



## *The Tortoise's Tale*

"... we went to school in the sea. The Master was an old turtle-we used to call him Tortoise-"

"Why did you call him Tortoise, if he wasn't one?" Alice asked.

"We called him Tortoise, because he taught us," said the Mock Turtle

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### **From nursery rhymes to childlore: orality and ideology**

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Last year I was browsing through some newspapers when I ran across a piece of news about the ultimate child-happy song composed by Grammy-award-winner Imogen Heap (Addyman). It was a project proposed by a group of psychologists researching the connection of children with musicality, and intent on creating an infallible production that would engage infants and make them happy. As interesting as it sounded, I was shocked to realize that, in an age where nursery rhymes are being abandoned (Scholastic), the same premises used by traditional children rhymes are being rediscovered by science. Infants, after all, still need to be silenced, calmed and controlled, and musicality has been a long-established element that managed to do so. Traditional rhymes offer many of the defining traits this new, scientifically proven and technologically based creation proposed. Perhaps a closer look should be taken to understand how much nursery rhymes can (and do) offer to the understanding of human mechanisms, both in adults and children, and how their impact encompasses much more than simply entertainment.

When approaching nursery rhymes, they appear as a concrete, limited and cohesive collection shared by all English-speaking countries packaged in colorful books or fun, animated Youtube channels. Yet they have truly been something that was alive: a group of productions that changed and increased throughout time, drawn from and shared with different languages and cultures, accommodated or purged, considered to hide secret meanings and, subsequently, fossilized in print. They pre-date literary culture although, since society has become literary, nursery rhymes have been generally approached either from the folkloric ethnography field through a collection and analysis of rhymes, their variations and their influences; or as a means to an end, taking into account their possible usage in phonological awareness, literacy and first and second language acquisition. Few have intended to answer what exactly nursery rhymes are, how they work and why it is that they have existed for so long. Understanding nursery rhymes offers essential knowledge of their position in children's literature, children's agency and the shared discourse between adults and children. It also illustrates how the relationship between adults, infants, communication and connection has preserved its essential features.

To better approach these points, one must first answer the question 'what is a nursery rhyme?', and it is through deeper insight into what their own taxonomy offers that the true nature of nursery rhymes is apprehended. The Encyclopaedia Britannica describes them as "verse customarily told or sung to small children" while Merriam/Webster gives a similar definition: "a short rhyme for children that often tells a story". Thus, nursery rhymes need two participants to exist: the child listener and the adult teller. The dual addressee of nursery rhymes seems to follow the idiosyncrasies of children's literature. But a closer look reveals different information.

### **ORIGIN OF NURSERY RHYMES**



A probe into the origin of nursery rhymes sheds some light on these differences. Nursery rhymes were mostly ditties meant to entertain a pre-literate society, where adults and children appeared as common participants in shared oral lore (Postman; Lerer). Most of these pieces would become won-over or stolen literature (Cervera 18), texts originally not intended for children, yet adopted and taken by them and, I would add that, as a result of this appropriation, they were consequently used by adults to manage children. The rhythm, musicality and repetitive structure of a nursery rhyme can come in handy when an adult is intent on silencing or entertaining a child. For this reason, Eckenstein considers them "a rhyme that was passed on by word of mouth and taught to children *before* it was set down in writing and put into print" (2, *my italics*).

The fact that nursery rhymes became among the first publications meant for children underlines their usefulness in dealing with children; nonetheless, before being published for children, nursery rhymes were found among other pieces of adult literature: plays, adult anthologies, side mentions (Opie 1-9; Eckstein 13; Vocca 560-562), for as Iona Opie mentions: "the overwhelming majority of nursery rhymes were not in the first place composed for children" (178).

It is their common usage with children that made nursery rhymes an easy collection of pieces to be printed in the developing children's literature publishing industry, regardless of their appropriateness. During the process of being set down in print, nursery rhymes were subjected to purification, censorship, and accommodation (Cardany 31), while the collection of rhymes increased with the addition of several new ones written specifically with the child listener in mind and thus following the premises of much of children's literature, where the idea of childhood and the way adults can and should shape it impacts upon the literary pieces written for them.

Nursery rhymes were transformed from being a living body of shared lore to a fossilized corpus of verses distributed and shared by all countries that speak English. That is, nursery rhymes stopped fluctuating through oral sharing and became subjected to the modifications that take place in printed works parting from the selection of particular rhymes and certain variations.

