Sidewalk Songs, Jump-Rope Rhymes, and Clap-Hand Games of African American Children

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Back during elementary days when everyone walked to school, the neighbors checked kids' bad behavior, then reported it to your parents, where you'd really get it again for doing what you had no business doing in the first place. In those days, not everyone owned a television set. Those who did had to patiently wait for TV time after the news and those God-awful "variety" shows for grown ups. By then, it was bedtime. Left to our own playful imaginations, we creatively filled time with various sidewalk songs, jump-rope rhymes, and clap-hand games. There were no headphones, no Sega games, no video arcades, no boom boxes, no CD or MP3 players, no palm pilots, no cell phones. This was before the "Mall," and most shopping was done downtown at back counters during Jim Crow. In many ways, it was a simpler time when many parents walked their kids to and from the bus stop or school in the neighborhood because few folks on the block owned cars. We lived in Black neighborhoods, shopped at neighborhood groceries, and sat in Colored-only balconies at the Saturday matinee. It was just us kids. We had each other; we had time. We were creative; and mostly, we just had good fun together.

While still in graduate school at Louisiana State University (LSU) at the end of the 80s, I wondered which of those kids' games and rhymes continued in Black communities some twenty years post-Civil Rights and integration.[1] Were these rhymes unique? What were kids doing at the end of the twentieth century? These questions led me to collect kids' lore in New Orleans, from the mid-80s through 1999. While I lost everything (a life-long collection of books, unpublished research and creative works) in Katrina flood waters, thanks to archives such as the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Foundation[2] and the Louisiana State Division of Folklife, the raw data is recreated here. In the longer study, a complete listing of all games, rhymes, and songs is further classified.

My initial purpose in collecting kids' lore in New Orleans was to unearth connections from kids' play to the blossoming adult. Were there similarities in the function of kids' lore in New Orleans to other places to the scholarship in general? Did this generation of boys join the girls, how, when, why? For New Orleans pre-Katrina, in what environment did these activities occur? For that decade or more of collecting, here is a sample of the kids' culture existing prior to the devastation of hurricane Katrina. This data set is in sharp contrast to games and rhymes of their parents' generation (boomers) and even greater gender distance from the current generation post Katrina. The purpose here is to provide part of the overall study to portray the kids' culture as evidenced prior to 2005.

In New Orleans at the end of the previous century and up to 2005, Black children performed the songs and rhymes in a family and extended-family environment. The youth were sometimes left attended by elder brothers and sisters, cousins, or neighbors, who might get them started and urge them to continue, especially in New Orleans — a city of families where it is common for

CFR_2011_R.indb 35 10/31/11 8:57:37 AM

several generations to live in the same neighborhood where they were born,[3] on the same street, or within blocks of one another. The result has been a sustained culture evolving over centuries. According to the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities, prior to Katrina, nearly 70% of Louisiana residents never left the state. This does not mean all is love and kindness. Many families retain that geographical closeness and do not speak because of old grudges. For the sake of the children, a nurturing and extensive children's society continues.

This city of families, though many are at or below poverty level, remained in the same neighborhoods for half of the last century on the average, prior to Katrina. The result was a breeding ground for a culture of children, who were supervised by the loving eyes of family, extended family, and neighbors. That culture of kids produced sidewalk songs, jump-rope rhymes, and clap-hand games, which reflected not just rhythm and rhyme, but a developing sense of cultural identity, gender, social mores, and in more recent years, comments on society incorporating popular culture.

At that time, the existence of children's sidewalk culture depended on adults who believe that children should socialize separately. Even though they considered their children to be blessings from God, in New Orleans pre-Katrina, many believed that children should not be a part of adult talk and that children should play with children. Neighbors also functioned as extended family, so an element of safety existed because of not-too-distant watchful eyes, especially for younger kids. The result is that many hot Louisiana evenings are still spent in this way. This allows Black children to talk about "grown things" with their friends and siblings in a way they can get away with, in a song.

Doing just cursory research, it was clear to me that this kind of urban fun, that is playing sidewalk games, is not exclusive to African American Children. For example, such rhymes as "Teddy Bear" can be found in some form around the world and can be traced to early explorers who brought it with them most likely from England; generally, many scholars suggest that "Teddy Bear" has been around for some 300 years. "Teddy Bear" is used as a rhyme, with jumping single-rope games, and also in clap-hand games. This one was collected in Detroit in 1989 or 1990.[4]

> Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear, turn around
> Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear, touch the ground
> Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear, tie your shoes
> Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear, watch the news
> Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear, climb the stairs
> Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear, go to bed

Though a tried-and-true centuries-old model of kids' lore, here in Detroit at the end of the last decade, it is updated with the phrase "watch the news." In African American urban areas, these sidewalk songs, jump-rope rhymes, and clap-hand Games serve different functions, foster quite original traditions, and continue strongly; but the way this process developed is unique; how these games evolve gave rise to generations of gifted young folks, and these activities provide a

CFR_2011_R.indb 36 10/31/11 8:57:38 AM

nurturing environment in a protected neighborhood setting.

