

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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