### ORALITY

Why was their usage so commonly accepted? Why did nursery rhymes become an obvious corpus to be transferred into print? How is it that even those adults that claim not to know any nursery rhymes "will find that they know about twelve nursery rhymes, which are in such common use that they seem to be 'in the air' and no one can remember how they first came to know them" (Opie 178)?

The persistence of nursery rhyme in communal memory has yielded numerous theories on the obscure, dark messages that rhymes hypothetically hide, which would have made them relevant for adults to disseminate (Foster; Alchin; Burton-Hill). New historical theories are still being generated and published. I would point out a less ambiguous reason: it is the traits that link nursery rhymes with orality that answer to their memorability for, before words were to be translated into print, the structure of discourse was organized otherwise to function in a culture where easy memorization was paramount, and knowledge was organized differently (Ong). In nursery rhymes, as an example of orality, these mechanisms abound. They are meant to be inevitably memorable and participatory and include among them rhythm, musicality, motion, formulaicity and repetition.

**Rhythm.** One of the most remarkable features of the nursery rhyme is its rhythm pattern. An original study published in 1966 by Robbins Burling in *American Anthropologist* pointed towards a universal metrical pattern in the nursery rhymes of numerous languages (mostly English, Chinese and Bengkulu, with additional information about Cairo Arabic, Yoruba from Nigeria, Serrano Indian language, Trukese and Ponapean). His focus was mostly on the stanza, not the line – a position which has been challenged since – but his main points still stand: rhymes in all languages belong to the oral lore and follow the needs of orality, focusing mostly on prosody and isochrony.

Since then, there have been many additional studies to prove or refute this theory and the conclusion can be summed up with the affirmation that children's rhymes follow a rhythmic pattern based on binarity and mostly working with quatrains or four-beat lines (Burling; Arleo; Dufter and Noel). A binary structure ensures easy repetition because it follows the simplest pattern of rhythm creation: groups of two or motions with two actions (breathing, walking); that is to say, the most organic



rhythmic pattern for humans, as they come into contact with it already in the womb, through the sound of heart-beats. Infants are lulled by repetitive rhythms and rocking; therefore, cyclic binary-based movement and sound are the natural resources for adults dealing with children, as well as for children themselves in agency. This is also the model adults apply when memorizing: chants, prayers, and proverbs mostly follow this structure.

The rhythmic pattern is grounded in stress-based isochrony and can be flexible in its syllable count and stanza structure; it follows a common metrical pattern in all languages while acquiring specific language-bound attributes, similarly to the process that takes place in literacy acquisition (Hickmann 6-9, 319; Arleo 54).

This metrical symmetry hypothesis (Arleo 56) connects to another type of rhythmical pattern, which determines the duration of the rhyme, that of tension-release. Nursery rhymes regularly exhibit a sense of closure: the stanza offers information that is perceived as complete (Pullinger 53-54, 109-111). Thus, following oral principles, the rhyme presents a closed circular structure in its rhythm, connected to its semantics: it appears as a complete piece, while offering the possibility of being built upon structurally.

As an example of isochrony in nursery rhymes, the popular 'Baa baa black sheep' has a diverse number of syllables per line (ranging from seven to three) yet has two stresses in each line.

Baa baa black sheep,  
Have you any wool?  
Yes, sir; yes, sir  
Three bags full.  
One for my master,  
And one for my dame,  
And one for the little boy  
Who lives down the lane.

The combination of female ending and male endings in each of the four-line stanza anticipates the tension of lines 1 and 3, offering closure and release on lines 2 and 4; this tension creation also takes place within the metrical structure itself, with line 2 combining a dactylic and trochaic structure, recreating a feeling of falling into the ending stressed syllable.

**Musicality.** The metrical pattern becomes connected to musicality, as it clearly marks the rhythm in utterance and the length the syllables have in stress-timed languages or should have in syllable-timed languages. It is not only natural to link rhythm with music; in fact, I would argue it works inversely: our natural musicality in communication creates a bias towards rhythm in utterance and requires rhythm for memorization.

Musicality is not arguably considered the basis of human communication and the source of vocal sound prior to language (Pullinger 42); it is also considered to be the most efficient way to create emotion and communion with others. While language works in generalizations to create a common ground of understanding (Vygotsky 6), music answers to companionship and engages where language might separate (Malloch and Trevarthen 6, Coats 134-139).

