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**ABSTRACT**

A number of the historical and contemporary games of black children reflect an attitude of resistance and assertion on the part of the players. Older game songs, dating from the days of slavery, express a recreative anger against slave masters or a contempt for the theater image of the jolly plantation slave, Jim Crow. Post-Civil War songs and dances defy the degradation of the slave experience and convey a buoyant hope for a better future. The contemporary games of black children, selected from a sample of children in the Buffalo (New York) black community, comment on sexuality, health, looks, and parental influence. Some games teach cause and consequence concepts or emphasize counting and learning the alphabet; others act out nonverbally the awareness of social roles and behavior. All of these games demonstrate the creative energy that black children exert in meeting the oppressive conditions that exist in their lives. (MAI)

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**What's in Small Talk?: Revolutionary Communication  
in Black Children's Games**

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Paper prepared for the 63rd annual conference of the Speech  
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Revolutionary communication in the context of African American life styles is resistance and assertion. It is where our people have resisted oppression and asserted their sassiness. These twin components of the African American experience are indicative of revolutionary communication processes in our children games. The intent of revolutionary communication is to create situational change. Asante (Smith) and Rich in Rhetoric of Revolution, a little noticed book, published in 1971 argued that all revolutionary communication is concerned with dramatic situational change. Although the games of African American children may not be as overtly concerned with a dramatic change, the change suggested is most certainly significant.

It is the thesis of this paper that black children games like the more thoroughly discussed spirituals, blues, hollers, and sermons serve a resistance purpose. The whole of black culture, during and after the slave experience, was orchestrated toward the salvation of the people. This is not to evoke wonder; it is rather as should be expected when a people are constantly bombarded with negative stimuli from the oppressor society.

We have chosen several games from historical and contemporary black societies to demonstrate the extent of the resistance and assertion in children games. The contemporary games were selected from a sample of 23 children in the Buffalo black community. Our aim was to select current games and to determine to what extent they reflected resistance and assertion.

Older games were collected from Bessie Jones' Step it Down. She found her games along the coasts of Georgia and South Carolina.

Our analysis stems from the theoretical propositions advanced by Asante in 1970 in his article "A Metatheory for Black Communication." Thus the interaction of frame of mind, structure of code, scope of context, and message delivery constitute a metatheoretical field for analysis. The significance of this field, this system, is that it provides a place for exploring black language and communication. All aspects of black language and life are interwoven in these games. The following examples serve to demonstrate the resistance and assertion.

Where you going buzzard?  
Where you going, crow?  
I'm going down to new ground  
to knock Jim Crow  
up to my kneecap  
down to my toe

And everytime I jump up  
I knock Jim Crow  
I knock  
I knock Jim Crow  
I knock, I knock  
I knock Jim Crow

Originating with the blacks along the Georgia and South Carolina coasts this singing game was an attack on the political and commercial caricature which had come into American English. A white actor named Thomas D. Rice had begun to characterize a jolly free plantation slave in the 1820's. (Jones, 1974) Blacks who heard about the characterization from those who had occasion to see it were angered. It was this recreative anger which led them to teach their children to knock Jim Crow. The image of the jolly free plantation slave was inimical to them. The impact of the game was increased as they increased the tempo to knock Jim Crow.

Little Sally Walker  
sitting in a saucer  
crying and a-weeping  
over all she has done

Rise Sally Rise  
wipe out your eyes  
fly to the east, Sally

Fly to the west, Sally  
Fly to the very one  
you love the best.

Oh, shake it to the east  
Oh, shake it to the west  
Oh, shake it to the very one  
you love the best.

Little Sally Walker expresses the optimism almost always present in the black community. Not only is the game an expression of optimism and a command for strength "Rise Sally Rise" but a revolutionary statement for Sally to wipe the tears from her eyes and to fly to the very one she loves the best. Children following the lead of their parents always turned the games into positive statements, even when they started out sad or tragic. Little Sally Walker was not to remain seated, crying and weeping in a saucer, she was to rise and after rising she was to be sassy and shake it to the east and to the west and to the one she loved the best.

Way go, Lily  
Way go, Lily  
I'm going to rule my ruler  
I'm going to rule my ruler  
I'm going to rule him  
with a hickory.  
I'm going to rule him  
with a hickory.