This research into the songs, games, and rhymes of African American children suggests strongly that it is no accident African Americans have contributed to world music, to an original American literary landscape. It is no accident that "rapping" is now a commercial commodity, and the lyrics of rhythm and blues music is legendary. The roots of Black music and literature are inseparably linked to urban and rural kids' games, songs, and play. Much in the way that the early blues, work songs, and sorrow songs gave rise to gospel music, jazz, and rhythm and blues, these sidewalk songs, jump-rope rhymes, and clap-hand games replace nursery rhymes very early and become the African American child's strong connection to the word in performance. As a result, this lore is the core of an oral literature, the beginnings of literacy, and a training ground for verbal repartee and verbal dueling necessary for survival in urban communities. The verbal prowess of African American children played on sidewalks in urban spaces is a direct link to the popular culture, music and story-telling nature of what become commercial raps. This folklore of Black children builds confidence and prepares these children to meet and assess the world in which they find themselves.

Africans brought to American against their wills took with them a great sense of rhythm and song. Hand-clap games such as those involving elaborate clapping under raised legs, slapping thighs and chests rhythmically while reciting the rhyme can be traced to working in fields during Reconstruction, the rhythms and recitations resembling work songs. Note this common example of Handbone. It is performed in a call-and-response fashion.

> Leader: Handbone, Handbone, where you been?
> Respondent: Round that corner drinking gin.
> Leader: Handbone, Handbone, what you know?
> Respondent: I'll pick this corn and drink some more.[5]

Rhymes with claps such as this one were surely pass-the-time entertainment, like Little Sally Walker, which can be traced to the days of slavery. African American children today should know that their games, rhymes, and songs are from a long-standing tradition of verbal strength maintained throughout the difficult times when education was prohibited for Black people. Another question arose: are contemporary games, rhymes, and songs, still functioning, and how?

My fear was that with so many contemporary distractions and trends, the advent of hundreds of cable TV stations, video games, headphones, and integration, these traditions are sometimes wearing thin. It was to document these traditions that I began this work. What I found is that these sidewalk songs, jump-rope rhymes, and clap-hand games, these traditions of oral lore among African American children, continued to function as teaching tools as much a play.

African American folklife determines whether we grow up learning from our moms how to quilt or how to sing gospel. Folklore is the sum of African American jokes, stories, rhymes, and songs. Folklife combines the ways of African Americans and influences how Blacks pass on what we make and do for generations. Folklore is what all people learn outside of school, outside of church, the

CFR_2011_R.indb 37 10/31/11 8:57:38 AM

traditions we pass on face-to-face, by word-of-mouth, generation-to-generation. Sidewalk songs, jump-rope rhymes, and clap-hand games are significant examples of the folklore of African American children: what we do among ourselves for ourselves, but what is passed on to us, mixed with what each age adds to it.

Verbal artistry among African American children is expressive and creative, although the forms are different. Children's lore in New Orleans' Black neighborhoods bears a necessary developmental function. Sidewalk songs pass on attitudes and knowledge of self, imitations of adult life and values, with distinct criticisms of adult life and society norms. This is demonstrated in such circle games as "When I was a baby." There is nothing in the boomer repertoire like this one.

In this circle game, an imitation game, "When I was a baby," which looks so simple and fun on the surface, there is some resemblance to the antiphonal pattern, since one girl jumps into the center of the circle and begins the song, which is then repeated by the girls surrounding the caller. All in the circle sing the response together, adding physical representations of the actions of the particular subject. Literally, they recall how a woman develops and lives her life, how she experiences disappointment, and how she handles conflict.

When I was a baby, baby, baby
When I was a baby, baby, baby
I went a wan a wan a wan wan wan (imitating baby sounds)

All night long. All night long. (This girl re-joins the circle, and another girl steps into the center of the circle reciting that next part. This swapping of the central leader continues with different girls leading until the game is completed. Depending on how many are involved, everyone will get a chance at the circle center; or in the case of just a few girls, the each new stage of a girl's/woman's life is lead).

When I was a girl, girl, girl
When I was a girl, girl, girl
I went a umph a umph, umph ump humph (imitating smiley faces while pretending to jump rope; but they actually swing an invisible jump rope)

All night long. All night long.