Dyads, mother-child binary units, engage in similar communicative musicality early on – with the melodic fluctuations of nonsense speech patterns in motherese also being shared throughout cultures and languages (Mazokopaki and Kugiumutzakis 203). These nonsensical sounding proto-conversations likewise follow a tension-release pattern and they naturally share time with easily accessed memorized rhythmical creations, through which caregivers operate and share formulaic sequences (lullabies, nursery rhymes and memorized songs). Rhymes follow a common binary rhythmical system which becomes the inevitable 'beat' for the musicality of metrical combinations. The fact that many of the nursery rhymes, as we have come to know them, were originally songs (Eckenstein 23-34) illustrates their shared adult-child origin, but also connects them to motion, as many of them were used in festive and ritual dances (Eckenstein 57-58).



**Repetition.** Therefore, rhymes are memorable because of their rhythmical-musical nature and their connection to motion – as well as their repetitive and cumulative structure, which follows yet another characteristic of orality (Ong 32, 37, 39). For when data could not be written down and read, it had to be recalled. Structuring information based on repetition, accumulation and rhyme organizes and helps anticipate knowledge.

Rhymes are generally rooted in the sensory world and make reference to people, objects, and actions, but not ideas, although ideas can and are inferred and assumed from the short actions found in the rhymes. This situational nature (Ong 42) makes rhymes more recognizable, as the objects and actions they depict are related to the culture they belong to, and can be found in daily actions. A rhyme could then be recalled and 'activated' when in contact with any of these domestic activities which it mentions (Pullinger 122). Currently, however, numerous objects and actions portrayed in nursery rhymes are no longer part of everyday lives of children and adults, and much of the vocabulary might seem unfashionable and unused – the triangular relationship between rhythm, repetition and formulaicity makes up for these uncomfortable terms, which might even be changed or updated in utterance and diachronic publications.

The repetition of a nursery rhyme nonce rhythmical line, a syntactic structure or a semantic situation helps remind the listener of the poem's general message, opening the door for variability while keeping the rhyme fixed in the sensory world. This repetition also has the intention of creating familiarity – nursery rhymes are to be a place of comfort and play, not a place of novelty as other types of children's poetry could intend to be (Wray 11; Coats 137)

In 'Baa baa black sheep' the repetition appears in the second stanza, when presenting the characters the bags are destined to; and it connects to both variability and closure. In the modern version of 'Itsy Bitsy Spider', the repetition of the character not only appears in the entire first line and the second-to-last one, offering a full sense of closure as the action appears complete, but also in the usage of –s and –c sounds in contrast with occlusive sounds, and the reappearance of the phenomena sun and rain.

The itsy bitsy spider  
climbed up the waterspout.  
Down came the rain  
and washed the spider out.  
Out came the sun  
and dried up all the rain  
and the itsy bitsy spider  
climbed up the spout again

This might add into the inferred assumption that the rhyme is circular, and there is a relation between the spider's actions and the phenomena, which would be connected to the general use of parataxis in children's rhymes (Pullinger 85), although there are no causal conjunctions. It would illustrate our need to narrativize events, to find a meaning and relation among them, to story-tell. This rhyme not only has previous versions but also exists in several different languages, where the structural and internal repetitions take place as well.

Consequently, with nursery rhymes referring to the sensory world and being heavily based on repetition, they are easily used for didactic purposes: the development of phonological sensibility (Bryant et al. 408; Harper 75; Dunst et al. 3) and subsequent literacy development (Bryant et al. 417; Dunst et al. 6), by helping in vocabulary acquisition, as well as relying on rhyme to anticipate word selection and aid in memorization. Rhymes, once put into print, have gone beyond spontaneous entertainment to become didactic instruments.

**Formulaicity.** In addition, nursery rhymes are an example of formulaic language. Wray considers them a type of memorized formulaic sequence, where the child learns a rhyme as a part of the socialization process linked to language acquisition. The socio-interactional agenda of children as language learners (130) makes them aware that "the rhyme and song signify a certain linguistic behavior" (128). When using nursery rhymes for didactic functions such as the aforementioned ones, the adult is taking apart the rhyme to use one of its pieces in a specific type of teaching – a teaching



related to literacy. However, the child, as an inhabitant of the oral world, initially learns in units: linked strings of words, without being conscious about their divisions. Formulaic sequences, which are also the basis for much of adult interaction, can be easily accessed and reproduced, while also being imbedded in the ideology the language itself represents (Hollindale 7; *Language and ideology in children's fiction* 1; "Linguistics and stylistics" 99), as "formulaic material plays a central role in maintaining the identity of the community" (Wray 92).

