

Extremes: How Girls Play Slaughter,
How Boys Play Slaughter at
Valley Oak Elementary

Linda Riley

Extremes

*A little boy once played so loud
That the thunder up in the thunderclouds,
Said, "Since I can't be heard, why, then, I'll
never, never thunder again!"*

*And a little girl once kept so still
That she heard a fly on the window sill
Whisper and say to a ladybird
"She's the stillest child I ever heard."*

James Whitcomb Riley

Lunchtime at Valley Oak Elementary School in Davis is busy. Packs of children roar through the playground, running, shouting, shoving, laughing, skipping, crying, kicking, cheering, and chasing-their movements seem random and complicated to the adult eye. But if you watch carefully, you can find a method to all their madness. The children sort themselves out. Some play alone, some in small groups of two or three, some in larger groups. And they know who belongs where: The benches nearest the classrooms are for the loners, the jungle gym and lawn area east of the school are for the small groups, and the center of the playground is where the large groups play.

This center, made of asphalt, is where games like four-square, kickball, or pogo are played. Directly in the center of this center, in between the basketball hoops, the children play a game they call Slaughter. Some days Slaughter is played by a regular group of fifth grade boys; some days it is played by a regular group of fifth grade girls. The two groups are always separate; they never play together. The first group to stake out the basketball hoops is the group who gets to play that day.

Both groups play Slaughter the same way. The game is similar to Dodge Ball, but the rules are more complex. The children form two lines of opposing teams. Each team has a goalie who stands in the back behind the team of opposition. To play, the goalie throws a lightweight ball at the opposing team. The opposing team members try either to dodge the ball or to catch it in midair and throw it at the first team. If a child is struck with the ball or drops the ball onto the ground while trying to catch it, she is said to be "slaughtered" and must exchange places with the goalie.

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What is interesting about the two groups who play Slaughter is that, although they use the same methods and rules of play, each game is quite different. Both teams have formed their own folkgroups and have invented their own stylized form of play in order to create their own shared group meaning. I believe that shared meanings of each group are different because one group is a male group and the other is a female group.

I arrived at my conclusions after spending three hours a week for eight weeks observing the children at Valley Oak as they played Slaughter. To observe, I sat under a tree about ten feet away from their game, watching and taking notes. I chose Valley Oak because both my children attend school there, although neither plays Slaughter. My research was helped by the fact that to the players I was simply Matt and Dani's mother. Most of them seemed oblivious to my presence.

The only problem I had with my research was in the beginning when I tended to make judgements about what was "good" play and what was "bad" play. Sometimes

I wanted to interfere when the children cheated or fought. Someone needed to, I thought.

The person in charge of lunchtime discipline at Valley Oak is a playground supervisor named Mary. Mary is an elderly Hispanic woman who has worked at various school playgrounds for the past twenty-four years. She always stays on the periphery of the playground, only interfering if a child complains to her or if the children's play becomes clearly dangerous. The playground is large, and she misses much of the fighting and swearing. Mary smiles often, her eyes crinkling with tiredness. I thought it was from shell-shock. I asked her if the children's play has changed in the past twenty-four years. She smiled and told me, "No, it doesn't change." She paused a moment, then said, "They're good kids though."

After talking to Mary, I relaxed a bit. I remembered my own childhood games, remembered that we too fought and swore and cheated. I realized that the mortality of modern children is not in decline, at least at Valley Oak. If anything, these children are more resilient than ever. It was then that I began to see the underlying patterns to their play. I began to be deeply interested in my research and started to relish the "bad" play. It gave me good material to write down.

It was from this "bad" play that I learned how Slaughter is played, what differences "exist between the girls' playing of it and the boys', and what the implications of these differences are. In discussing the differences and their implications, I will focus upon three topics: how the game is framed by both groups, the boundaries created by both, and how disputes are handled within each group.

