoed by
philosophers from Kant to Levinas. But she equivocates: “Respect and distance are
certainly better than violence and appropriation, but is ethics only a form of restraint …
Might there not, at least on the psychological level, be another way to use people?”
After a sustained close reading of Playing and Reality, Johnson concludes that
Winnicott’s motives are pure: it is merely his language that is troublesome. She purports
to resolve the ethical dilemma by suggesting a substitute. “Perhaps a synonym for ‘using
people’ would be, paradoxically, ‘trusting people,’ creating a space of play and risk that

32 Barbara Johnson, Persons and Things (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press,
2008), 94.
33 Johnson, Persons and Things, 94-95.
does not depend on maintaining intactness and separation,” she proposes. Johnson lets Winnicott off the hook because causing psychical harm does not necessarily result in physical violence. To the contrary, she finds that psychical harm can be perceived, emotionally, as trust.

While Johnson’s analysis helps to resolve one half of this ethical issue – that psychical harm is not equivalent to actual violence, Artaud points to the beginnings of a way out of the adjoining one, i.e. the problem of determining the limits before psychical injury does transgress a boundary leading to bodily harm. “Everything that acts is a cruelty,” Artaud exalts. Despite his melodramatic claim, Artaud does not literally mean every violent crime that transpires in the phenomenological world is justifiable. “Acts” is the operative term in this exclamation, which we must understand within the context of his Theater of Cruelty. The actor, he contends, “brutalizes forms … and through their destruction he rejoins that which outlives forms and produces their continuation.”

Actors break apart the mundane gestures of everyday life and remake them as aesthetic signs to convey “that which outlives forms.” Action is a matter of dramatization, of artfulness, of self-conscious reproduction and cruelty has strict aesthetic limits on stage. Cruelty represents as the will, perseverance, and determination to make the necessary decisions required in order to move through life.

Artaud concedes, however, that cruelty is not the same as violence. Cruelty, he maintains “is not the cruelty we can exercise upon each other by hacking at each other’s bodies, carving up our personal anatomies, or, like Assyrian emperors, sending parcels of

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34 Johnson, Person and Things, 105.
35 Artaud, The Theater and Its Double, 85.
36 Artaud, The Theater and Its Double, 12.
human ears, noses, or neatly detached nostrils through the mail, but the much more
terrible and necessary cruelty which things can exercise against us. We are not free. And
the sky can still fall on our heads.” Artaud suggests a Winnicottian notion of
dependence on objects. Individuals are not in control of the objective world. Rather, we
are subjected to the world. We live in fear that “the sky can still fall on our heads.” In
order to persist in this world of constant impingement, Artaud argues that we must
exercise “necessary cruelty.” Yet he differentiates his version of cruelty from baser
forms of violence, sadism, and torture. Cruelty is not about “hacking at each other’s
bodies” but rather it is aligned with an ethics of self-discipline, resolve, and
determination.

The predicament illustrated by String Boy isn’t simply that his string play is
aggressive. The problem is that it’s the wrong kind of aggression. The kind of cruelty
required to sustain the transitional phenomenon is a capacity for mental destructiveness.
However, String Boy’s actions are real. While Winnicott observes that an infant must be
ruthless in his destruction of mental objects if he is to successfully shoulder the eternal
burden of keeping the inner life of the mind and outer reality separate yet interrelated, the
ethics of his theory of play as cruelty depend on the ability to distinguish between forms
of real harm and psychical cruelty. Stated plainly: The difference between cruelty and
violence hinges on a matter of directionality. Playing, Winnicott’s term for psychical
cruelty, signifies a concept of mental aggression directed at destroying mental objects,
rather than physical violence directed at real people. String Boy’s aggression fails to
make this distinction.

Evaluating this problem of defining the boundary distinguishing mental aggression from actual violence was of urgent and real importance to Winnicott’s historical contemporaries. Winnicott, whose life and career spanned two world wars, came of age during a historical period of violent cultural and political upheaval. His peers, who like him received the bulk of their training during the interwar period, developed as theorists within a shadow cast by the world wars of the 20th century. Illustrating the way that the violence of the wars was woven into the fabric of everyday life for these analysts, photographs taken at Anna Freud’s Hampstead Nurseries show children cheerily eating snacks in air raid shelters and wearing gas masks, which engulf their tiny faces.

Figure 1. Children at Anna Freud’s Hampstead War Nurseries

The unthinkable violence and human cost of these wars revealed aggression to be an intractable emotional but also social problem. Marga Vicedo asserts that “war also contributed to ongoing interest in understanding human nature and, specifically,

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clarifying whether aggression is an ineradicable part of human behavior." The task of clarifying the relationship between playing, childhood, and psychological origins of aggression leading to war, trauma, and historical violence fell in large part to a group of psychoanalysts studying children. Influenced by the political and social concern over questions about mass violence, trauma, and human suffering, psychoanalysts struggled to produce a theory to understand the connection between childhood, aggression, and war.

The work of Melanie Klein, who served as a mentor and confident to Winnicott, was decisive in moving Freud’s concept of the death drive towards the center of psychoanalytic theories about childhood and play. Klein put forth a dark, turbulent vision of childhood angst and aggression. According to Kleinian doctrine, childhood is a period of life characterized by overwhelming anxieties and aggression. Children, she argued, develop an ego as the result of depressive anxieties that build up within the psyche. Klein’s innovation of a technique through which she could communicate, thereby working directly with child-patients, constituted one of her most significant and controversial contributions to the field of pediatrics. Until Klein popularized her play technique, child psychoanalysts, led by Anna Freud, defended the belief that a child’s attachment to his real parents prevented the necessary transference between analyst and patient for the analysis to work. As a trainee and a pioneer in the field of pediatrics attempting to develop his own theoretical beliefs about children’s mental health, Winnicott’s professional views were affected by a complicated personal relationship with

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Klein that, at times, transgressed professional boundaries (Winnicott analyzed Klein’s son; Klein analyzed Winnicott’s second wife). Though he began as a student and follower of Klein’s school, he eventually broke with her views on playing and cruelty.

Interceding in this larger debate about both playing and cruelty, Winnicott’s contributions to the psychoanalytic theory articulate an original view on the relationship of cruelty to health. He believed that Klein focused too heavily on the practical use of play, thus failing to investigate the psychological significance of playing itself. Filling in this deficit, Winnicott offers a critique:

Naturally one turns to the world of Melanie Klein (1932), but I suggest that in her writings Klein, in so far as she was concerned with play, was concerned almost entirely with the use of play. The therapist is reaching for the child’s communication and knows that the child does not usually possess the command of language that can convey the infinite subtleties that are to be found in play by those who seek. This is not a criticism of Melanie Klein or of others who have described the use of a child’s play in the psychoanalysis of children. It is simply a comment on the possibility that in the total theory of the personality the psychoanalyst has been too busy using play content to look at the playing child and to write about playing as a thing in itself. It is obvious that I am making a significant distinction between the meanings of the noun ‘play’ and the verbal noun ‘playing’.

Winnicott’s position is that play is not, as Klein’s play technique implies, merely a tool to study the aggressive child or to diagnose childhood sadism. Rather, his theory of play

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portrays playing as constitutive of aggression in childhood. For Winnicott, the practical
distinction between play and playing is also a verbal one. He places playing within “the
total theory of the personality,” granting it its own status as a psychical process. While
Klein studies play the noun and the psychical content that the child expresses through his
play, Winnicott professes an interest in exploring playing the nounal verb, drawing
attention to the significance of playing and aggression as healthy, normal psychical
functions. Playing, the verb, indicates a method of study. It represents an activity, a way
of conducting oneself, a mode of inquiry.

Winnicott championed the importance of playing as cruelty and its relation to
mental health. Without a capacity for cruelty, life would be defined by futility and
compliance. “It is creative apperception more than anything else that makes the
individual feel that life is worth living. Contrasted with this is a relationship to external
reality which is one of compliance. Winnicott defines compliance as a “sense of futility,”
or “the idea that nothing matters and that life is not worth living.” Compliance carries
with it a sense of futility for the individual and is associated with the idea that nothing
matters and that life is not worth living.”43 It represents the chief feature of illness. Like
String Boy, we all must struggle against our psychical tethers to mental objects, though
our fetters may be unseen, the “mind-forg’d manacles” that the Romantic poet William
Blake warned us about at the turn of the eighteenth century. These ties are the reasons
why we must be able to exercise unlimited cruelty or aggression on the objects of mental
life, so that they do not terrorize us, and we do not become compliant to them.

43 Winnicott, Playing and Reality, 87.
Recalling String Boy’s pathological use of string, we can observe how psychical objects become frightening when they are not mentally destroyed and placed in the intermediate zone. String is, arguably, the archetype for all transitional objects. String signifies the illusion of contact between internal and external realities that the transitional phenomenon enables. Under ideal circumstances, it represents an affirmation that the child is successfully sustaining the paradox of playing in between internal life and external reality. Yet, under less than ideal circumstances, it also illuminates the dangers of failing to master the transitional phenomenon.