This song is usually punctuated by "sometimes." It probably originated during slavery and is rarely heard now except in Charleston and Savannah. Resistance is paramount. One can see the obvious sentiment of wanting to treat the master like the master has treated the slave. This song was sung

in the slave quarters and continued in the segregated ghettos after the war between the states. Such provocative songs and dances kept alive the hope of a better day. In fact, the words "sometimes" and "some day" were used in an ominous way.

Sandy Ree

Way down yonder  
Sandy Ree  
Where I come from  
Sandy Ree  
Girls love boys  
Sandy Ree  
Like a hog loves corn  
Sandy Ree

Papa got a shovel  
Mama got the hoe  
If that ain't farming  
I don't know

Dog on the porch  
kicking off fleas  
Chicken in the yard  
scratching up peas

Old brother rabbit  
died with a habit  
in my garden  
eating up the cabbage

If I live  
to see next fall  
I ain't gonna plant  
no cotton at all

Mama in the cotton patch  
Picking up cotton  
Papa in town  
drunk and sloppin'

Well, if I live  
and I don't get killed  
I'm going back  
to Jacksonville  
Road is wet  
woods is muddy  
daddy's so drunk  
He can't stand studdy

Down in the bottom  
cotton goes rotten  
can't get a bale  
It's no need of rottin'

Your dog bark  
He don't see nothin'  
My dog bark  
He done see somethin'

One of these days  
and it won't be long  
You'll look for me here  
And I'll be gone.

Again the defiance, the longing, the intention to escape oppression, to change status, to deny the oppressor of labor show through as a most revolutionary posture. To not plant cotton or to run away is tantamount to denying the slave owner the right to decide what to do with his property. But it is the independence of the black soul, defying by every conceivable means the degradation of the slave experience. Buoyancy was inexplicable to the oppressors; it was life to the Africans. These games are old but may be heard in black communities even now.

Contemporary games of black children exemplify a continuation of resistance and assertion with the ever present pedagogical element. Causes and consequences, sexuality, social roles and behavior, mathematics and history are all parts of the song games, jump rope games and clapping games of black children.

While playing these games, black children exercise an inherited oral tradition and simultaneously engage in nonverbal behaviors. Although description of these nonverbal behaviors are not studied in detail, most of the games are accompanied by nonverbal behaviors. The clapping games are particularly nonverbal. They possess elaborate clapping patterns

where children may touch open hands, as they move back and forth. All of the games are lyrical and rhythmic. In the clapping games the children always stood either facing each other or side by side with no more than a foot or a foot and a half separating them.

The creativity of these games reflects the improvisational nature of black oral and musical idioms. When not sure of the words the children appear to improvise. One little sister put it this way. "You just make up somethin' that rhymes." There is a generative element in the game dynamic, one can always make up games.

My mother and your mother were sitting in a ditch  
My mother called your mother a black son-of-a-bitch  
Bring out the children and let them play with sticks  
when they get older they learn to play with  
Dick was a little boy who played with Tiny Tim  
He jumped in the piss-pot to see if he can swim  
He swam to the bottom, he swam to the top  
when he came up he was in his mother's  
cocktail and ginger ale ten cents a glass  
If you don't believe me I'll kick your  
Ask me no questions, I'll tell you no lies  
This is a true story about your mother and mine.

The creativity of this clapping game is the clever signifying of the so-called "bad words." Blacks have used this technique in "talking bad" to oppressors since coming to Africa. It is an adaptation of the resistance and assertion strategem. You can say what you need to say without being perceived as a threat.

Another clapping game utilizing the strategem of signifying goes:

Johnny had a steamboat  
His steamboat had a bell  
Johnny went to heaven  
His steamboat went to  
Hello operator  
Give me number nine  
If you don't connect me  
I'll kick your  
Behind the refrigerator



There was a piece of glass  
Johnny fell upon it  
And broke his little  
Ask me no questions  
I'll tell you no more lies  
Johnny told me about it  
the night before he died.

Some of the children were heard singing another song, called "Ronald McDonald."

Ronald McDonald  
A big dick  
oh its a whopper  
A big dick  
I want another  
A big dick  
It's so sweet  
A big dick  
Light my cherrytree  
A big dick  
Ronald McDonald  
A big dick.

Games such as these are quickly spread throughout the community. They comment on sexuality, health, looks, and parental roles. They are created particularly when children seem to have few other amusements.

