
Learning from Children's Play and Folklore in South Louisiana

An Interview with Jeanne Pitre Soileau

A Louisiana native, Jeanne P. Soileau has been an educator for forty-seven years. She earned her Ph.D. from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, where she used oral and video interviews and notes amassed over thirty-five years of research in South Louisiana for her dissertation, "African American Children's Folklore: A Study in Games and Play." She collected folklore for the Council for the Arts in Education in New Orleans from 1975 to 1985 and served as an instructor for the Louisiana Voices: Folklife in Education Project from 1998 to 2001. Her publications include *Louisiana Folklife: A Guide to the State* (1985); *Yo' Mama, Mary Mack, and Boudreaux and Thibodeaux: Louisiana Children's Folklore and Play* (2016), which won the 2018 Chicago Folklore Prize and the Iona and Peter Opie Prize from the American Folklore Society; and *What the Children Said: Child Lore of South Louisiana* (2021).

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American Journal of Play: What does the work of a children's folklorist look like?

Jeanne Pitre Soileau: I cannot speak for all folklorists. Some are concerned with material culture—things children make by hand. But others, like myself, concentrate on the verbal interactions between young people. In my case, I have over the years written descriptions of, voice recorded, and video-taped children as they played traditional school yard games. These games included ways of choosing "it," hand games, ring games, jump rope, jokes, teases and taunts, camp songs, and school yard speeches.

Over the years, I was my primary collector. I joined the Louisiana Folklore Society and made contacts with various venues—schools, recreation

centers, churches, summer camps—and got permission from the heads of these organizations to collect. At the appointed time, I showed up with a tape recorder and a set of prompts in the form of a questionnaire and began a collecting session. Sessions usually lasted about an hour. At one summer camp, however, I spent an entire afternoon interviewing campers of various ages who straggled up in small groups.

My routine questions to any student who cared to be recorded included: How do you choose who is it? What kind of hand-clapping games do you play? Do you play ring games? What tag games (or running games) do you play? Tell me a joke. What do you say to tease someone? What speeches do you make on the playground? What do you say when you jump rope? What cheers do you know?

Such collecting was exciting, but transcribing tapes proved tedious. You listen, write, rewind, repeat, for hours. From the transcripts I fashioned lectures, presentations, articles, and—finally—two books concentrating on the verbal interactions of boys and girls from three to twenty-one years old.

AJP: What inspired you, and how did you get started?

JPS: I suppose my interest in folklore started with my family. Two French-speaking grandmothers lived with us, and both were storytellers. From an early age, I heard tales of family legends, Jean Sot stories (the French version of Foolish John tales), and history through the eyes of two very different women who had begun life in the nineteenth century. Both my grandmothers were readers and paid close attention to politics and had loud, and contrary, opinions. My brother, who was three years older than I and was a great reader, was given the task of being my babysitter. He hated it and wanted only to read his books. So, he would take me to the library and to the Sans Souci bookstore, which was owned and presided over by Miss Edith Garland Dupre, and plonk me in a chair and say, “Read.” I did. I read through the entire folklore and fairy tale section of the Lafayette children’s library by the time I was ten. Then I read books in a wide range of geographical and historical settings that Miss Dupre helped me select at her bookstore. She let my brother and me pay a quarter a week for our books. She was a true inspiration to both me and my brother. I was delighted when the library at University of Louisiana at Lafayette was named in her honor.

Someone had donated a stereoscope to the children’s library where I

spent so many hours. There were boxes and boxes of stereoscope slides of faraway places in piles all over the floor. Looking through the viewer, I travelled to romantic locations and saw historic places. This engendered a curiosity for travel which has never left me. Whenever I have travelled, I have observed children at play and taken notes.

AJP: Who are the scholars and other folklorists who helped shape your approach to and understanding of child lore and games?

JPS: My thesis director at University of New Orleans was George Reinecke. He often laughingly described himself as “the last of the New Orleans French Creoles.” Reinecke was involved in the Louisiana Folklore Society, and he strongly suggested I join. My early contributions (in the 1970s) included a collection of the French proverbs my two grandmothers had used to guide me in my early years and an article on the stories about Jean Sot from St. Martinville, Louisiana. I had a strong alto voice in my twenties, and I sang French songs provided by Reinecke from the collection of renowned folklorist Corinne Saucier at festivals and conferences.