When aggression is directed at real people rather than psychical objects, it becomes a problem. As Winnicott explains, String Boy uses string to deny a separation:

> It would seem possible to arrive at such a statement if one takes into consideration the fact that the function of the string is changing from communication into a *denial of separation*. As a denial of separation string becomes a thing in itself, something that has dangerous properties and must needs be mastered … When hope is absent and string represents a denial of separation, then a much more complex state of affairs has arisen – one that become difficult to cure, because of the secondary gains that arise out of the skill that develops whenever an object has to be handled in order to be mastered.\(^{44}\)

Winnicott cautions against the hazards of allowing string to transform from “a denial of separation string” into “thing in itself, something that has dangerous properties and must needs be mastered.” The string’s “dangerous properties” are, I suggest, a desire for control, a desire to master, and overcome the feeling of helplessness. In this scenario,

mastery bring with it “secondary gains” and “skills,” language that connotes insinuations of taking pleasure in exercising violence against real people. This pleasure carries with it an implication of sadistic callousness. This is not the disinterested, necessary cruelty justified by Artaud.

What Winnicott’s statements about mental illness and compliance reveal is that, without an ability to be cruel, String Boy feels both persecuted and helpless. As Artaud would say, string dramatizes the idea that “the sky can still fall on our heads.”

Winnicott observes that, “In this particular case it is possible to detect abnormality creeping into the boy’s use of string.” String Boy does not use string to play. Rather his literal use of the string he ties around objects and his sister’s throat demonstrates his need for an unmediated connection with reality. This literalness shows an “abnormality” in his use of transitional objects. String Boy’s inability to ruthlessly destroy the world means that he is always in fear of losing control over the objects of the world, hence his need to actually tie objects together. In his desire to use physical objects to reinforce mental ones, String Boy’s play misdirects his aggression towards real objects rather than mental ones. Ironically, String Boy’s inability to be psychically destructive is what results in his palpably aggressive behavior.

By contrast, in true play there is no pleasure in aggression or cruelty. Cruelty, ruthlessness, and destruction are merely terrible necessities of learning how to fulfill a basic psychical function. A comparative example illustrates the difference between psychical cruelty and physical violence. A little girl, aged one year, was brought to Winnicott for treatment of severe fits. In addition to the fits, the child had a medical

history of gastroenteritis and occasional incontinence. Winnicott records three consecutive consultations with the mother and child. In each session, he begins by taking the child and placing her on his knee while he conversed with her mother. The first time he held her, Winnicott notes that she made “a furtive attempt to bite my knuckle.”

During her second visit, she again bit his knuckle, nearly hard enough, he comments, to draw blood. The child combined knuckle-biting with a game of throwing spatulas on the floor. Winnicott narrates the events of the third consultation:

She again bit my knuckle very severely, this time without showing guilt feelings, and then played the game of biting and throwing away spatulas; while on my knee she became able to enjoy play. After a while she began to finger her toes, and so I had her shoes and socks removed. The result of this was a period of experimentation which absorbed her whole interest. It looked, to her great satisfaction, that whereas spatulas can be put to the mouth, thrown away and lost, toes cannot be pulled off (italics original).

The child in this case invents a game that uses three different objects: knuckles, spatulas, and toes. The child’s use of each of these objects signifies an important process of psychical maturation, for Winnicott. The act of biting his knuckles demonstrates her

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47 Winnicott, Playing and Reality, 66.
48 Winnicott always had a cup filled with spatulas at hand in his consultation room. His so-called “Spatula Game” is a diagnostic tool that he invented to help detect psychological development in infants. Infants between the ages of 5-13 months should interact with a spatula in certain predictable patterns. The child’s normal or abnormal use of the spatulas functioned as a heuristic to predict internal anxieties, conflicts, or impediments to healthy development. For further information, see Madeleine Davis, Boundary and Space: An Introduction to the Work of D. W. Winnicott (Philadelphia: Brunner/Mazel, 1981), 17-22; and Jan Abram, “Donald Woods Winnicott (1896-1971): A brief introduction,” International Journal of Psychoanalysis 89, no. 6 (2008), 1196.
49 Winnicott, Playing and Reality, 66.
attempt to determine if he is a ‘me’ object or a ‘not-me’ object. The physical violence of this act shows that she is not yet capable of using a transitional object. As the child develops, she discovers the spatulas, shiny metal tongue depressors, as a more appropriate and useful transitional object than Winnicott’s knuckles. The game of throwing the spatulas shows that the child’s growing awareness that a spatula is a ‘not-me’ object. Winnicott uses italics to highlight a moment of revelation. The progression of these games from biting to throwing to the child’s ultimately epiphany, that spatulas “can be put to the mouth, thrown away and lost” but “toes cannot be pulled off,” illustrates an internal, psychical shift from omnipotence and embodied aggression to mediated, psychical cruelty. By tolerating the child’s outward aggression and cruelty that Winnicott is able to co-create a space of mutual respect and cooperation. The result: While on his knee, the child learned how to truly play.

Summing up this ethics of playing as psychical cruelty in a witty little dialogue, Winnicott quips, “The subject says to the object: ‘I destroy you’, and the object is there to receive the communication. From now on the subject says: ‘Hullo object!’ ‘I destroyed you.’ ‘I love you.’ ‘You have value for me because of your survival of my destruction of you.’ ‘While I am loving you I am all the time destroying you in (unconscious) fantasy.’”  

In this imaginary dialogue between subject and object, Winnicott advocates for the positive value of destructiveness. Indeed, he emphasizes that, “There is no anger,” in destruction; there is only, “joy at the object’s survival.”

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50 Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 120-121.
51 For commentary on aggression and destructiveness in Winnicott’s work, see *Winnicott and the Psychoanalytic Tradition: Interpretation and Other Psychoanalytic Issues*, ed. Lesley Caldwell (London: Karnac Books Ltd., 2007), 24-32; Brooke Hopkins, “Wordsworth, Winnicott, and the Claims of the ‘Real’,” *Studies in Romanticism* 37, no. 2
So, what happened to String Boy? Was psychotherapy able to help him find joy? String Boy’s case didn’t end well. In the years succeeding their initial consultation, Winnicott continued to maintain contact with String Boy’s family and receive updates on the boy’s development. As he grew, String Boy affected a ‘tough guy’ persona, while at heart, remaining sensitive and vulnerable. Winnicott notes that String Boy owned a family of teddy bears, who he nursed and attended to with great care, loving them and sewing them trousers by hand. String Boy’s string play recurred when he was about 9 years old, at the same time that his mother was due to go into the hospital for another operation. It manifested once again in a particularly morbid way four years later, during another bout of the mother’s depression. One day, String Boy’s father arrived home from work to notice that his son had used a piece of rope to suspend himself from a tree while he lay, so entwined, limp as if dead. Understanding that this was a test, the boy’s father ignored him and the child tired of the game. When he tried the same game with his mother the next day, she received a dreadful shock and ran to him immediately, believing her son to have hanged himself. Winnicott added a final note to the case in 1969, fourteen years after his initial treatment of the child. Reflecting mournfully on the boy’s adult behavior, he laments that the boy’s illness never fully resolved. In adolescence, he was unable to complete his education, developed an addiction to drugs and ultimately developed a character that was negligent and lackadaisical.

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52 Winnicott, Playing and Reality, 125.
Playing as cruelty shows that, although the transitional phenomenon includes the mental capacity for aggression, destructiveness, and ruthlessness, it also represents a gateway to a configuration of mental processes, including playing, social relationships, and joy. For Juliet Mitchell, a practicing psychoanalyst, Winnicott’s conceptualization of playing exemplifies “a quintessentially ‘psychosocial’ theory of the mind.”

“Throughout his life and work,” she continues, “Winnicott was concerned with the conditions for subjectivity and it was his unique insights into the mutually constitutive relations between the psyche and the social, the internal and external worlds – particularly the ‘transitional phenomena’ – that allowed him to produce a truly psychosocial theory of the subject within the Object Relations tradition of psychoanalysis.” Mitchell’s larger claim is that hatred and aggression are missing from the theory of hysteria. She seeks to recover a more accurate etiology of psychosociality that incorporates hatred and the death drive. Her focusing question is: What changes the small child’s traumatic experience of ego-annihilation into a social relationship which, at any point, can break down again into the violence of the original experience – when playing in the nursery becomes war on the battlefield or hysteria in the bedroom?” In short: How does hatred become love? The infant’s first task is to learn how to be ruthless, to be aggressive enough to tolerate reality without feeling either too dependent or too persecuted by the external world. Mitchell argues that the infant’s second task is to cope with the trauma of discovering that there are other people in reality who are, in

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turn, constantly and ruthlessly destroying their mental representations of you, too. This she classifies as sibling trauma.

Although Mitchell recognizes the importance of the stress Winnicott lays on the role of aggression in child development, her views on play fall more within the Kleinian tradition than the Winnicottian tradition. She contends that play is compensatory for the necessity of hatred, aggression, and cruelty in human behavior. Play facilitates the transformation of hatred and sibling trauma into love. As I’ve argued, Winnicottian play is not the compensatory force that soothes or repairs an ethical wound to the Other. Rather, a close reading of Winnicott’s theory of play shows that play is constitutive of aggression and healthy destructive urges in the personality.