Framing: Let the Games Begin

For the boys at Valley Oak, getting ready to play Slaughter is a complicated business. First the boys stand around aimlessly for a while, thumping and kicking the ball. A few try to appoint themselves leader, but are ignored. They wait. There is much scuffling, boasting, and swearing. Sometimes the boys throw the ball at

each other's genitals or call out to each other in falsetto, "Don't do that! You'll hurt me." One day Alex tells Billy, "You're such a virgin."

The tallest boy in the group, Arona, usually arrives late. He looks bored and says little. Usually Billy names some possibilities for a team. The names include his and Arona. Arona nods. The game begins.

The boys arrange themselves on the basketball court haphazardly. An outsider cannot tell who is on what team. There is more boasting and swearing. The language is aggressive: "Waste him." "Cream him." "You are trying to challenge me, asshole?" One boy hits another with the ball and pretends to fire a semi-automatic randomly thought the schoolyard.¹

For the girls, Slaughter begins much differently. The game starts the moment everyone is assembled. The team members are usually the same from day to day. The girls line up in even rows. When a girl takes a turn or is hit by the ball, she looks downward to the ground, as if in embarrassment. No one boasts; no one taunts. Two girls act as cheerleaders, dancing in unison, singing "Woogah, Woogah," and laughing. The play is slow.

Why the variations? Children's folklore can often be understood in relation to four polar oppositions: order versus disorder, hierarchy versus equality, male versus female, and dynamic versus conservative (Mechling 96-97). Perhaps the differences are the result of different folkgroups focusing on different sides of the dialectics. The boys seem to be constructing a play frame that stresses hierarchy and disorder, the girls, a frame that stresses equality and order.

For these particular boys, the notion that children are an underclass in American society seems important. Children's play is often antithetical, and is constructed to oppose the official order of meaning, uses, and processes (Mechling 97).

Perhaps boys have good reason to oppose the official order of society. Men in American society are valued for their ability to be aggressive and individualistic. During the 20th century, however, boys have been more closely supervised, and their most aggressive games have been delineated. In fact, since 1920, the whole of the play world has become more feminine and favors domestic, verbal, and non aggressive play (Sutton-Smith 232-233).

Slaughter is a means for the Valley Oak boys to invert adult values which stress order and equality. Freed from the constraints of the classroom and any adult intervention, the Valley Oak boys can experiment with the notion of what it means to be male in American society. Slaughter is constructed as a folk performance so that the boys can learn how to maintain the balance between being masculine and being a member of society. The game helps them come to terms with significant cultural categories (Brady 175). When they play they are learning to be aggressive and individualistic along with learning how to fit into a group.

The boys invert adult values of order in the way they play haphazardly and aggressively; they invert adult values of equality in the way that they have a clear leader, choose sides, boast, and taunt each other. The boys also show anxiety in their ability to be masculine; so they invert masculinity by talking like females and

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taunting each other about their sexuality. Excitement is heightened because these boys are exploring themes not open to them in the everyday world (Mechling 98).

The girls at Valley Oak do not seem to be opposing the adult world of school, which I said earlier stresses the "feminine." Instead, their play seems to focus on the tension between what is typically thought to be male and female behavior.

The early play of girls was segregated and focused on status and marriage. But girls have shown a steady increase in their interest in the more active games formally played by boys. Title IX of the Federal Education Amendments in 1972 mandated equality in sports for girls and resulted in increased changes (Sutton-Smith 232-233). The women's movement has also resulted in changes in attitudes about what is proper female behavior.

But the result of change is often confusion. Boy's games are inherently disorderly, aggressive, and hierarchical. When the girls stress order and equality in their games (order by always having the same team members and standing in even row; equality by not taunting or boasting and by looking embarrassed when it is time to take a turn), they address the inherent tension between order and disorder, hierarchy and equality, and ultimately the puzzling contradictions inherent in being a female in modern society. The girls' game of Slaughter is purposely framed so that they can address the tensions they have as females, and so that, like the boys, they too can learn how to balance these tensions. What they have to balance is different from what the boys have to balance, so they adopt a different frame.