When I was a teenager, teenager, teenager
When I was a teenager, teenager, teenager
I went a hum a hum hum hum hum (imitating a teen on the phone; the girls hold up one hand thumb up and forefinger out to resemble the headset of a phone.)

All night long. All night long.

CFR_2011_R.indb 38 10/31/11 8:57:38 AM

When I got married, married, married
When I got married, married, married,
I went a kiss, a kiss, kiss, kiss, kiss (imitating a full-blown embrace, sticking out their lips pursed as in kissing; all movements animated and exaggerated throughout).

All night long. All night long.

When I had a baby, baby, baby
When I had a baby, baby, baby
I went a rock, a rock, rock, rock, rock (imitating a woman rocking their baby to sleep or comforting the child held tightly in their arms).

All night long. All night long.

When my husband beat me, beat me, beat me
When my husband beat me, beat me, beat me
I went a unh, a unh, unh, unh, unh (imitates the anguish of being severely beaten to the ground, afraid, hurt, crying out in pain).

All night long. All night long.

When I beat my husband, husband, husband
When I beat my husband, husband, husband
I went a bam, a bam, bam, bam, bam (imitates vigorously fighting back in retaliation with no fear and profound vindication and power; they enact the beating of the husband to the ground, laughing all the way).

All night long. All night long.

When I lost my baby, baby, baby
When I lost my baby, baby, baby
I went a sigh, a sigh, cry, cry, cry (imitates great grief, making crying faces all the while, sometimes laughing but fiercely pretending to cry).

All night long. All night long.

When I died, died, died
When I died, died, died
I went a humph, a humph, humph, humph, humph (imitates what it is like to be dead, arms folded akimbo, faces stern).

All night long. All night long. (This ends the game).

CFR_2011_R.indb 39 10/31/11 8:57:38 AM

At the time, the core group of girls were aged six through ten. They lived within walking distance and most worshiped together, while a few attended St. Raymond Catholic School, just a few blocks east. They were not shy about reenacting their play and enjoyed having an adult audience. It was shocking to hear such young girls at play reflecting on the dominant gender themes of the day as well as the taboo topic of marital sex, resulting in birth, domestic violence, and the woman's power not just to fight back but to successfully retaliate and live out her life.

Circle games allow everyone to play; no one is left out. Sometimes, they are elimination games; in this one case, it is not. "When I was a baby" is an imitation game, something like more common Simon Says, but it is much more contemporary and light years away from the child-like concerns of my youth. Here, the gender roles are clearly defined, yet the "little" girls are not fazed by the content; this is typical of what they witness on TV, in movies, in neighborhoods.

At its core, children's folklore in African American urban areas is not just play but a comment on the world. Some rhymes are downright vulgar, with profane shouts and responses, and others are more respectful, editing offensive words cleverly during the game with the kids not skipping a beat. Some attitudes are imposed by race, sex, family, and individual ethnic and economic situations. New Orleans, with its Black majority, imposes a dominant and varied and varied set of adult examples, values, barriers, and opportunities. How did these come to be?

As with all folklore, transmission is key. With the oral songs and rhymes of these sidewalk games, Black youth learn typically from other children. They learn these songs and rhymes from their parents, often before they can talk. In many ways, this is the earliest literacy of African American kids. Once in the children's repertoire, sidewalk songs take the place of nursery rhymes and reflect pre-adult concerns. Children then learn them and pass them on to each other in the street, on the front porch, on the sidewalk, or in the public parks.

How do these elements function? Children's folklore, in general, fulfils certain functions: it reflects and criticizes society and transmits values. For most kids, their lore entertains them, teaches them how to manipulate words, helps to develop their group identity, and creates a bond. Especially for Black kids, these rhymes and songs provide opportunities to practice "handling" authority and inform them of their sexual roles.

The sidewalk songs of children's folklore perform a particularly important role in African American culture. When Black youth perform these rhymes and songs, they practice and learn to contribute to their rich African American verbal culture, a continuing historical legacy. By puberty, if not earlier, Black children must learn to "hold their own" for protection from the verbal abuse of their peers, sometimes avoiding or allaying physical abuse. It is a common Black custom to be able to "rap" oneself out of a street fight or "jive" your parents out of a deserved whipping. Therefore, this early verbal play becomes a vital link to what will later become "jiving," "sounding," "woofing," or "selling wolf tickets," especially "the dozens," and eventually "rapping," all of which are common African American verbal-dueling traditions. The dueling, dozens and rapping have been incorrectly attributed only to Black male culture. Girls may be the instigators of this tradition, and they participate in these early raps frequently with boys. From the start, boys

CFR_2011_R.indb 40 10/31/11 8:57:38 AM

participate and play with girls to varying degrees depending on their exposure to sisters, girl cousins, and neighbors. Therefore, a Queen Latifa is no accident, and she is not just imitating a male rapping tradition. This is demonstrated in the group of youth that I researched, dubbed The Perlita Street Kids by their parents for the name of the street on which they lived and played at the time.