For Winnicott, the capacity for cruel play differentiates what he calls “creative living” from biological life. On the one hand, “a whole life may be built on the pattern of reacting to stimuli. Withdraw the stimuli and the individual has no life,” remarks Winnicott.56 Creative living in adult life, on the other hand, requires the “retention throughout life of something that belongs properly to infant experience: the ability to create the world.”57 Creative living represents the adult version of playing in childhood. And String Boy’s failure to achieve creative living tells the story of what happens to individuals when they do not learn how to play while they are infants.

The concept of creative living is intrinsically tied to Winnicott’s medical ethics and his historical identity. Notably, in “Creativity and Its Origins,” he lapses from discussing the clinical usefulness of the concept of creativity in treating disorders like

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57 Winnicott, Home is Where We Start From, 40.
schizophrenia into an oddly placed allusion to World War II. He muses, “when one reads of individuals dominated at home, or spending their lives in concentration camps or under lifelong persecution because of a cruel political régime, one first of all feels that it is only a few of the victims who remain creative.” This passage insinuates a sense that Winnicott viewed his role as a doctor as being accompanied by both medical and civic and political responsibilities. He advocates, not only for recognizing the psychological value of play, but for the social value of cruelty, too. If mental illness results from a sense of futility as having to comply with the demands of an external reality beyond our power to exploit, Winnicott implies that health comes from aggression, from an individual’s ability to sustain the illusion of contact, use, and relatedness. The opposite of compliance, conformity, submission, and reaction is creative living, or the ability to adapt to, construct, and shape an intermediate zone between external reality and internal life. In a creative life, an individual is able to successfully fit into the world rather than be overwhelmed by it.

What we confront in Winnicott’s work and development as a thinker is the emergence of a theory of playing that deals with human aggression as both a psychological, social, and political problem. Winnicott’s views of psychopathology and his practice of psychotherapy were deeply implicated in his theory of play. His views on the role of psychotherapy are complex. He confesses that psychoanalysts “tend to think of health in terms of the state of ego defences. We say it is healthy when these defences are not rigid, etc. But we seldom reach the point at which we can start to describe what

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58 Winnicott, Playing and Reality, 91.
life is like apart from illness or absence of illness.”\textsuperscript{59} His statement implies that psychotherapy must do more for a patient than merely cure neuroses. Winnicott understands illness as an inability to play and the therapeutic encounter as an exercise whose function is to help patients learn how to play.\textsuperscript{60} Playing within the therapist’s office involves troubleshooting problems or blockages that impede an individual’s ability to use or relate to the environment, or external world. For individuals who did not receive good-enough mothering, the task of the therapist is to facilitate this process in adulthood. In essence, the therapist in psychotherapy recapitulates the role of the good-enough mother, who protects and supports the infant from psychological trauma as he learns how to be aggressive and sustain the weight of a self-created world in early infancy. Ultimately, the psychoanalyst aims to help the patient achieve creative living by coaching the patient on how to be cruel.

Artaud, too, thought that cruelty was the key to achieving happiness. He viewed cruelty as a delirious, exalted, revelatory experience that “extends the frontiers of what is called reality.”\textsuperscript{61} In “The Theater and Plague,” he builds on this notion of boundless transmission and externalization. “If the essential theater is like the plague,” he exclaims, “it is not because it is contagious, but because like the plague it is the revelation, the bringing forth, the exteriorization of a depth of latent cruelty by means of which all the perverse possibilities of the mind, whether of an individual or a people, are localized.”\textsuperscript{62} Comparing the effects of cruelty on the mind to the operations of plague on the body,

\textsuperscript{59} Winnicott, \textit{Playing and Reality}, 133.
\textsuperscript{60} For Winnicott’s remarks on playing as a form of psychotherapy, see “Playing: A Theoretical Statement,” \textit{Playing and Reality}, 51-70.
\textsuperscript{61} Artaud, \textit{The Theater and Its Double}, 13.
\textsuperscript{62} Artaud, \textit{The Theater and Its Double}, 30.
Artaud suggests the theater brings forth external signs of the mind’s innermost workings, like a pox onto the skin. Cruelty disturbs the senses. It rouses “perverse” desires. It externalizes “latent” urges. At the same time, cruelty shows the way to a deeper, richer, but also more frightening way to perceive the world. It is a world in motion. A world at play.

Theater focuses and concentrates what Artaud calls “hunger,” an appetite for cruelty, but what Winnicott calls playing. While cruelty is, for Artaud, the means to experience aesthetic transcendence, Winnicott takes the idea of cruelty further by identifying joy in the world’s survival of mental destruction. In his theory, playing and aggression are, I argue, also constitutive of love and respect for others. If mental objects are not ruthlessly destroyed and made real, they would instead linger and torment the mind. Loving these intractable mental representations would be the equivalent of self-love. Destroying objects aggressively, ruthlessly, cruelly, is what places the objects outside of the psyche and, therefore, psychologically prepares them to receive love. In this scheme, ethics is not, as B. Johnson argues, only predicated on trust.63 Winnicottian ethics of play are also predicated on persistence; resilience; resolve. For Winnicott, without cruelty, we cannot find joy.

For me, the most important legacy of Winnicott’s theory is his lesson to be self-aware, to have the ability to reflect on our actions, and to know that we are separate from others. The ability to live creatively is the ability to live in a world of transitional objects, a world dressed up in the illusion of the transitional phenomenon. Despite this quality of externality, the individual must retain the belief that he is able to relate to people and use

objects of this external reality with respect. In Winnicott’s theory of psychological health, playing and cruelty are the two core metaphors that encapsulate what makes life valuable, beautiful, joyful, and worth living.
Ties that Bind: Togetherness, Attachment, and the Ethics of Play

*It may be that proximity is all you know of love – I, thank God, have not been so deprived.*

– Harry Harlow

Eight dark, round eyes peer out of four wrinkly, heart-shaped faces. Three spindly arms reach out to clutch at slight shoulders and waists. Two of the infants suck on tiny thumbs as the eyes gaze anxiously into the camera’s lens. This photograph, taken at the Harlow Primate Laboratory at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, shows four infant rhesus monkeys, nicknamed “together-together” monkeys by Harry Harlow, the scientist who conducted experiments to understand the impact of bad mothering, peer social relations, and play on infant psychological development.

![Infant rhesus “together-together” monkeys.](image.png)

Figure 1. Infant rhesus “together-together” monkeys.
Harlow’s experiments were fodder for the public imagination, even during his life. His research received popular media coverage in prominent newspapers such as the New York Times.\(^1\) His cultural image was that of a prickly, yet charismatic scientist, at the forefront of ascertaining new models for understanding human social interactions.\(^2\) Harlow’s experiments on monkeys investigated infant instinctual needs for maternal care and the long-term psychological effects of disrupting the mother-infant bond.

While Harlow’s “together-together” monkeys are among the most famous of his test subjects, he ran numerous experiments probing the outcomes of different social and familial configurations between rhesus monkeys. Researchers working on primate subjects in the 1950s imported rhesus monkeys from India. However, the imported monkeys often arrived ill and infected the monkey colonies living in research facilities. In 1956, after losing the majority of its monkey colony to an epidemic of tuberculosis, the University of Wisconsin became one of the first research sites to begin breeding rhesus monkeys domestically for experimental uses.\(^3\) To prevent disease from spreading and killing the newly established colony, monkey caretakers followed rigid procedures whereby they removed newborn monkeys from their mothers within hours of birth and kept them in isolated cages where the vulnerable infants would have little chance of contracting illnesses. It was at this time that Harlow’s team noticed the infant monkeys

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\(^2\) Lauren Slater, Opening Skinner’s Box: Great Psychological Experiments of the Twentieth Century (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2004), 133-156.

\(^3\) Harry Harlow, “The Monkey as a Psychological Subject,” Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science 42, no. 4 (2008), 336-347.
developing strange behaviors, which would become central to his later experiments. The infant monkeys would cling desperately to the cheesecloth diapers that covered the bottoms of their cages and when the soiled diapers were exchanged for fresh ones, the monkeys often became despondent, sometimes even dying. These upsetting outcomes motivated Harlow to design controlled experiments to examine the early infantile needs of the monkeys more intentionally.

There is something visceral about Harlow’s experiments with monkeys that elevates these stories from sterile scientific procedures into animal fables with the power to convey a deeper truth about the impact of human relationships on the formation of moral identity.

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5 The literary critic, M.H. Abrams defines the form of fable as a subclass of allegory. For Abrams, allegory uses literal representations to signify a second, figurative order of meaning, which conveys some kind of thesis. Animal fables, in particular, use beasts, which often talk or act like humans, to dramatize a moral, often included in the form of an epigraph. While Harlow’s stories are not fables in the classical Aesopian tradition, I argue that they conform to the form insofar as they use animal actors to illustrate his scientific thesis about love, which he summed up in several short poems published with his article documenting his experiments. For Abram’s definition of fables, see “Allegory,” from *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1999), 5-7.
Two of his chief preoccupations were ascertaining the effects on maternal deprivation and the role of peer play on infant monkey development of intellectual and social identity. To this end, he designed experiments in which infant monkeys were subjected to social deprivation chambers; bottle fed by wire or terrycloth “mother-machines;” and abused by violent “Iron Maidens,” which pumped freezing water on the infants or shot streams of air hard enough to dislodge and hurl them across their cages. While Harlow observed that the infant monkeys who were deprived of both parents and friends developed disturbing and abnormal adult behaviors, infant monkeys who were allowed to play with peers demonstrated decidedly fewer bizarre or deviant behaviors. Even when
subjected to abusive or severely delinquent mothering, the together-together monkeys, those who spent time playing and bonding with other monkeys, were able to achieve nearly normal adult identities. Harlow coined the term ‘togetherness’ as his key term to describe the important role of social bonding in psychological development.