My other folklore interest stemmed from my three years as a teacher in the New Orleans public elementary school system in the mid-1960s. While teaching, I spent hours on yard and bus duty, and I listened to the children as they played hand claps, jump rope, and chasing games. The children played with so much enthusiasm! With so much more excitement than they approached classroom learning! I wondered whether anyone besides myself found this schoolyard play interesting. I ran my curiosity about children's play by Reinecke, and he encouraged me to do research into child lore scholars with the idea of becoming one myself.

I hit the library, and by the end of the 1970s, I had read through books by Lady Alice B. Gomme, William Wells Newell, Henry Carrington Bolton, Roger Abrahams, Philippe Aries, Paul Brewster, Brian Sutton-Smith, and two by Peter and Iona Opie. By 1972 I had a couple of notebooks filled with jottings gleaned from schoolyards. In 1973 I got my first tape recorder. From that point on, using my membership card from the Louisiana Folklore Society, I made appointments at schools, churches, summer camps, and city playgrounds, and I tape recorded groups of children ages three to eighteen as they demonstrated their games and songs for me.

As my interest in child lore expanded, I shared my findings with a second Louisiana folklorist, Patricia Rickels, who was teaching African

American literature at University of Louisiana at Lafayette. She guided me to readings that helped me understand and appreciate the play style and mannerisms of the African American children from whom I was collecting. She encouraged me to look for books that would further enhance my understanding of the Black aesthetic, and her advice led me to works of linguist William Labov, political activist H. Rap Brown, writers Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Richard Wright, and later, Black folklorist Daryl Cumber Dance, and ethnomusicologist Kyra D. Gaunt.

AJP: Do you remember how you played as a child?

JPS: Good question! I had a really free childhood, much more unsupervised than the childhoods I see around me now. Our neighborhood had ten or more boys and girls close to my age to interact with. We rode bikes, climbed trees, explored neighbor's garages, played in empty train cars at the track, fought with one another and made up, and engaged in entire afternoons of imaginary play where we were knights, cowboys, marines, fairies, hunters, and monsters.

While I played hard, I also read a great deal. I would come home from riding my bike all the way across town, climb a tree, and read until I was called for supper.

My childhood pursuits have persisted until my late seventies. I still begin each day with an hour of vigorous swimming and read two to three hours every day.

My peers influenced some of my interests. One neighbor girl was a big movie fan of historical romances. She and I saw *Ivanhoe*, *Knights of the Round Table*, and *Quentin Durward*, all starring Robert Taylor. *King Solomon's Mines* and *The Prisoner of Zenda* left me with a lifelong warm heart for the actors Stewart Granger and Deborah Kerr. I am still a movie buff. My friend and I spent hours reenacting these movies. She always had to be the heroine, while I, often unwillingly, had to be the hero. Other peers in the neighborhood engaged in vigorous outdoor sports such as tag, croquet, badminton, tennis, and swimming. So, I remember my childhood as stimulating, both intellectually and physically.

AJP: How has your own play and experiences influenced your approach to collecting child lore?

JPS: Although I was very active and I read a lot, in some ways I spent a lot of time listening to people talk. Our house was the center of family visits,

with both grandmothers living with us. There were fourteen aunts and uncles, and it seems that every weekend—and all summers—were filled with visiting relatives. Some came from Texas, some from New Orleans, some from Birmingham, Alabama. There were so many accents and so many hilarious stories. One summer three boy cousins, who had been reared in Australia, spent a month with us. The stories they told! The way they expressed themselves!

One of my aunts lived in our neighborhood. She had three children. She took classes at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette over two summers and I became the babysitter for my three younger cousins when I was twelve. From 8:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., five days a week, I had to entertain three restive cousins ages three, four, and six. I learned to become a storyteller, camp counsellor, game instigator, referee of squabbles, and organizer of long neighborhood walks. I also learned that small children were distinct individuals who had much to say.