Certainly, the formulaic sequences in a nursery rhyme which is already structured around rhythm and repetition also function as an early awareness of the grammatical structures found in the language: what types of morphosyntactic combinations appear most, how nominal, verbal, adverbial and prepositional syntagmas work. However, their use as a bridge between sound play and symbolic language impact on the fact that "they are not remembered and repeated merely because they delight the ear, rather they are signals, in poetic elaboration and as verbal art, of the relations of things" (Watkins 393), which is connected to their semantic content. Hickmann developed the theory of 'thinking for speaking', explaining the impact language has on how children categorise the world, on which aspects of the incoming information are most salient to them, and/or on how they organize information when they engage in the activity of communicating in discourse. Such an impact has been observed in children's linguistic uses during the emergence of language, as well as during later phases of development (338) and is initially based on aural activity and repetition of sounds. The impact of formulaic constructions such as nursery rhymes is significant.

Thus, the characteristics nursery rhymes display are a result of their oral nature and their aural purpose: their inevitable musicality connected to the usage of metrical patterns that aid memorization and generate a sense of community; the repetition found in words, nonce sequences, grammatical structures and rhyme that aid anticipation and participation; the formulaicity in the rhymes' construction that embed the language in the community and a shared ideology. The nature of nursery rhymes is one of performance and sharing: they exist to be said or sung out loud, in a participatory environment. Whether it is the lulling of a parent with an infant or a crowd at an engaging event, nursery rhymes are, at their core, a communal event. For this reason, they are so commonly used intertextually, to be parodied, reused in children's media (Mínguez-López), or alluded to in all types of discourse (Millán); nursery rhymes appeal to a common experience and create the shared space between adults and children as individuals of a community.

**Language as play.** Note that I used the word experience to describe the sharing of a nursery rhyme, for although nursery rhymes are currently found in numerous publications and lavishly illustrated book versions, unless the reader has heard the rhyme previously, the performance will not be accurate. The metrical pattern will create an inevitable rhythm, but the musical or performative element of the rhyme is known only by those that belong to the community that shares them. If the reader's mother tongue is not one that has distinctive vowel length, the isochrony might differ in the reading as well. Therefore, the nursery rhyme is meant to be shared out loud and repeated; linked, through its oral nature, to memory, language acquisition and, over all, the communal identity that is connected to musicality and formulaicity. Published nursery rhyme collections trust that the reader is part of the English-speaking culture; in doing so, they leave others out. Public videos and numerous Youtube channels dedicated to nursery rhymes are supplying a different type of experience by combining the oral nature of rhymes with images, usually animation; nevertheless, they mostly offer rhymes with didactic purposes and either manipulate the traditional rhymes or create new ones to fulfill this aim. Due to the current trend of nursery rhymes engagement being discarded by parents as they are perceived as unfashionable or not educational (Dunst et al. 6), it is worrisome that instrumental nursery rhymes might be the ones that endure.

Because nursery rhymes need sound, hearing and motion to exist, that is, performance, they become the place where adults and children play together with language. When I referred to their origins, these rhymes and songs have been seen to be experiences where any member of the community could be involved. Their collection as a single corpus of nursery rhymes illustrates the fact that they were already being used to entertain children, that children themselves had already taken these rhymes as their own and that they were commonly known by most of the community – and potential book purchasers. Through publication, nursery rhymes became a commodity: the object of that which



already *belonged* orally. And it seems that once possessed outside of the oral experience and fossilized in print, they have slowly lost their need to be performed unless linked to didactic purposes.