Harlow’s monkeys tell a story about power, conflict, and vulnerability, which is disturbing even as it is compelling. What I find fascinating about this animal fable is, in part, how his concept of togetherness reflects a larger cultural discourse about play, child-parent bonding, and a historically timely concern about the deeply human need to form social relationships. In this chapter, I analyze two scientific theories about love, one by Harlow and one by John Bowlby, which have their roots in cultural anxieties prevalent during the period between the end of World War I and the beginning of World War II. My argument reveals the porousness between literature and medicine by uncovering how these narratives are central to Harlow’s and Bowlby’s psychological concepts. Examining these stories help us to understand a cultural relationship between play and the traumatic history of war in the 20th century.

During the interwar period, many psychologists turned their attention from theorizing the place of cruelty in the human mind to seeking compassion. Second generation psychoanalysts, in particular, struggled to reconcile Freud’s teachings with national problems confronting them. Freud’s metaphors for mental life tended to stress the role of conflict in psychic development. Even in Freud’s depiction of a child’s

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7 As my chapter on D.W. Winnicott demonstrated, the teachings of Melanie Klein, a leading interpreter of Freudian psychoanalysis, articulated a dark, disturbing vision of childhood mental life as anxious and sadistic. Emphasizing Freud’s concept of the *death drive*, Kleinian psychoanalysis exudes a sense of pessimism about human nature, which
earliest familial relationships, his theories emphasize jealousy, anxiety, and antagonism. In the face of war and real international conflict, the public longed for theories about the child’s bond to its mother that framed this archetypical relationship in terms of love, compassion, and security. Within this historical climate, the child’s bond with its mother became a fecund site for psychological inquiry and scrutiny.

Bowlby, a trained psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, and the co-founder of attachment theory, was among the psychoanalytic theorists who were actively investigating these issues. Bowlby’s attachment theory posits the human need to form relationships as a primal part of an infant’s development of identity. At the center of attachment theory is another story, which resonates with the tale of Harlow’s together-together monkeys. Bowlby, a keen observationalist, drew on experimental data gathered by Harlow and Mary Ainsworth, co-founder of attachment theory, to construct his theory. The Strange Situation, the experimental procedure pioneered by Ainsworth, tells a story about the role of dependency and vulnerability in the development of human infant identity. Attachment, in Bowlby’s language, describes a concept closely related to Harlow’s notion of togetherness. Harlow and Bowlby were both fascinated with discovering a narrative to explain the puzzle of the child’s bond with its parents and the nature of love.

The scholarly field of work on Harlow and Bowlby has been dominated by scientific and psychoanalytic appraisals. While Harlow’s work was controversial for the arguably registers the trauma of the First World War. Yet second-generation psychoanalysts, many of whom trained under Klein and her disciples, challenged her teachings and her unequivocal conviction that problems in childhood originated wholly in intrapsychical drive conflicts. For a genealogy of psychoanalytic perspectives in the 20th century, see William Borden, *Contemporary Psychodynamic Theory and Practice*, (Chicago: Lyceum, 2009); and Stephen A. Mitchell and Margaret J. Black. *Freud and Beyond: A History of Psychoanalytic Thought*, (New York: Basic Books, 1995).
nature of his experiments on live subjects, the results of his research has been
incorporated into psychological textbooks without significant debate.\textsuperscript{8} Bowlby’s work,
by comparison, has inspired strong, polarized reactions from the scholarly community.
Psychoanalysts have taken Bowlby’s theory to task for its turn outwards and
prioritization of external factors over intra-drive conflict.\textsuperscript{9} Peter Fongay notes that,
“There is bad blood between psychoanalysis and attachment theory”.\textsuperscript{10} For the past five
decades, psychoanalytic opponents of Bowlby’s have accused him of an array of sins,
which include betraying classical drive theory, ignoring the role of unconscious psychical
processes, and flattening a theory of complex internal motivational systems. In the field
of developmental psychology, attachment theory has gained more traction, though it has
been critiqued for its limited empirical evidence.\textsuperscript{11}

In comparison to the significant body of scientific and medical literature engaging
Harlow’s and Bowlby’s work, humanist scholars have largely ignored the cultural
significance of their turn to literary modes of collecting and disseminating their research.
In fact, only two books by humanist scholars have been published on Bowlby’s work,
both of which belong to historians of science. Margo Vicedo gives a history of “mother

\textsuperscript{8} For a history of how introductory psychology textbooks have incorporated Harlow’s
work into the oeuvre, see Marga Vicedo, “Playing the Game: Psychology Textbooks
\textsuperscript{9} For two psychoanalytic rebuttals to Bowlby’s theory made by his contemporaries, see
Max Schur, “Discussion of Dr. John Bowlby’s Paper,” \textit{Psychoanalytic Study of the Child}
15 (1960), 63-84; and René A. Spitz, “Discussion of Dr. Bowlby’s Paper,”
\textsuperscript{10} Peter Fongay, \textit{Attachment Theory and Psychoanalysis} (New York: Other Press, 1999),
1.
\textsuperscript{11} See E. Lynn Schneider, “Attachment Theory and Research: Review of the Literature,”
\textit{Clinical Social Work Journal} 19, no. 3 (1991), 251-266; and Sandra Bucci, Nicola H.
Roberts, Adam N. Danquah, and Katherine Berry, “Using attachment theory to inform
the design and delivery of mental health services: A systematic review of the literature,”
love” from the end of the Second World War to the 1970s, offering a feminist rebuttal to scientific theories that have reified gendered parental roles and devalued women’s role in the traditional nuclear family by portraying maternal sentiment as natural and organic. Michal Shapira examines the ways that psychoanalysts, including Anna Freud, Melanie Klein, D.W. Winnicott, and John Bowlby, shaped historically contingent notions of childhood during the interwar period. Neither of these books offers a literary analysis of Bowlby’s theory of attachment. This chapter seeks to fill in this gap by offering a literary reading of these texts.

My close reading of Harlow’s and Bowlby’s stories illuminates intersections between literary and medical discourses about play, childhood, and psychoanalysis during the interwar period. In the first half of my chapter, I grapple with ethical dilemmas that arise from an analysis of Harlow’s experiments exploiting love and play to promote intellectual development in infant monkeys. Harlow, in a singular and highly idiosyncratic move, used poems and other literary media to disseminate the findings of his research, transforming his experiments into animal fables that convey a moral thesis about the role that love plays in child development. Harlow’s fables offer a cautionary

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tale about the dangers of asserting too much power over a child’s early relationships. The latter half of this chapter focuses on Bowlby’s theory of attachment. My reading of Bowlby addresses the historical stakes of using literary and narrative forms to convey scientific knowledge. The literary techniques that Bowlby adopted to explain the nature of child-parent bonds create a microcosm for analyzing cultural anxieties about love and war.

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Play features prominently in the experiments designed by Harry Harlow and Mary Ainsworth. But beyond the discipline of developmental psychology, play has been a site for heated discussion amongst humanists. Throughout this dissertation, I have responded to a certain genealogy of play outlined in my introduction, which highlights the gradual emergence of a tension within disciplines of the social sciences, in particular anthropology, sociology, and psychology, and in the humanities, including philosophy, history, and literary studies, between a desire to understand play and a desire to control it. Beginning in the 18th century, cultural commentators have privileged a paradigm of imaginative play, which emphasizes the cultivation of moral growth, while at the same time facing the temptations of controlling or exploiting it. The cultural history in which this dissertation intervenes functions as a conceptual lynchpin for this chapter in particular. This section draws on the debate about play in the social sciences and humanities to develop a set of ethical questions and concerns about the uses of play that will serve as a theoretical apparatus for my larger argument.

Within the broader cultural discourse on imaginative play, a particular strain has emerged in the 20th century, which focuses on toy-play. Cultural critics and
anthropologists have viewed play with toys as especially relevant to promoting children’s moral and intellectual development.\textsuperscript{15} Exemplifying this tradition, Roland Barthes expressed concern when he read modern toys as portents of a vulgar and machinist adult world, which toys prepare children to enter. Modern and predominantly plastic toys, argued Barthes, are replicas of adult objects, reduced and miniaturized to satisfy the needs of a child, who is conceptualized as little more than a miniature person. The toy “prefigures” the adult world.\textsuperscript{16} Barthes meant this literally. Toys are, in fact, small figures that stand in place for the objects the child will deal when he reaches maturity. The games that children play with toys repeat, again quite literally, the preoccupations of adults. War. Bureaucracy. Ugliness. In contrast to this atonal plastic toy-world, the Barthesian sense of toy-play is one in which a toy is not merely a tool to train children, but one that helps the child invent a world rich in wonder and joy. Barthes romanticizes a certain notion of play carried on with what he considers to be classic, wooden toys. Wood embodies an organic, sensibility that is missing from the plastic and metal objects of Barthes’s modern era.