When I became a long-term substitute teacher for a third-grade class at William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans in 1965, I—as were the students—was plunged into the throes of acclimating to racial integration. For the children, the 1960s was a frightening time. They did not know whether to trust all those white teachers they had to face every day, and not all white teachers were happy to teach them. I asked for help from one of the best teachers I have ever known, Renee Gholz, a veteran teacher who had gained her skills teaching Hispanic children in the El Paso School system in the 1950s. I learned from her that the best way to capture the trust and interest of my small charges was to let them talk. Theirs, she explained, was a culture that highly valued speaking skills. I learned to ask a question then step back and allow a free flow of talk. Again, I found that small children had much to say.

AJP: You have called your work a series of time capsules. Why?

JPS: Whenever I met with groups of children and taped the conversations, I was limited in time. In a classroom, the taping time ran only to the allotted class period. At camps and at churches, the time allotted was often close to only one hour. Every time I turned off the tape recorder and had to close the session, I could still hear children shouting, “I know one! I know one!” The taped sessions included the voices of those children who were bold enough to step forward. Once the recorder was off, there were so many children

who knew a lot, but had not stepped up. Like snippets of time, the voice recordings leave out the chatter that led up to them and the conversation that followed them. I so wish I had had more time to make more recordings and videos of all those children who could have contributed so much more.

AJP: What are some of the earliest historical forms of children's play and lore?

JPS: The British folklorists Peter and Iona Opie had great interest in the historical aspects of child lore. In the introduction to their 1959 *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, the Opies stated, "No matter how uncouth schoolchildren may outwardly appear, they remain tradition's warmest friends. Like the savage, they are respecters, even venerators, of custom; and in their self-contained community, their basic lore and language seem scarcely to alter from generation to generation." The Opies follow this statement with a list of antecedents to the lore they collected. Throughout *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, the Opies included footnotes (thankfully appearing at the actual foot of proper pages) that tied a great number of the items of lore they presented to examples of similar child lore from historical sources. These footnotes relate items they collected in the first half of the twentieth century to games, rhymes, riddles, sayings, divinations, and more, from the time of the Greeks and Romans to Henry VIII, Shakespeare, Jonathan Swift, Queen Anne, and Samuel Pepys.

When I visited the New Orleans Museum of Art's exhibit of the treasures of King Tut in 1977, there I found several examples of the board games and toys the young king had been buried with.

AJP: Much of your research has focused on African American children's games, which you have described as ephemeral artistic expressions. What makes these games different from other forms of play?

JPS: I collect all children's folklore because I believe it is a form of ephemeral art. During our lives we learn most between the ages three (the earliest age of any child from whom I have ever collected) and twelve (about the seventh or eighth grade), the span of life in which most children learn, share, play, and practice what we call "children's folklore." For many children, the lore shared with other children proves one of their most treasured outlets for artistic expression. They learn rhyme, rhythm, a form of public speaking, formalized game rules, cultural expectations, kinesic aptitude, and self-assurance through play shared with peers. It is the actual playing of the games that constitutes ephemeral artistic expressions, not the games

themselves. The games exist as artifacts and, as such, remain expressions to be handed down through time to new generations of children.

AJP: What is the significance of word play and banter in games such as The Dozens?

JPS: Dozens are, for the most part, verbal insult contests conducted in front of groups of friends. The idea calls for players to challenge one another to engage in quick flowing repartee while being urged on by friends who create an audience. The emphasis lies on fast comebacks in the correct formula. An “uh” or a hesitation merits a snub and loss of face.

Based on the many recordings I have made of “clean dozens” contests, the first speaker might say, “Yo’ teet so yellow when you went outside, the sun said, ‘Hello, Mama!’” The next line might immediately follow. “I got one! Yo’ teet so yellow that the sun say, ‘I’m on vacation.’”

The speakers, if they proceeded to the dirty dozens, began their contest lines with “Yo’ Mama . . .” and “Fuck yo’ Mama . . .”. The point of the verbal contest at any level is to test both verbal quickness and the ability to formulate a pertinent retort to any delivered line without showing any loss of face.