When adults interact with children through communicative musicality and subsequently nursery rhymes and songs, they remember how language is an object of play in itself. Language learning takes part through play, as the child acquires vocabulary, formulaic sequences and phonological awareness; transgression also takes place, through nonce words, impromptu vocabulary manipulation, mislabelings and improvised rhyme combinations. In my household, the little boy of 'Baa baa black sheep' lived down the drain, creating mixed emotions of dread and rebelliousness in the children of the household. Linguistic play comes naturally in the adult-child dyad, where the seeds of thinking through mimesis and creating through mimicry might produce a unique type of creativity as Brice mentions:

Models matter a great deal to play, even though across the age span, individuals often play on their own initiative. However, the imitative potential that models provide for novices allows learners to create from what they see others do. This particular capacity – of moving beyond mere imitation to creativity – comes to humans (and several other higher-order primates) as a result of the brain's mirror neurons. While humans observe and see patterns and rules that others enact, they have an inner drive to create anew. For centuries, this drive has led children, scientists, and artists to new behaviors, ideas, and inventions (188-189)

Language play offers a model and the tools to unmake it. It introduces the child into the communal patterns, while underlining the possibility of individualizing them and deconstructing them. Therefore, oral nature as a combination of fixed and fluid elements, connected to the situational experience is still very much alive in nursery rhymes.

### **CHILD AGENCY AND CHILDLORE**

This combination (the connection to the adult world and to an open-ended and creative performance) is why nursery rhymes have such an impact on child agency. While still under the supervision and need of adult care, children use language play to create a sense of self. This creativity, shared with adults, contributes to their emotional, social and intellectual development while also giving the child a chance to experiment, create and innovate (Cremin and Maybin 285). Adults are reminded through this language play of their creativity as well, while reactivating their contact with their own childhood; as it is something that is carried within the adult construct. Due to the oral nature of nursery rhymes and their specific idiosyncrasies, the adult/child division (dis)appears through shared production, instead of being underlined through vertical up-to-down didacticism.

However, the largest impact of nursery rhymes on child agency occurs on what has come to be known as childlore. Childlore takes place once the child has an independent space to create and share with peers. I focus only on rhyme and poetic creations of childlore, not on the rich and diverse collection of jeers, promises, name-calls and other variations collected by the Opies in their *Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*. Because children already arrive at their individual situations (schools, playgrounds, events) with a poetic code, it will be this discourse that they will reuse to create some of their own agency.

Child agency's apparent uniformity – how it is shared throughout space and time by oral means only – represents the easiness of its memorization and the relevance of musicality, spoken word and performance in the creation of a collective identity. Childlore survives for generations and is shared in diverse regions, regardless of distance (*The lore and language of schoolchildren* 6-7; Turner 141). It follows codes that children must acquire to be part of a community and to be accepted.

### **NURSERY RHYMES AND CHILDLORE: CONVERGENCES AND DIVERGENCES**

Childlore and nursery rhymes appear to be in opposition on some points. On the one hand, in the way that they function, as nursery rhymes have become standardized and regulated, connected to literacy, while childlore appears as a flexible corpus, under the adult radar, and connected to orality. However, although in childlore the "the behavior and defects of oral transmission can be seen in operation



during a relatively short period" (*The lore and language of schoolchildren* 8), and trends can be added to childlore from any type of paracultural source; childlore is largely a stable group of poems that preserves what is considered to be the "legislative language" (ibid 15) of the children of a specific group.

The aforementioned influence of paraculture on childlore (television, songs, advertisements, home videos, celebrities' statements) is connected to the reception by children of messages originally not intended for them, as seen in Ewers (10) and Rudd (35). Children are not passive participants in culture, they will combine what is meant to construct the child's social identity as imposed by adult management and what the child actually feels attracted to or considers alluringly different. Rudd identifies this process as hybridity (35). Part of what will be considered alluring is, undoubtedly, all that is connected to what Reynolds calls 'rubbish' (72): the topics and semantic fields that are considered sociably inappropriate for children, from scatological references to subversive or critical messages. This creative potential in language underlines both the acceptance of rules and their elasticity in play, as it assists in the creation of a unique, wholesome and rooted identity. For, isn't the creation of one's self one of the main motivators of literacy (Stephens; Messenger Davies; Fraiberg)? What better way to do so than challenge the status quo, deconstruct it and reshape it in language?

As active producers of their own culture, Thomas emphasizes that "it is important to regard children's culture *alongside* adult culture" (154, italics original). The influence of paraculture results in messages that might be accommodated or accepted into the children's literary sphere by a shift in the market's paradigms, references or ideologies, as took place in the collection or publication of nursery rhymes. With subversive messages out of context through semiotic base changes, nursery rhymes, with this same won-over origin, could become an accepted object of literary play for the children that were already sharing them.