Barthes portrays toys as instruments that promote the development of certain desirable character traits in children. He disparages toys that curb the growth of imagination and instill consumerist values in children, lamenting that the literalness of toys makes it impossible for the child to invent the world. Barthes associates toy-play with opposing models of identity – the owner versus the creator, the user versus the

\textsuperscript{15} Also see Lois Rostow Kuznets, who offers a literary study of toys. By defining a toy world that is liminal, a magical realm that is free from ethics of the real and objective world, Kuznet frames a parallel reality of paradox and excess, desire and anxiety, \textit{When Toys Come Alive: Narratives of Animation, Metamorphosis, and Development} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

inventor. Wooden toys encourage moral values, while plastic toys cultivate material ones. One implication of these binaries is, of course, Barthes’s preference for imagination and wooden toys. But more universally, there is a clear insinuation that the type of toys with which a child plays matters; that toys have power to foreshadow, and to influence, a child’s adult identity. Barthes’s reading of toys accentuates the growing emphasis within cultural discourses on play’s role in cultivating moral growth in children.

While assumptions about the usefulness of play have been dominant in philosophy and the social sciences, literary criticism offers a way to question and resist this narrative. Harry Harlow belonged to a generation of psychologists who sought to anatomize the meaning of love. The fable of Harlow’s monkeys conveys a cautionary tale, which warns against attempts to control child development. Harlow’s experiments on monkeys tested whether it was possible to spur the growth of intellectual development in the infants by exploiting love and play. Rather than generating intellectually superior monkeys, Harlow’s experiments resulted in the creation of monstrous traits in his test subjects. My close reading analyzes the way that his key terms underwent a shift to represent his growing understanding of the complex relationship between play, love, and compassion.

Harlow, a trained behavioral psychologist, hypothesized that love could be defined as an innate need for contact and proximity, which gives an infant a feeling of safety and security. To test his hypothesis, he ran controversial experiments on monkeys, which involved subjecting them to extreme emotional and social deprivation during infancy. He designed complimentary surrogate mother dolls; one, which was constructed
from a wooden block covered in sponge rubber and wrapped in a soft terrycloth towel, behind which a lightbulb was placed to create warmth; and a second, which was made of bare wire.\textsuperscript{17}

![Figure 3. Infant rhesus monkey with wire doll and terrycloth doll.](image)

Commenting on the dolls, Harlow claimed that he had invented a superior mother, “a mother soft, warm, and tender, a mother with infinite patience, a mother available twenty-four hours a day, a mother that never scolded her infant and never struck or bit her baby in anger.”\textsuperscript{18} These “mother-machines,” as Harlow dubbed them, were each equipped to hold a bottle from which the infant monkeys could feed. The dolls were placed side-by-side in the infant monkeys’ cages, which were otherwise kept entirely isolated. While half of the monkeys received their bottle from the wire dolls, the other

\textsuperscript{17} Harlow, “Affectional Responses,” 422.
half were fed by the warm, soft dolls. Regardless of which surrogate fed the infants, they bonded with the terrycloth dolls and spent their time clinging to the terrycloth doll, clinging to her and seeking comfort from her as they would from a real mother.

Harlow’s experiments began as attempts to unlock the psychological mechanisms behind love, but with the ulterior motive of investigating ways to control, manipulate, or substitute maternal care for alternative models to maximize intellectual development in infants. During his test subjects’ infancy, they were routinely administered learning exercises. Harlow carefully logged the monkeys’ affectional responses and intellectual development. He used toy-play as an index for the nature of the infant monkey’s love for the surrogate mother dolls. He placed the infants in a “strange room,” an unfamiliar enclosure that contained toys for the infants.

![](image)

Figure 4. Rhesus monkey raised on terrycloth doll playing in a strange room.

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When the infants were deposited in the strange room without their mother dolls, they displayed signs of terror, cowering, rocking, sucking a thumb, and frantically clutching their heads and bodies. When, however, an infant monkey was placed in the strange room accompanied by its mother doll, the infant tentatively explored the space and played with the toys, returning intermittently to seek reassurance from the mother dolls. Comparing the behavior of the monkeys raised by the dolls to monkeys raised by real mothers, Harlow found no significant difference in the monkeys’ behavior. Yet the monkeys raised on dolls showed greater weight gain and earlier intellectual growth than their peers raised by real mothers. These initial results led Harlow to conclude that, while an infant’s particular caretaker is non-interchangeable, this caretaker need not be the infant’s mother to achieve equal or superior physical and intellectual development.

Harlow chose to convey his research findings to the public in his own eccentric and highly idiosyncratic manner, by writing and illustrating a graphic novel about his experiments and penning several poems about love in the animal kingdom. His choice to use animal fables to communicate the results and implications of his findings speaks to a degree of porousness between literature and medicine. While his scientific publications tend to be dry, descriptive, and include minimal interpretation, his poems offer a perplexing site to question and engage his claims. Harlow’s stories transgress the line between scientific reportage and literary meaning.

The move to a poetic medium speaks to an acknowledgement of the deeply human need to form relationships; and yet, Harlow’s early publications depict love as almost comically simplistic. In one poem, titled “The Rhinocerus,” he declares:

The rhino’s skin is thick and tough,
And yet this skin is soft enough
That baby rhinos always sense,
A love enormous and intense."^{22}

This short poem exemplifies Harlow’s conceptualization of love as passive, even mechanical. The mother’s skin provides the infant with an unmediated sense of love. All of Harlow’s poems focus on the relationship between physical contact between mother and infant and the sense of love and security it automatically inspires. For instance, a mother elephant’s “touch on baby’s skin / Endears the heart that beats within."^{23} The mother hippopotamus’s “cuddle, push, and shove / Elicits tons of baby love.”^{24} Yet this notion of love, defined foremost by security, physical proximity, and contact, strikes me as affectively shallow, and fundamentally at odds with expressive, figurative language. In his poetry, Harlow fails to suggest that love requires the baby to possess a sense of interiority or compassion.

Unfortunately, though perhaps unsurprisingly, Harlow’s first animal fable ended in tragedy. After publishing his initial findings, he discovered that the monkeys raised on surrogate mother dolls had severe social, emotional, and behavioral problems.^{25} When these monkeys were placed in situations that required them to play with or respond to the social cues of other monkeys, they utterly failed. The monkeys raised by the dolls ignored other monkeys entirely, were sexually unfit, and when artificially inseminated, turned out to be abusive and negligent caretakers.

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The fable of Harlow’s monstrous monkeys cautions against oversimplifying the importance of play and parenting in identity development. Ironically, Harlow’s so-called perfect mother-machines raised cruel and heartless offspring. Whereas Harlow uses the language of psychopathology to describe the monstrous behaviors displayed by his monkeys, I am interested in a problem that I perceive as having to do with compassion, or more accurately the lack of compassion. Raised in social isolation, the monkeys had developed intellectually but not emotionally. While the monkeys’ toy-play gave an outward sense of autonomy and intellectual development, their lack of compassion reveals that they had no awareness of the feelings or thoughts of other individuals. Thinking back to Harlow’s experiment with the strange room: the monkeys explored the strange room while seeking comfort and reassurance from their mother dolls, and played with the toys provided. Harlow interpreted play as an outward sign for health and normative development. Yet this interpretation of play is misleading. In fact, the long-term results of Harlow’s experiments show that play is as much a psychological experience as a phenomenological one.

Shifting from the concept of love to that of togetherness, Harlow defined a different theoretical paradigm for his animal fable. Harlow’s adoption of a new key term for his experiments suggests his growing awareness of a relationship between identity, play, and compassion. Experimenting with a new group of monkeys, Harlow provisioned the infants with the same surrogate mother dolls as his initial test subjects, but with the
significant variation that these infants were raised in pairs of what he termed “age-mates.”

Instead of clinging to the surrogate mother dolls, the age-mates tended to cling to one another. When age-mates were socialized with other monkeys raised under the same conditions, they formed “choo-choo trains,” sitting one after another and clinging to the waist of the monkey in front. Harlow called these groups ‘together-together’ monkeys to indicate their deep social and emotional bonds. Although the together-together monkeys exhibited delayed adult social behaviors, preferring at first to cling rather than to properly play, given time they overcame the circumstances of their birth. Unlike the monstrous monkeys who continued to display psychopathic and autistic behaviors in adulthood, the together-together monkeys were eventually able to socialize, mate, and parent normally.

Figure 5. Together-together monkeys as infants and at 1 month old.

The fable of together-together monkeys reveals an unexpected moral: compassionate togetherness is a phenomenon more complex than simple love and not at all guaranteed to accompany outward signs of affection or intellectual development. This interpretation of Harlow’s data stands out more emphatically in a literary close reading than in his own methodological discussion. My analysis of Harlow’s fables reveals that his early experiments on love as security gave too simple, too linear an account of the effect that parental deprivation has on the development of identity. By contrast, placing compassion at the center of identity development led Harlow to more complex assumptions about the relationship between the vertical and horizontal planes along which identity develops.