Any rules? Each youth is expected to contribute. If one doesn't know a rhyme, he or she is expected to make one up or learn one from someone else. No one wants to be known as not able to "talk stuff." These unspoken rules have existed for generations. In some cases, the environment creates a healthy competitive spirit, the kind that will produce a "jam" session as in Jazz where no one wins but everyone contributes creatively–which is the essence of "jamming" word play, and games creatively, communally. In other cases, kids can be cruel and pressure or taunt the person into producing, or the person will not be in the game, what is called "OUT" a fate considered worse than death. Nevertheless, the resulting product is children's lore, African American style.

Topics range from familiar rhymes and songs to adult-style "bragging" strategies. These songs are much more relevant to their day–such as the one expressing their knowledge of the existence of crack cocaine. This example is sung to a sidewalk dance or stomp (a group line dance popular in Black communities long before country music line dances). It is a simple rhyme but shows a prophetic awareness of trouble:

> Yo momma, yo daddy, they betta leave that pipe alone
> yo sista, yo brotha, they betta leave that crack alone
> yo auntee yo uncle, they betta leave that pipe alone
> Yo family you friends, they betta leave that crack alone
>
> (they do an elaborate turn)
>
> Do wha'cha wanna, Do wha'cha wanna
> Do wha'cha wanna, Do wha'cha wanna
>
> (they do an elaborate turn)
>
> Yo momma, yo daddy, they betta leave that pipe alone
> yo sista, yo brotha, they betta leave that crack alone
>
> — John, Sunni, Treshon, Natasha, Corey, Jason, 2 June 1990

In this sidewalk song, the children are aware of the impending fate of "crack" cocaine addicts. Crack cocaine is an enemy of the people they love, and it becomes something to avoid firmly. Here, they perform a prophetic service to each other, reminding themselves of the boundaries they must face to achieve a long and healthy life.

From these brief examples, it is demonstrated that at an early age in New Orleans, African American children actively participate in their verbal development

CFR_2011_R.indb 41 10/31/11 8:57:38 AM

trough the years prior to Katrina devastation. The rhymes were not collected in the schoolyard. Like my childhood decades prior, these kids lived in neighborhoods within a mile of each other and walked to each other's homes to play after school. They brag, they duel, they dance, they sing of the world as they understand it. These rhymes, games, and raps serve to define group identity, address adult concerns, and help children learn verbal prowess and entertain one another. These sidewalk songs, jump-rope rhymes, and clap-hand games of African American children were still strong on the streets of New Orleans throughout the 1990s and early 21st century in the historic 7th Ward neighborhoods, as evidenced in the lore of the Perlita Street kids.[6]

NOTES

1. Many thanks to folklorists Dr. Rosan Jordan and Dr. Frank de Caro, who guided and encouraged my early training in folklore; and additional special thanks to Dr. Joyce Marie Jackson, also folklorist at LSU, who pushed me to collect, and continued to provide opportunities for me to present this work at the African Heritage Stage of the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival for a series of years.

2. Special thanks to Archivist Rachel Lyons and the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Foundation Archives for saving my work; I am deeply indebted to you for all you do.

3. Many of our names can be dated some 300 years and accessible in the older resting places, St. Louis cemeteries No. 1, No. 2, and No. 3.

4. This collecting, for two summers at the end of the 1989 and 1980, was made possible by generous support from the Michigan State Museum Festival of Michigan Folklife, while I was there to present Detroit kids demonstrating Double Dutch.

5. I heard numerous variations of this hand-clap rhyme throughout my life in Louisiana, and also in Black communities where ever I lived in the Bay Area of California and in Detroit and even in Washington D.C. when I visited for research.

6. Once invited, I presented these kids performing their games and rhymes at the Louisiana State Folklife Festival twice in the 90s, and numerous times at the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival also in the 90s. Presenting our living traditions helps folklorists document contemporary culture. Festivals help everyone understand each other better and so promote respect as well as employment in the field for budding and experienced scholars. Certainly, it taught the children of Perlita Street a greater appreciation for their culture, exposed them to other cultures in an educational environment, and perhaps helped them develop a continued interest in folklore and folklife. Because the children did "perform" their traditions, the Jazz Festival paid each child $20.00 for the performance. No child participated without parental permission.

CFR_2011_R.indb 42 10/31/11 8:57:38 AM

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CFR_2011_R.indb 43 10/31/11 8:57:38 AM