Boundaries: Risky Business

According to the regular rules of Slaughter, if a boy is "slaughtered" with the ball, he becomes a goalie, and the boy who "slaughters" him becomes "it" But one day I watched the goalie hit a boy named Tai square in the stomach with the ball. Quickly, Tai threw the ball back to the goalie, saying, "I have two lives."² The group discussed the events for a few minutes and then decided that Tai did in fact have two lives and would not be required to be a goalie unless he was "slaughtered" one more time. The next boy to be "slaughtered" also tried to impose the two lives rule, but was not allowed even a period of negotiation. Instead, he was handed the ball and motioned to the goalie spot, where he went without complaint.

When the girls play Slaughter, they never cheat. In fact, when a girl takes a turn, she does it quickly without calling attention to herself. Afterwards, she usually joins her teammates in a ritual slapping of hands. The girls then re-form into their team line. Frequently, one girl stays behind with the girl who has just thrown the ball, and the two spend a moment smoothing and stroking each other's hair. When the bell rings, many of the team members walk back to their classrooms together, again smoothing and stroking each other's hair.³

These instances of group behavior are quite different from each other, but they both show the way that children deal with dangerous categories and erect boundaries.

When boys play Slaughter, they seem to understand that power is not equal. Some

boys have more "lives," or chances at success. The boys constantly try to negotiate the rules to suit their own needs and therefore push for more power. They seem to understand that real life favors those who possess the dynamism to push against the boundaries of the rules, those who are more socially adept, those who can intimidate, or those who can cheat. By doing so, these boys learn the process of negotiation (Sutton-Smith 242), the value of creativity, as well as the importance of luck.

But this play can be dangerous as well. Because the boundaries to Slaughter are dynamic, there are those who will push against the rules and be unsuccessful, the result being loss of face. Pushing the limits is risky.

When the girls play Slaughter, they are experimenting with power also. Power for these girls is a dangerous activity since girls' play usually places a high value on affiliation and intimacy (Sutton-Smith 248). When a girl takes a turn in Slaughter, she is the most powerful player on the team; she has the ball and can control the game. The ritual hand slapping is the girls' way of rewarding that individual performance. The grooming behavior gives the girls a chance to acknowledge the boundaries, to draw quickly back from their dangerous play. It is the way the girls reassure one another that group affiliation is more important to them than individual performance. The girl with the ball may be reassuring the team members that she still identifies herself as a group member, while the group may be reassuring the girl that they accept her need to experiment with power.

It seems significant that the girls stroke each other's hair, the part of their body that is outwardly feminine. The girls may be displaying to themselves and to others that they are females. They may be establishing an "in group" that consists of females and identifying what is appropriate female behavior. The girls erect boundaries about who is in (girls) and also who is out (boys).⁴

The boundaries that the children erect in their game in Slaughter involve both the tension between hierarchies and equality. The boundaries that they erect are different because once again the boys are stressing the hierarchical nature of society, and the girls the egalitarian. Throughout their play, they address different anxieties, for the boys being "out" in the hierarchical order, for the girls, being "out" in the female group. The boys' boundaries give them less chance to experiment with intimacy skills; the girls' less chance to experiment with individual performance.

Fighting: Dangerous Liaisons

One day during a game of Slaughter, a boy named Billy started to cheat. Normally cheating would not be a serious violation, but Billy's cheating violated Arona's chance to take a turn. Arona moved close-up and face-to-face with Billy. Both boys quickly posed themselves into fighting stances. First Billy would take a turn moving in closer, looking threatening while Arona mocked and taunted him. Next it was Arona's turn to be the aggressor.

A third boy named Jason appointed himself as conciliator, standing nearby and keeping a steady stream of calming talk going while the two boys continued to circle

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around each other. Finally Jason made a joke. Everyone thought this joke was so funny that they had to stop the fight because they were all laughing so hard. The boys resumed play and after a few minutes, Billy again started to cheat. Arona looked at him. "I can't live with this guy," he said in a comical way. The two boys slapped hands. For the rest of the game, they played as far apart as possible.