On a basic level, togetherness incorporates the desire for physical proximity apparent in Harlow’s definition of love, a literal understanding of being together. Yet, on a more sophisticated level, togetherness symbolizes an awareness of the thoughts, feelings, or desires of others and the capacity to relate to others with compassion. Togetherness, moreover, implies a sense of social identity built on this sense of compassion, exchange, and equality. Although the mother dolls satisfied the early monkeys’ need for physical togetherness, this inanimate relationship was devoid of emotional togetherness. Indeed, it hardly needs stating that the surrogate mothers had no thoughts or emotions to detect, even if the infants had sought them.

What I find fascinating is that, in shifting from the concept of love as security to emphasizing the essential value of compassion in togetherness, Harlow also shifts from trying to control the vertical relationships that define intellectual development, to highlight the importance of the horizontal relationships that produce an individual’s
identity. His early experiments aimed to show that the vertical parent-child relationships can be bypassed without affecting the linear development of intellect and autonomy. His later experiments with together-together monkeys privilege the role of horizontal relationships and represents a model of contingent (rather than linear) social and emotional development. The latter model reveals that forming an identity is not simply a process of overcoming vertical barriers, but also a process of being open to exchanges with peers.

My argument has traced the ramifications of an ethical debate about the dangers of using play or love to control child development. By analyzing Harlow’s animal fables, I engaged with the scientific stakes of maximizing human potential and manipulating the human need for relationships. In the second half of this chapter, I turn to examining the interdisciplinary and historical stakes of this issue. Harlow’s research on togetherness contributed important empirical evidence to support John Bowlby’s theory of attachment.

In their theoretical preoccupations, Bowlby and Harlow exhibited much consonance. They both sought narrative explanations for the mystery of a child’s love for its parents. They both understood love as a function irreducibly linked to separation, deprivation, and loss. And they both turned to literary and narrative techniques in their investigations of the nature of this singular emotional experience. Yet “it was not,” writes psychologist Frank C.P. van der Horst, “self-evident for a British ethologically oriented psychiatrist and an American animal behaviorist to meet in those days. In the 1950s, there was a great barrier between ethologists (who were mostly biologists by
training) and students of animal behavior (mostly psychologists).” 27 John Bowlby’s close and productive interdisciplinary collaboration with Harlow was, for its day, daring and original. 28 Close reading these theorists in relation to one another creates rich opportunities for situating tensions between literature and psychology, play and ethics, and parents and children within the specific historical context of the interwar period.

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Today, scientists recognize attachment theory as “one of the most ambitious attempts to formulate a comprehensive theory of personality, emotional development and psychopathology of the post-Freudian era.” 29 Bowlby’s theory represents an important intervention in the history of child development. Exploring how his system of psychological attachment frames the study of child-parent bonds as a microcosm for issues of social stability, reveals the ways that his theory reflects the cultural anxieties of his times. His first formal statements of attachment theory were given before the British Psycho-Analytic Society in the late 1950s. These papers formed the basis behind his

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28 Bowlby was first introduced to the field of animal ethology in the early 1950s. Beginning in the summer of 1951, Bowlby became interested in the work of Konrad Lorenz, Nikolaas Tinbergen, Robert Hinde, and Harry Harlow. Upon learning of Harlow’s experiments on parent-infant relationships in monkeys from Robert Hinde, Bowlby introduced himself by letter, but soon they were also exchanging papers and meeting at conferences. Bowlby’s interest in ethology prefigures his developing preference for observational research over the psychoanalytic methods of free association and historical reconstruction. For more information on Bowlby’s engagement with ethology, see van der Horst, John Bowlby, 108; and Frank C.P. van der Horst and Marinus H. van IJzendoorn, “John Bowlby and Ethology: An Annotated Interview with Robert Hinde,” Attachment and Human Development 9, no. 4 (2007), 321-335.

thinking in the most unified statement of his theory: the *Attachment Trilogy*. Bowlby argued for a major reorientation of his contemporaries’ psychological and psychoanalytic perspectives regarding parent-child bonds and the development of identity. In *Attachment* (1969), he situates his theory in relation to psychoanalytic views of love and mourning; evaluates the perplexing behaviors that children manifest when they undergo a separation from their parents; and explains his view on the nature of the child’s tie to its mother.  

*Separation* (1973) examines archetypes of human sorrow, analyzes behaviors associated with anxiety and fear in children, and relates anxiety in children to the concept of parental sensitivity. *Loss* (1980), as its eponymous title suggests, examines loss, mourning, and bereavement in adults and children, notably challenging the entrenched belief in medicine that children neither love, nor mourn the loss of their parents.  

Although the Trilogy was published in the decades following the end of World War II, Bowlby’s theory of attachment is, nonetheless, deeply informed by the historical tensions of the 1920s and 30s. The roots of attachment theory, I argue, have their origins in cultural anxieties prevalent during the period between the end of World War I and the beginning of World War II. The mass violence to which people were subjected during the Great War coupled with growing anticipation and anxiety about World War II created a real, urgent need for new psychological treatments for trauma and explanatory frameworks that mapped the place of love, compassion, and civic engagement in mental life. Drawing on themes from psychoanalysis, many social discourses spanning law, public policy, education, and medicine turned to the family as the key unit of future

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social stability. This section complicates and historicizes my reading of Harlow’s key terms by adding an essential acknowledgement of the role that dependency and vulnerability play in forming secure familial relationships. My argument highlights the paradoxical way in which attachment signifies that an individual’s sense of security in their identity grows from an ability to feel dependent and vulnerable rather than independent and autonomous. Bowlby’s theory of attachment represents a microcosm for the ways that play became a symbol of familial stability.

In recent years, historians of science have begun to gather evidence to show how psychoanalysts were called upon to support inter- and post-war efforts to promote social and familial stability. Marga Vicedo argues that popularized versions of psychoanalytic and psychological theories, including those of Harlow and Bowlby, were used to reinforce traditional notions of the nuclear family. Through newspaper articles, magazine photos, and radio broadcasts, these depictions of heteronormative family life reified the idea that maternal love was innate and biological and that women’s primary cultural role was that of caretakers in social and scientific discourses. These endeavors to maintain the status quo, contends Vicedo, were part of an effort to reestablish social stability emanating from the family during these socially and politically turbulent times. The child’s love for its parents stood out as a site to investigate how familial stability was inseparable from more abstract understandings of social health.

While historians have begun to analyze the media that psychoanalysts used to participate in public interwar discourses, literary scholars have yet to interject their perspective on the narrative techniques they used to convey their messages. Storytelling represents an important part of Bowlby’s thinking and methodology. Quite notably, his
final book was a biography of Charles Darwin, Bowlby’s second greatest hero besides
Freud. This biography, which required significant archival research, straddles an unusual
boundary between a diagnostic history of Darwin’s various health problems and an
intellectual biography analyzing his life and works. In the Prologue to this text, Bowlby
justifies its significance by arguing “that it was [Darwin’s] grandfather’s generation that
shaped so much else in Darwin’s life: the social and economic circumstances in which it
was lived, the political causes he favoured, the kind of scientific problem that fascinated
him and, not least, the direction that his theorising took.”33 Thinking like a good
historian, Bowlby articulates a deep interest in juxtaposing psychological questions about
the operation of the mind with humanist concerns about the cultural meaning of these
functions.

Amidst the sea of clinical data Bowlby provides in the Trilogy, the most important
and intentionally constructed literary form in the Trilogy is, I contend, a parable.34
Bowlby’s theory of attachment works in conjunction with a scientific parable created by
Mary Ainsworth, his co-founder of attachment theory. They have been retrospectively
titled co-founders, in recognition of Ainsworth’s vital contributions to Bowlby’s

33 John Bowlby, Charles Darwin: A New Life (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1990),
14.
34 Similarly to fables, Abrams considers parable a subclass of allegory. Unlike fables,
parables are short narratives that use human figures to illuminate a comparison between
the specific characters of a story and a general thesis. As my discussion of Ainsworth’s
experimental protocol will reveal in greater detail, she and Bowlby extrapolated a general
thesis about archetypical patterns in human personality development from narratives of
specific children drawn from the experimental data. While the Strange Situation is not a
traditional parable, it nonetheless exhibits many characteristics of parable and highlights
Bowlby’s and Ainsworth’s penchant for narrative modes of understand scientific
principles. For Abram’s definition of parable see “Allegory,” Glossary, 7.
thinking. Her most significant contribution to the Trilogy came in the form of the only empirically and ethically sound experiment of its day for testing attachment in real children. Ainsworth, a Canadian-American developmental psychologist, perfected the Strange Situation, a protocol to measure human attachment under laboratory-controlled conditions. In this experiment structured as a miniature drama, a mother engages in toy-play with her child in the presence of a stranger. Play, a symbol of the child’s ability to tolerate the presence of the stranger, is used as an indicator for the quality and strength of the parent-child bond. This scientific parable presents a rich site to parse a cultural relationship between familial bonds and play.