AJP: How have the spaces children played in—such as playgrounds, schoolyards, classrooms, and summer camps—shaped the way they played and the lyrics of the songs they sang?

JPS: Children need spaces where they can congregate freely, without too much adult supervision, to successfully pass on to their peers the childhood lore they acquire. School recess time, even if it is only twenty minutes, provides the space, the setting, and the time for myriad schoolyard events. Summer camps congregate children from various towns and cities in one venue where they can share camp songs, tell horror stories, pull pranks on one another, and do hand claps and share jokes in the afternoons during nap time. Camp songs and lore remain fond memories for many young people to be handed down to their younger siblings and friends.

The minute children find themselves alone with peers, they begin to share lore. This is the reason play spaces away from too much adult supervision are so important.

AJP: Can you tell us about some of the different ways you found that children choose who is it in their tag and chase games? Has this changed over time?

JPS: I would say that choosing who is it might be the most recognizably conser-

vative segment of child lore. The phrase “eenie meenie minie moe,” now termed racist and offensive, is, however, one prompt line that virtually every recorded group has recognized and responded to. Today most children say:

Eenie meenie minie moe
 Catch a (fella /tiger /teacher)
 By the toe

Choosing who is it is essential to many schoolyard games, and hundreds of formulas exist for doing so. There are one liners like “Boy scout/ Camp out,” and there are lengthy jingles that work both for hand claps and counting out:

My mama and your mama
 Live across the street
 1618 Beeston Street
 Every night they have a fight
 And this is what they say:
 Boys are rotten just like cotton
 Girls are dandy just like candy
 Itsy bitsy soda water
 Itsy bitsy pooh
 Itsy bitsy soda water
 Out goes you!

I do not think counting out has changed over time. There were always alternative ways to choose who would be it without a verbal formula. Some informants told me they flipped a coin for it. Some children said they ran to a designated place, and the last one to get there was it. And sometimes, a lead boy or girl simply pointed at someone and shouted, “You’re it.” And the game began.

AJP: What is the “children’s network” of playground lore

JPS: Elizabeth Tucker in her 2008 *Children’s Folklore: A Handbook* describes the way children share their lore as “a network of children that transmits children’s folklore, with creative variations.” Folklorists who have gathered child lore from William Wells Newell’s 1883 *Games and Songs of American*

Children to Nigel Kelsey's 2020 *Games, Rhymes, and Wordplay of London Children* have noted that games English-speaking children play in one country might be played simultaneously in an English-speaking country quite far away. Games I collected in south Louisiana exist in variations collected by Brian Sutton-Smith in New Zealand. No one knows exactly how the network works. A child in New Orleans might hear a jingle played by an older sibling and bring it to school. Another child hears it, repeats it, and in days it is being chanted in Ontario, Canada, or Edinburgh, Scotland. No one knows how this rapid transmission occurs. It just does.

AJP: You have noted how childhood games and lore are passed down and spread, but are there other kinds of contemporary culture and media that influence how games and lore change or manifest themselves? Do you have any particular examples?

JPS: Children's play is influenced by every aspect of the media. Movies, television, and radio have long influenced schoolyard play. My friends and I reenacted movies we saw in the late 1940s and early 1950s. We made costumes, built movie sets, wrote scripts, and acted them out. If we saw a movie with dancing, we imitated the dance numbers in the living room at home.

I recorded young girls acting out their favorite television dramas on playgrounds from the 1970s to the 2000s. In the 1970s, boys imitated martial arts they viewed in movies, and they danced to music played on the radio and in music videos. In 2022 girls are still singing and dancing to popular songs they listen to on the radio. Even with COVID-19 restrictions, I walk my dog in the city park in New Iberia. Last month I observed a birthday party held under a park gazebo. A player blasted the song "WAP" by Cardi B, and a small group of young girls who looked to be around eight to ten years old clapped, sang, and danced along to the music.