The girls at Valley Oak never came close to a physical fight, but one day a girl named Sara refused to go out after she was hit with the ball. The girls started chanting, "You're out, Sara, you're out," but she ignored them. In order to keep the game going, most of the girls decided to ignore Sara's breach, but a few angry girls quit the game and stood next to me, under the tree. "I hate her so much, I feel like smacking her," said one. "She wears ugly clothes," says another.

Another girl was hit, and the girls instantly cried out, "You're out. You're out." This girl refused to become goalie, citing Sara's example. The argument became vehement. One girl turned to Sara and said, "Everyone hates you because of this." The girls under the tree kept up their gossip. "You should see her temper," said one girl. More girls joined the circle. "She's a pooh head," said another. "You guys aren't playing," yelled out someone. The group still playing started a chant, "Play around Sara. Play around Sara." Before the situation was anywhere close to resolution, the bell rang.

The disputes within both groups can be understood by using Turner's model for social dramas (Myerhoff 31). Each dispute contains Turner's first stage--a violation. In both cases the violation was cheating.

For the boys, cheating is not a serious offense, but since the individual rights of a valued member were violated, the breach was important. Billy had violated important boundaries established by the group, affecting their most important need--the need for a hierarchy within their folkgroup.

For the girls, cheating is a serious offense. Sara had violated important boundaries established by the folkgroup, affecting their highest need--the need for equality.

Because their most important values had been violated, each group quickly moved to the crisis stage. For both the boys and girls the game stopped.

Fighting at Valley Oak School is a serious offense that results in suspension. Arona and Billy also looked afraid. Clearly the third step in the social drama, that of redress, had to happen or serious punishment and/or loss of face might occur. In the boys' case a conciliator started negotiations.

In the girls' case, the drama had to be redressed or the game would end in anarchy. Instead of using negotiation as a means of redress, the girls tried at first to ignore Sara's breach. When that didn't work, they used exclusionary tactics, which are common in the play of girls (Sutton-Smith 242). Because the girls did not successfully redress their crisis, they never reached the fourth and final stage of restoration. The boys, however, were able to share in a final ritual (the slapping of hands) and therefore, were able to reaffirm their basic system of beliefs.

The boys' game of Slaughter is more equipped to deal with crisis situations than is the girls' game. Because the girls place an enormous value on affiliation, they are

less able to learn negotiation skills. According to Sutton-Smith, this is common feature of girls play (242).

The game of Slaughter defines two separate folkgroups at Valley Oak Elementary School. These two groups function differently. Each expresses group needs and addresses contradictions that the children see in larger society, most especially the contradictions between order and disorder, hierarchy and equality, and male and female. Because the expectations in society are different for males and females, each group stresses different sides of these dialectics: The boys stress disorder, hierarchical relationships, and male behavior while the girls stress order, egalitarian relationships, and female behavior. Boys who play Slaughter at Valley Oak seem more adept at negotiation, the girls at intimacy skills.

I learned during my fieldwork that children's play is neither good nor bad. I don't believe that the different negotiation and intimacy skills these children obtain from their play are good or bad either. They are simply different and react the present attitudes of society. Sutton-Smith quotes some who believe that adults should teach girls to play in a way that they can learn proper negotiation skills (253-254). I doubt that it matters what adults think or try to do about children's play. The children at Valley Oak Elementary will continue to play Slaughter in their own way because children's games belong to children.

Notes

1. This boy may be expressing anxiety about a shooting incident that took place in Stockton, California, in 1988. A sniper opened fire on a playground, randomly killing several children.
2. The concept of "lives" has probably been used in different ways. The most common use is the cat who is in legend said to have nine lives. These particular boys play Nintendo quite a bit, which is a computer game that allows each player three lives.
3. This hair stroking reminds me of the grooming behavior anthropologists have observed in gorillas and chimpanzees.
4. I heard two girls talking about a boy whom they saw playing aggressively. "Why stoop to his badness," said one.

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