Attachment represents a new psychological paradigm for understanding the relationship between parents and children. Prior to Bowlby’s attachment theory, psychologists depicted the relationship of the child to the parent through the analogy of food. At the turn of the 20th century, the dominant psychological theory of child-parent bonds asserted that infants are indifferent and utilitarian in the use of their caretakers. The Theory of Secondary Drives postulated that the experience love, construed along the lines of Harlow’s passive and mechanical sense of the term, was a mere byproduct of the mother’s (or mother substitute’s) ability meeting the infant’s desire for food. The Theory

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35 Frank C. P. van der Horst and Marga Vicedo present contradictory evidence for the quality of Ainsworth’s working relationship with Bowlby. Vicedo suggests that Bowlby coolly rejected all public acknowledgement of Ainsworth’s contributions to attachment theory, despite her desperate pleas. Van der Horst presents a study of Bowlby’s and Ainsworth’s partnership that reveals a robust and caring exchange of letters and ideas. See Vicedo, The Nature and Nurture of Love, 191-92; and van der Horst, John Bowlby, 131-152.

36 Bretherton notes, unlike classical psychoanalytic theory, Ainsworth’s Strange Situation is designed to be replicable (rather than idiosyncratic) and empirically sound. 


38 Bowlby, Attachment, 178.
of the Secondary Drives suggests that love is not an innate motivating factor in child development, but rather ancillary to more primal, biological needs. This paradigm reinforces a perception of an inherent callousness and utilitarianism in children from birth.

The Strange Situation tells a story about how trust develops between parents and children. Ainsworth formulated the Strange Situation as a twenty-minute drama with eight episodes, each lasting two to three minutes. Paraphrasing the protocol:

*The protocol begins when a mother and her baby are introduced to a playroom set up in a laboratory by a technician. The technician gives the mother instructions and shows her where to sit before leaving. The mother may encourage the child to play with the toys in the room, if the child does not automatically do so. In the second episode, the mother sits quietly and allows the child to play with the toys in the room. She may not initiate contact with the baby, but may respond if the child seeks her attention. After a few minutes, a stranger joins them. The stranger sits quietly in the room for one minute, makes small talk with the mother for one minute, and plays with the child for one minute. In the fourth episode, the mother subtly exits the room. If the child notices the mother’s absence and becomes anxious, the stranger offers comfort. The stranger departs and the mother returns, pausing at the threshold of the doorway to greet the baby. She then enters and, if need be, comforts the child. When the child is ready, they play together. The mother exits the playroom a second time. The child is left alone. The stranger returns to the room. Upon entering the room, the stranger*

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pauses to greet the child. If the child is upset, the stranger attempts to comfort the child. In the final episode, the mother returns. She enters, pauses to note the infant’s response to her second return, picks up the child, comforts the child, and the drama concludes with the mother and child playing together.

Ainsworth designed each of the scenes to gradually increase the stress the child in the Strange Situation experiences. At first, the play that occurs between mother and child represents the child’s feeling of safety. The addition of the stranger to the scene adds an element of uncertainty, putting a minimal amount of stress on the child. In scene four, the mother’s departure transforms uncertainty into danger. The mother’s slight pause, before re-entering the playroom in scenes five and eight, are significant because they allow the researcher to closely observe how the child reacts to her return. More sophisticated than Harlow’s use of a strange room, playing is one of many indicators Ainsworth observed to locate the child’s experience during the eight episodes of the drama.40

On a descriptive level, playing in the Strange Situation indicates feelings of safety and security. The drama creates a landscape of environments in which to observe how the child uses the toys, the stranger, and the mother. The meaning of play in Ainsworth’s Strange Situation is not outward facing, as for Harlow. Neither is it fully inward facing, as for Freud and Winnicott, suggesting that it is not a symbol of purely psychical conflicts. Rather, play for Ainsworth transpires at a junction between external behaviors and actions, and internal feelings and processes. Children who trusted their mothers were able to play despite the presence of the stranger. An inability to play, for example crying,

40 Bowlby, Attachment, 338.
ignoring the toys, and searching for the mother during her absences, represents insecure attachment. The child’s use of toys and the mother signify archetypical characteristics defining the parent-child bond.

On a psychological level, the Strange Situation draws attention to the marginalized, but crucial role of dependency and vulnerability in the development of trust between parent and child. Although Ainsworth was not the first researcher to study the behavior of children in strange situations, her breakthrough had to do with how she interpreted the data she collected in her experiments. Previous researchers had interpreted the child’s reactions during the protocol naively. They assumed that manifest expressions of emotion – children who cried hardest when separated from their mother or fussed and scolded the most on her return – demonstrated the highest levels of attachment. Ainsworth argued the opposite. Her breakthrough hinges on her recognition that secure attachment measures parental sensitivity to the infant’s needs, rather than merely availability. Ainsworth’s research showed her that caretakers who respond attentively to their children’s needs establish a stable and trusting bond. Caretakers who are physically present, but inattentive to an individual child’s unique wants and needs fails to establish a trusting bond. As we know from Harlow’s story of togetherness, reciprocity is key to this psychological dynamic.

Attending to Ainsworth’s language of sensitivity, rather than merely her methodological intervention, shows that her re-interpretation of parent-child bonds laid the foundation for a radical, conceptual shift in how children and family structures were

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perceived. Attachment theory explicitly rejects the Theory of Secondary Drives. Though Bowlby’s claims for a loving and compassionate bond between children and their parents may seem obvious to today’s generation of parents, his privileging of sensitivity, reciprocity, and trust at the center of child-parent bonding ran counter to the dominant psychological theory of parent-child bonding at the turn of the 20th century.

Rather than telling the story of how children use their caretakers, the Strange Situation conveys lessons about the ways children learn to trust and love their caretakers. Attachment reveals that security in one’s identity is, paradoxically, built on a sense of dependency and vulnerability, rather than on a sense of autonomy or utilitarianism. Whereas psychoanalytic theory theorized the infant’s omnipotent experience of believing to magically control the nourishing breast, Bowlby’s and Ainsworth’s theory of attachment emphasized the reality of actual parents who care for infants and meet infant needs.42 Their argument is that attachment, or trust, is built up through repetition and empathy. Caretakers who are well-attuned to the needs of their infant create a reciprocal dynamic. The infant learns to respect and to trust the caretaker. Part of this relationship involves the infant’s ability to feel safe in the care of the parent. As opposed to a theory of omnipotence, which ends in disillusionment, resentment, and anger, attachment theory emphasizes the infant’s capacity to depend on a caretaker without feeling betrayed or vulnerable. Attachment replaces notions of childhood ambivalence and aggression with a new understanding of childhood dependency and vulnerability. This shift moves love and trust from the margins of child psychology, to its center.

Furthermore, Bowlby stressed the lifelong importance of attachment. Attachment does not represent an infantile phase that children outgrow once they become self-sufficient. Rather, attachment patterns established during infancy persist throughout an individual’s life. Interpreting the meaning of Ainsworth’s parable, Bowlby advances two arguments: First, Bowlby argues that an infant’s capacity to trust, love, or feel dependent on its first caretaker engenders a lifelong pattern for how an individual will relate to others. Children, Bowlby claims, who have a secure attachment grow up to feel confident and accepted. By contrast, insecure attachment is portrayed as a risk factor for depression, anxiety, hostility, aggression, narcissism, timidity, jealously, and greed. Second, he insists that insecure attachment is the result of familial instability. This latter claim expresses anxieties about the fragility of secure attachment and a child’s moral development.

Juxtaposing psychological and social discourses about familial stability uncovers a significant cultural anxiety about the family’s responsibility for ensuring the child’s moral growth into a socially responsible and civically engaged citizen. Evolving notions of the social importance of child-parent bonds during the 20th century can be discerned in the areas of law and public policy equally. Public interest, for instance, in deviant forms of childhood grew out of new understandings of childhood as a unique period in biological and emotional life, requiring specialized forms of discipline and management. Before the turn of the 20th century, the majority of youths appearing before the law were

44 Bowlby, Separation, 211-212.
45 Fongay, Attachment Theory, 20.
young boys from working-class families.\(^{46}\) Victorian culture portrayed crime, poverty, and misconduct as innate character faults. Whereas Victorian culture linked deviance in children to idleness and vice, progressive views depicted children as dependent on adults for education and love.\(^{47}\) In the first half of the 20\(^{th}\) century, British legal and public policy underwent shifts to accommodate new understandings of adolescent rights. A series of legislative acts that took place in the first half of the 20\(^{th}\) century reflected the growing consensus that childhood is a vulnerable and malleable period in life.\(^{48}\) The legislation called for a separate court system to evaluate the crimes and misdemeanors of children as well as required judges to consider the crimes of minors within the context of their social and familial lives. These acts, which depict children as victims of abhorrent parenting, rather than predisposed to aggressive and socially deviant behavior, focus on the theme of rehabilitating young offenders, instead of punishing them.

A byproduct of this cultural climate was that it focused widespread public attention on the family unit as the key for social stability. Michal Shapira examines the emergence of a discourse within psychoanalysis that explores the underlying emotional mechanisms leading to violence during the interwar decades. The picture of


\(^{47}\) Shapira, *The War Inside*, 164.