Nonetheless, many of these messages might never become part of the children's literary sphere. These texts, with an increasing number being accessed easily and without mediation by children through diverse media, give a different version of how to define the children's literary sphere. For while children's discourse includes children's literature, it must also include discourse taken by children and child agency. While children's literature is mostly the one addressed directly to children – the one that accommodates the market, whether in compositions specifically for the children's literature market or taken from other areas and accommodated to fulfill the market's expectations; discourse taken by children or won-over literature would comprise all the texts that interest children and are synchronically placed *outside* of the children's market, those which are not considered appropriate for children by the mediator circle. Some of these pieces might become part of the first group, while others will be discarded in a larger diachronic view. These two models appear in the collection of nursery rhymes, their publication, purging and adapting; as well as in the composition of new rhymes that responded to the paradigms of children's literature at the time of their creation.

Child agency responds to both of these inputs, modeling upon the style and messages which are meant for them and the style and messages which they are interested in individually or as a group. I would compare it to crossing a road. An adult without a child will cross at a red light or in the middle of the road, as long as there is no danger, and many times in front of children. When a child and an adult cross together, they wait at the light until it turns green and they are authorized to cross, following the expected rules. When a school child crosses on her/his own, they also cross at a red light or in the middle of the road, as long as there is no danger; additionally, they also need to make sure there are no known adults around to catch them doing so, as "the school-child's verses are not intended for adult ears" (*The lore and language of schoolchildren* 1).

Another difference to be pointed out between nursery rhymes and childlore would be their function. Childlore is mostly connected to usefulness to the child: that is, to games and action (Turner 133-136). Although children do have a Bakhtinian carnivalesque culture, where rhymes are used for subversiveness and parody, the connection of a rhyme to motion will help it endure. A clapping game, however, can use a subversive rhyme, or the rhyme used for skipping rope might have held a subversive message at a certain point in time becoming no longer relevant in the synchronic situation it is used, but surreal in being outdated.



This connection to motion is what makes childlore the preferred object of study in the analysis of children's rhymes metrical patterns (Arleo 40, 55) as, contrasting with the fossilization of nursery rhymes in print, these rhymes are, by their own definition and due to their oral nature, performative.

Childlore's differences with nursery rhymes have thus far been underscored by a common drive: the oral performance and sharing of musicality and language; the involvement of children in culture through the structuring of rhythm, memory, formulaic language; the illustration of the boundaries of language agency through play. With the tools of the common game of sound and meaning created between adults and children through nursery rhymes, children make use of creative mimicry and the inclusion of paracultural influences to produce, recreate and echo their own agency. Turner underlines when speaking about children's creativity that "for more than four-fifths of these rhymes, there is no obvious adult origin at all" (143).

## CONCLUSIONS

Although literacy has constructed a different way of thinking, analyzing and storing information, Pullinger stresses the co-dependency and connection of orality and literacy (71). Current communication, heavily reliant on images and sounds rather than literary messages, illustrates a revisiting of the oral discourse and constructions that sound true in communication and community. Nursery rhymes have served this purpose prior and since printing became widespread: a communal ground where adulthood and childhood are blurred and culture is participated in. When performed, they are the middle ground between orality and literacy, between adult and child.

Nursery rhymes prove to be the performance of words, the link of play between adulthood and childhood as well as the bridge to a poetic code of the child's own. Whether this poetic code will persist throughout adulthood or will only be reactivated when the adult resumes contact with children will have to be the object of a different kind of study. It is clear that nursery rhymes work; their inevitable rhythm and musicality linked to the further characteristics of their oral nature produce the same results they would have had in their original oral settings, including the socio-cultural requirements of ideology and acculturation produced by language acquisition and its impact on the thinking process.

The fact that they have been set into print has produced a division between the official discourse and the unofficial or subversive one, which can be seen in childlore: the uncensored rhymes mainly used for motion and games, collected, won-over and shared without adult supervision. The division between literary culture and oral culture is inevitable, as they develop differently and require specific cognitive aspects; however, nursery rhymes and their impact on culture and childlore prove that orality is still essential to all children's inventiveness, creativity, agency and identity, regardless of their cultural background (Messenger Davis 112-11; Haas 271). The happy song project underlines and rediscovers that the configuration nursery rhymes offer creates that middle ground. A participatory culture, the connection of adults and children through linguistic play and performance, open the door to the child's own generation and socio-cultural awareness. It is this game, as old as culture itself, which gives children the tools to create on their own.

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