To begin with, in their games, black children teach each other cause and consequence. One such indicator is a song-game called Fat and Skinny which goes:

Fat and Skinny was in the bed  
Fat rolled over and Skinny was dead  
Fat called the doctor and the doctor said  
One more move and we'll all be dead.

This same game is also sung like this:

Fat Mama and Skinny Mama was in the bed  
Fat Mama farted and Skinny was dead  
Fat mama called the doctor and the doctor said  
One more fart, we'll all be dead

Again, the ability of black children to improvise is displayed. Boys and girls sing this, *game*.

Another example is a song-game called Mary, Mary. Although there are implications in the song that a boy is singing it, black girls sing it. It follows:

Mary Mary please don't say no  
To the basement we must go  
Put your butt against that wall  
*Here* I come busting all  
Won't your mother be disgusted  
When she find your cherry busted  
Won't your father be surprised  
To see your belly rise.

This particular game also communicates sexually which is also another element which black children communicate to each other. In their games they express that they are very well aware of sex and sexual organs as well as other parts of their bodies. This clapping game is one such game which concludes

Five by Five  
We shut our eyes  
In the bed with my baby - A lonely night  
Six by Six  
He stuck out his dick  
In the bed with my baby - A lonely night  
Seven by Seven  
We went to heaven  
*In the bed with my baby - A lonely night*  
Eight by Eight  
The doctor was late  
In the bed with my baby - A lonely night  
Nine by Nine  
It was a quarter to 9  
In the bed with my baby - A lonely night  
Ten by Ten  
We took off our clothes and did it again  
In the bed with my baby - A lonely night

Boys also have their own song games which girls do not play. One such game is sung:

Ain't your mother pretty  
She got meatballs between her titties  
She got scrambled eggs between her legs  
Soda pop in her cock

Besides communicating cause and consequence concepts and sexuality black children are also aware of social roles and behavior. Such awareness can be seen in this song-game which is acted out nonverbally concurrent to the words of the songs.

When Mary was a baby, a baby, a baby,  
When Mary was a baby, she look like this  
(nonverbal gesture of putting a thumb in her mouth)  
When Mary was a girl, a girl, a girl  
When Mary was a girl, she look like this  
(nonverbal gesture of playing jump rope)  
When Mary was a teenager, a teenager, a teenager  
When Mary was a teenager, she look like this  
(nonverbal gesture of gossiping on the telephone)  
When Mary was a lady, a lady, a lady  
When Mary was a lady, she look like this  
(nonverbal gesture of switching down the street)  
When Mary was married, married, married  
When Mary was married, she look like this  
(sing: "Here comes the bride, Here comes the bride")  
When Mary had a baby, a baby, a baby  
When Mary had a baby, she look like this  
(nonverbal gesture of rocking a baby in her arms)  
When Mary killed her husband, her husband, her husband  
When Mary killed her husband, she look like this  
(nonverbal gesture of stabbing her husband with a knife)  
When Mary killed her baby, her baby, her baby  
When Mary killed her baby, she look like this  
(nonverbal gesture of stabbing her baby)  
When Mary killed herself, herself, herself.  
When Mary killed herself, she look like this  
(nonverbal gesture of laying in her tomb)

Another example is a short song-game about a prostitute in which girls put their hands on their hips and swing them as they walk.

Strut Miss Lizzie, Lizzie, Lizzie.  
Strut Miss Lizzie all night long

Sometimes the name is changed by substituting it with their own.

In some of the games, younger black children teach themselves how to count and how to recite the alphabet in their own original and fun way which appears to be more fun than the traditional games they learn in school. One such game is "Miss Sue."

Miss Sue (2 claps)

Miss Sue (2 claps)

Miss Sue from Alabama

She got to A, B, C, D, E, F, G

She got to H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O, P

She got to Smoooooth touch

She got to Smoooooth touch

She got to FREEZE

(When FREEZE is shouted, everyone freezes in their place in any position for a few seconds)

"Cinderella" is a jump rope game which teaches counting at least to twenty-five.

Cinderella think she's cute

She always wear her bathing suit

If you count to 25

You will get another try

(The child in the middle of the other two who are turning the rope jumps until she stops the rope by missing a jump).

"Teddy Bear" is another jump rope game in which black children count. In this one, they count up to the number of times they can jump without stopping the rope.

Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear

Turn all around

Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear

Touch the ground

Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear

Shoe your shoes

Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear

Be excused (repeated until the child jumps out)

(While the rope is in motion, without stopping the rope. After she does, the other children continue to sing:)

Come back in (repeated until the child jumps back in while the rope is in motion).

**Then it continues:**

Go upstairs

Say your prayers

Lord have mercy on my soul

How many biscuits have I stole

1, 2, 3, 4, 5; . . . (child jumps until she makes a mistake)

This game also has an indicator of the black religious-cultural experience by singing a popular expression used by black folk - "Lord have mercy."

A contemporary version of "Mary Mack" goes:

Oh Mary Mack, Mack, Mack  
All dressed in Black, Black, Black  
With silver buttons, buttons, buttons  
All down her back, back, back  
  
She paid 15 cents, cents, cents  
To see the elephants, elephants, elephants  
Jump over the fence, fence, fence  
  
He jumped so high, high, high  
To reach the sky, sky, sky  
And he never came back, back, back  
To the 4th of July, ly, ly

The "fourth of July" seems to express the knowledge of the national holiday.

There is an objectism bond of the black experience which is found in "Mary Mack." For example:

She went upstairs, stairs, stairs  
to make her bed, bed, bed  
She made a mistake, stake, stake  
and bumped her head, head, head  
On a piece of cornbread, bread, bread

In the last line, cornbread, a favorite food of blacks is mentioned.

In this next song game, nothing visible, in terms of content, expresses black culture. But in the second last line the children do something that is almost equivalent to scatting - a verbal play of sounds used famously by black musicians.

Hey Cathy, somebody's calling your name  
Hey Cathy, somebody's playin' your game  
Hey Cathy, somebody want you on the telephone  
  
If that's my mama I ain't home  
Sitting at the table drinking Black Label  
Chi chi chi wa wa, chi chi chi wa wa boom  
Ah shucks - one more time (then whole game is repeated)

Another song-game in which the same thing is done is "Ronald McDonald" although there are many more song-games which exhibit varieties of this technique of play on word sounds.

Ronald McDonald had some french fries  
Ronald McDonald had some french fries  
Ooohh chi chi wa wa french fries  
I got a nickel french fries

Ronald McDonald had some milk shake  
Ronald McDonald had some milk shake  
Ooohh chi chi wa wa milk shake  
I got a nickel french fries

(do the same thing with hamburger and pop)

Black children also seem to express an awareness of the conflict that can occur between adults.

Your mother and my mother live across the street  
1414 Broadway Street  
Every night they have a fight  
And this is what they say:  
Kiss my aka backa, my soda cracker  
my jelly belly (the rest of this game is not recorded because the children forgot the rest of the words at the time this was written).

Although all of these games communicate something about black children's awareness of life and society, some of them are created just for fun. Two such games are "Fudge, Fudge" and "Miss Susie" (jump rope games) but kids also like to just sing them. They go as follows:

Fudge, fudge call the judge  
(any name's) havin' a baby  
Wrap it up in toilet paper  
Send it down the elevator  
Boy? Girl? twins? triplets?  
(Child stops jumping on the one he/she chose).

Miss Susie

Miss Susie had a baby  
She named him Tiny Tim  
She put him in a bathtub  
To see if he could swim

He drunk up all the water  
He ate up all the soap  
He tried to eat the bathtub  
But it wouldn't go down his throat

Miss Susie called the doctor  
The doctor called the nurse  
The nurse called the lady with the alligator purse

One more is titled "Peace, Black Power" and goes:

I went down town to see James Brown  
He gave me a nickle to buy me a pickle  
the pickle was sour, he gave me a flower  
the flower was dead, and this is what he said  
Peace, Black Power - your mama need a shower  
Don't laugh, Don't laugh - your daddy need a bath

Again the objectism from the black community makes a resounding appearance in this word game with "James Brown" and "Black Power".

Resistance and assertion are the twin elements present in black children games historically and currently. What these games demonstrate is the creative energies of our people in meeting oppressive conditions. These are more than survival games; they are victory statements. No one could presume to be master of the person who could throw dirt in your eyes and make you think it is visine. Thus, the small talk the games black children play, and the objectism in their language, constitute structure, frame, and context for revolutionary struggle at a certain level of existence.