\(^{48}\) The first half of the twentieth century saw a steady stream of legislative acts focused on clarifying the law in relation to adolescents. The 1907 Probation Act introduced probation as an alternative sentence for juveniles. The Children’s Act of 1908 developed the principle that children in trouble with the law deserve special treatment. The 1908 act established a separate court system to deal with juvenile offenders. The Children and Young Persons Act of 1933 expanded the 1908 Act, further emphasizing the importance of ensuring the welfare of adolescents who appear in front of a court. The 1948 Children’s Act asserted that the focus of the law should be on rehabilitation rather than on punishment. See Shapira, *The War Inside*, 140-141.
psychoanalysis drawn by Shapira does not portray it as an elitist pursuit. Rather, she studies the public and popularized versions of psychoanalysis, such as radio broadcasts, brochures, and propaganda. Second generation psychoanalysts, including Bowlby, had a greater impact on public opinion, social policy, legal reform, and popular norms than is often assumed, argues Shapira. In their messages, these analysts dealt with the aetiology, character, and treatment of trauma, anxiety, violence, aggression, and mourning as well as issues of childhood, family life, and personality development. Analysts targeted the child’s mind as a site for seeding the values of citizenship, democracy, and family.

“Psychoanalytic experts,” writes Shapira, “made the understanding of children and the mother-child relationship key to the successful creation of social democracy.” As psychoanalysts expanded their efforts to study the underlying emotional mechanisms that led to violence, they increasingly saw the child’s psyche as the primary site through which to secure the future of democracy in Western civilization.

In many social discourses, the figure of the abnormal child, also recognizable as the insecurely attached child, stands in for social anxieties about aggression, anxiety, trauma, and social instability. Social institutions cropped up purporting to aid children who were victims of unfortunate circumstances beyond their control. The roots of two of these social movements, Institute for the Scientific Treatment of Delinquency (ISTD) and Child Guidance Clinics, can both be discerned in timely concerns over maladjusted youth and juvenile delinquency. The ISTD contributed to this social movement by providing therapy for juvenile delinquents as well as conducting research on causes of crime and

preventative measures. The Child Guidance Movement, by contrast, occupied a unique space between social and medical intervention. Clinics are important because they represent a point of convergence between medical and social concerns. The idea of Clinics came over to Britain from America, where the idea grew out of the Child Study Movement, which emphasized raising children in compassionate, loving circumstances. At Clinics, teams composed of a psychiatrist, a social worker, and an educational psychologist, treated maladjusted youths. Whereas the ISTD focused on rehabilitating juvenile delinquents, Clinics originally focused on prevention. Both social movements attempted to treat the problem of the abnormal child as a solution to the abstract problems of aggression and recalcitrance in the society at large.

Cultural movements that gained momentum during the interwar period laid stress on the role of the social institutions in averting or minimizing problems in attachment. A key instance of this attitude can be discerned in the progressive school movement of the 1920s. The progressive school movement emerged as a reaction against the strict discipline and classical education still espoused by public schools at the time. Progressive schooling sought to nurture the organic development of a child’s natural potential by encouraging children to experiment with interactive forms of learning.

These schools, which often catered towards youths who had experienced inadequate parenting or broken homes, purported to offer children and adolescents educational experiences to compensate for a lack of familial stability. Instead of leaving the matter of compassionate child rearing exclusively in the hands of the family, these progressive schools are, I suggest, a symbol of how society was in the process of reconsidering its responsibility for children as an intractable shared problem.

The example of the progressive schools holds particular relevance to this chapter because it illuminates a historical connection between play, interwar culture, and Bowlby. Bowlby taught at two progressive schools during the 1920s, before beginning his psychoanalytic training. Bowlby’s experiences at Bedales and Priory Gate exposed him to the set of values related to trust, compassion, and moral identity, which I have used play to represent throughout this chapter. Bedales was a coeducational school founded by J. H. Badley in 1893. Bowlby taught physics, chemistry, and gardening at Dunhurst, the Junior School of Bedales, which served boys and girls between the ages of six to twelve. The curriculum was modeled on a combination of Montessori Principles and the work of G. Stanley Hall. Priory Gate, founded by Theodore James Faithfull in 1919, provided education to emotionally disturbed children between the ages of three and eighteen years of age. Most of these children came from difficult home situations or families with inadequate parenting. Faithfull was influenced by psychoanalytic ideas and modeled Priory Gate after other national and international schools which were applying psychoanalytic theory in their teaching philosophies.54 Faithfull was also a member of

54 British schools that applied psychoanalytic principles included Susan Isaacs’s Malting House School and A. S. Neill’s Summer house. International examples include Siegfried
the Order of Woodcraft Chivalry and his educational values included strong pastoral preferences. Thus, the courses at Priory Gate took place outdoors during the summer months between June and August, when the children engaged in activities like walking, camping, and cycling. When he left Priory Gate to pursue psychiatric and psychoanalytic training, Bowlby did so with a strong belief about the urgency of finding compassionate psychological frameworks to represent the relationship between child-parent bonds and a child’s identity.

This section offered a New Historicist reading of attachment theory to suggest that it reflects cultural anxieties about war and the ways that parent-child relationships stood in for interwar anxieties about social stability. Close reading Bowlby’s and Ainsworth’s work expands and complicates an ethical problem that I framed in the first half of this chapter, which showed how Harlow discovered the dire consequences of exploiting love and play for scientific gain, before he turned to trying to understand, rather than exploit, parent-child bonds. Overall, this chapter has argued that psychologists have used play, interpreted play, and sometimes exploited it. Play has provided a motive for asking questions and interpreting the meaning of stories that psychology has used to talk about the nature of love. Reflecting, more broadly, on the way that I have used play in this chapter, I propose that the ethics of play represent one thread of a discourse that weaves together the three chapters of this dissertation.

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Part of this dissertation’s larger design has been to demonstrate what a literary perspective brings to our understanding psychoanalytic narratives about playing and

Bernfeld’s Kinderheim Baumgarten in Vienna and Vera Schmidt’s International Solidarity in Moscow.
childhood in the interwar period. Adopting the concept of play as a theoretical
touchstone, which mediates a cultural relationship between language and medicine, I
have argued that we can learn deeper truths about the relationships between injury and
empathy; creativity and cruelty; war and love; power and harm.

My interest in this topic was piqued by Northrop Frye’s troubling and yet deeply
resonate discovery of some kind of narrowly averted danger at the heart of play. Whether
it is the traumatic encounter staged through the game of *fort* and *da*, String Boy’s
obsessive attempts to bind himself to his loved ones, or the fable of together-together
monkeys, the potential for playing to transgress the boundary between imagination and
real harm seems to be an inescapable symptom of what it means to be *at play*. The
confrontation of play with issues of power, cruelty, and harm strikes me not as a
contradiction, but as a challenge that this dissertation has sought to demystify.

One way to take the measure of the discussions that have unfurled throughout my
dissertation is through the imagery of strings, lines, and conjoiners – literal, figurative,
psychical, and emotional. These figures recur quite pervasively. In Chapter One, the
motif of string enables me to draw a connection between the mental processes of
Freudian play and trauma exemplified by the game of *fort-da* and Melville’s reflection on
“The Line.” My turn to literature creates a link through which I explore the tension
between creativity and empathy, on the one hand, and injury, on the other hand.
Illustrating my reading of Freudian play, Melville’s style provisions me with a way to
discuss ambiguity and paradox in Freud’s writings on play. Chapter Two places string in
a privileged position as the central metaphor used by Winnicott to signify his concept of
playing. Playing, for Winnicott, represents the mind’s way of relating inner desires to
external objects, which occurs, paradoxically, not through acts of love but through acts of cruelty. Playing is his trope for the capacity for mental destruction necessary for an individual to establish social relationships. At the same time, interpreting the trope of playing with string offers a way to question Winnicott’s theory of playing. String Boy’s pathological use of string, which threatens harm to his family, frames an ethical problem relating to psychical violence and its difference from physical harm. Like Melville’s theory of the whale line, Winnicott’s treatment of string pays homage to the dangerous properties at stake in the mind’s play. Chapter Three seeks to understand the historical relationship between the psychological concept of attachment and play. Attachment relates to the motif of strings and lines through the themes of dependence and interconnectedness. While the linkages that I analyze in this chapter may be less tangible than the previous two, the themes of attachment, parent-child bonds, and love represent the emotional counterparts to the string in *fort-da*, the line in *Moby-Dick*, and the string in *Playing and Reality*.

String also signifies my process as a literary critic, of drawing connections between ideas in psychological, literary, historical, and ethical discourses and pulling on loose ends to unravel problems that I have encountered in my study of play and psychoanalysis. The more I sought to untangle the connection between playing and harm, the more I came to realize that these concepts cannot be easily, not entirely separated. Here scientific theories are of little help. They can purport to catalogue, to use, perhaps even to master the recuperative and beneficial properties of play. And yet science is not equipped to analyze the ethics of play. Data is of no help when the
questions are those of suffering or harm. In fact, attempting to quantify the problem may reinforce injury and preclude other ways of addressing harms done.

This dissertation offers no pretense to help treat individuals who suffer from an inability to play, but it does explore the richness of theories of play. The theories taken up by this project embody desires and anxieties about the ways that people relate to one another, with cruelty; with kindness; with compassion. It is by studying these emotions that I hope to elucidate the complexity and mystery of play.
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