So, children watch a lot of television, and it influences their play. According to "Average Television Time, May 1999," children viewed a total of nineteen hours and forty minutes a week. On January 16, 2022, I Googled "Television Viewing Time" and these were the stats I found on the Center for Disease Control's website: "According to the Kaiser Family Foundation children ages 8–18 now spend, on average, a whopping 7.5 hours in front of a screen for entertainment each day, 4.5 of which is spent watching TV. Over a year, that adds up to 144 full days watching a screen for fun." This

apparent increase in screen-viewing time will almost certainly affect child play and the transmission of traditional school yard lore.

In the last two years, COVID-19 restrictions have pushed the children I know to greater dependence on electronic devices for amusement. My grandson, who is eleven years old, wishes to spend four to seven hours a day playing online video games with his friends. He also watches anime on television. On January 16, 2022, when he was watching *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure* and I suggested he read a book instead, he responded, "But Grandma, I have to watch it. All my friends are watching it, and I have to know what they are talking about."

AJP: How has the Internet, online video platforms, and social media such as YouTube and Instagram changed the children's network of lore?

JPS: In 2016 I wrote that the electronic age has simply added, not superimposed, a new play world for children. Play in the electronic age offers an exciting range of modes of interaction. YouTube, Facebook, smartphones, Xboxes, video games, TikTok, and much more offer children and young adults new avenues of play and social communication.

YouTube, to cite only one platform, offers many play options. Young people passively watch other individuals play video games; they actively create and act out videos of their own and post them; they critically watch videos of other children playing traditional games, and then they upload comments in the comment section.

Children are tech savvy at an early age, and they send one another selfies, videos, TikTok and Instagram messages, and texts. The number of texts alone numbered 2.2 trillion sms or mms messages in the United States in 2020. We do not know how many of these messages are shared by children, but I see children walking around with phones to their ears wherever I go now.

Children play with whatever is at hand, and the electronic world offers many tempting options. However, child lore has in the past required face to face learning: physical juggling for play space, the touching of hands in counting out, shared chants when jumping rope. Face to face play is being restricted, and I feel this loss might have an impact because in-person contact seems essential to the passing on of traditional child lore.

AJP: How might children's experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic shape their lore?

JPS: It is not possible for me to make any prediction about how the pandemic might shape children's lore yet. Certainly, the confinement of children, the hours spent at home rather than at school, the curtailing of sleepovers and playdates, and the many hours they are spending in front of electronic devices will make a difference in shaping child lore. It will take careful questioning and many conversations with children willing to share their experience before folklorists will be able to assess the changes the pandemic might have wrought.

AJP: You have written that many older children and adults fail to recall their childhood folk games due to a form of blocking out. Can you explain this?

JPS: The usual time span for child lore to be disseminated stretches from ages three to about twelve. Children pass along counting out rhymes, jump rope jingles, taunts and jeers, ring games, and tag formulas for about ten years. Then they stop. Some girls begin trading make-up secrets, sex lore, and fashion facts in middle school and seem almost embarrassed to try to remember childhood games when prompted as young adults. These young people block out the memories of their child lore because they somehow deem that part of their lives childish, or not cool. Teen lore and adult lore, like cheers and jokes and patterned teasing, become more acceptable.

This is not true, though, for all young and older adults. Some of my informants, both Black and white, who were college aged could recite more than an hour from memory. My mother, who was in her seventies when I interviewed her, when properly prompted with my questionnaire, recalled more than thirty minutes of child lore.

AJP: One final question: Many lament the loss of the kind of play that you documented during the last quarter of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century. What do you think will happen to children's lore? Will it survive?

JPS: The death of schoolyard play has been predicted from the earliest years of its collection. William Wells Newell, the earliest major collector of child lore in America, felt he had to write down everything he heard the children play before it "perished at the root." That was in 1883. Children are still playing, and I believe they always will. Will they continue to recite jump rope jingles, play hand claps, chase one another in tag games, recite ridiculous speeches in front of their friends? Yes, if the schools open again and school

officials allow them to participate in all these things.

Times have changed, but children still seek out other children to share their secret world with. That secret world once energized the playground, the day camp, and the sleepover. Now it includes secret information shared electronically as well as personally.