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Trickster Tales:
Uncle Remus, Brer Rabbit, and Bugs Bunny

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Background Reading (from Laura Gibbs, *Mythology and Folklore of the World*)

Joel Chandler Harris, a journalist, a Southerner, a white man, published his first Brer Rabbit story in the *Atlanta Constitution* newspaper in 1879, fourteen years after the end of the Civil War. Harris had heard the Brer Rabbit stories all his life, having grown up as a poor white child in Putnam County, Georgia (his father deserted the family and Harris was raised by his mother). Harris was born in 1848; the Civil War coincided with his adolescence and he found himself a young man in a new South. After the war ended, he went to work for a rural newspaper and later moved to Atlanta and began writing for the *Atlanta Constitution*.

The Brer Rabbit stories that he published in the paper were immensely popular, and were first published in book form in 1881. Along the way Harris also created the character of "Uncle Remus", a fictional slave who told the Brer Rabbit stories to an eager and curious little white boy; Uncle Remus speaks in dialect, while the little boy speaks a precociously literary English.

Harris continued to write for the newspaper and to publish Brer Rabbit stories for the rest of his life. Harris eventually collected and published over 250 stories about Brer Rabbit and his fellow animals. All of the stories were collected from African-American storytellers whom Harris knew personally. In addition to these stories, Harris also published short stories featuring Uncle Remus as a character. These fictional stories, purely the product of Harris' imagination, were also collected and published in book form, although they never attained the popularity of the Brer Rabbit stories.

Thanks to the Brer Rabbit stories, Joel Chandler Harris became a celebrity - or, rather, Uncle Remus became a celebrity. Mark Twain recounts an incident in *Life on the Mississippi* when an audience was disappointed to find out that Joel Chandler Harris was not himself black, was not really "Uncle Remus."

Of course, Mark Twain was another writer who made use of dialect in his stories and novels. In the introduction to *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain explains his purpose and intentions:

"In this book a number of dialects are used, to wit: the Missouri negro dialect; the extremest form of the backwoods Southwestern dialect; the ordinary "Pike County" dialect; and four modified varieties of this last. The shadings have not been done in a haphazard fashion, or by guesswork; but painstakingly, and with the trustworthy guidance and support of personal familiarity with these several forms of speech. I make this explanation for the reason that without it many readers would suppose that all these characters were trying to talk alike and not succeeding."

Of course, while Joel Chandler Harris and Mark Twain were both quite confident that they were working to improve race relations by doing this kind of writing, modern attitudes have changed. Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* has been banned from many schools, and students are often shocked that the Uncle Remus stories are included in this course. Personally, I cannot imagine doing this course without using the Brer Rabbit stories: it is one of the most important collections of American folklore that we possess. We are incredibly lucky to have this collection of hundreds of African-American folktales, which also provide a record of African-American dialect as spoken in the 19th century. Harris had a folkloric interest in these stories, and he notes the connections between the Brer Rabbit stories and African traditions, as well as the diffusion of these stories throughout Native American traditions.

Admittedly, the way in which Joel Chandler Harris collected and published the stories is bound up with the racism that marked every aspect of life in the society in which he lived. There is a deep contradiction between Harris and the stories that he tells: Brer Rabbit is a vitally important and authentic creation of the African-American experience during slavery, while Uncle Remus is a fictional character spawned by the racist politics of the post-war white South. This Uncle Remus character is used by Harris as a kind of "black-face" in print, something like a literary minstrel show. Harris is white, but he writes as a black man, much like the white singers and comedians who appeared as "black" on the stage.

Minstrel shows with white entertainers performing in black-face date back to the 1820's. These shows were already a well-established tradition by the time Harris was born and he would have been exposed to minstrel

shows all his life (in fact, minstrel shows continued to be popular well into the 20th century, mostly famously in Amos and Andy). Putting on the Uncle Remus character seems to have come quite naturally to Harris, yet he never agreed to "perform" as Uncle Remus in public. At no time, did Harris do any public reading of the Brer Rabbit stories.

Luckily for us, however, the way that Harris "dressed himself up" in writing did not involve the use of black face paint, but instead depended on the heavy use of dialect in his stories. Harris, in fact, prided himself on his use of dialect, and his ability to distinguish between the many different regional dialects of the American South. As a result, you are probably going to find the stories hard to read. In order to understand the stories, you basically have no choice but to read them out loud, using Harris' odd and abbreviated spelling to recreate the sound of English that was spoken by his African-American sources.

Yet at the same time that Harris's motives were - by the standards of his time - extremely sympathetic, there is no denying the taint of the minstrel show in Harris's work. For this reason, Julius Lester, a contemporary African-American author, eliminated the Uncle Remus character entirely from his retelling of the Brer Rabbit stories. He also changed much of the dialect into basically standard English, which is only slightly flavored with dialect vocabulary and rhythm. Here is how Julius Lester explains his choice (*Introduction to **The Tales of Uncle Remus: The Adventures of Brer Rabbit***. Dial Books. New York: 1987, xv-xvi):

Reading the original Uncle Remus tales today is not an easy task. The contemporary reader is offended by the dialect, if that reader is able to decipher it. (It is almost like reading a foreign language.) The reader is also uncomfortable with the figure of Uncle Remus, his attitudes, his use of the word "nigger," and his sycophancy. Because Uncle Remus is a character with whom blacks and white are uneasy today, the tales themselves have become tainted in some minds. This is unfortunate. Whatever one may think about how Harris chose to present the tales, the fact remains that they are a cornerstone of Afro-American culture and continue to be vital. The purpose in my retelling of the Uncle Remus tales is simple: to make the tales accessible again, to be told in the living rooms of condominiums as well as on front porches of the South.

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You might also want to read about the controversy surrounding the Disney film *Song of the South*, a mixed live-action and animation feature film based (loosely) on the works of Joel Chandler Harris. This film has been withdrawn by Disney from circulation in the United States and in Europe....The main objection that has been raised about the film is that it turns the Southern plantation into a timeless paradise, where black folks could imagine nothing finer than fetching and carrying for the wealthy white folks. In fact, it is very hard to tell whether the story is set before or after the Civil War. Disney invented an elaborate frame tale for the film about the trials and tribulations suffered by a little white boy (the cast of the film is mostly white), while the Brer Rabbit stories are animation sequences inserted into the film.

In a sense, Disney's version is just the opposite of what Julius Lester tried to do. Lester, in his 20th century version of the stories, got rid of the Uncle Remus character and minimized the use of dialect. Disney went the other direction, exaggerating the Uncle Remus frame tale almost beyond recognition (while also adding a whole cast of white characters), and exploiting the use of dialect for comic effect. For anyone who doubts that there is at least some deeply rooted element of racism connected with this film and its popularity, you will want to check out the "defense" of the film at a website which calls itself bannedfilms.com - although the main goal of bannedfilms.com does not seem to be protest the fact that Disney has withdrawn the film from circulation, but rather to make as much money as possible from the commercial vacuum that Disney has created for them as a result.

Luckily for us, the works of Joel Chandler Harris are safely in the public domain, and Disney cannot withdraw the Brer Rabbit stories from circulation, no matter what they decide to do with the film *Song of the South*...!

The Wonderful Tar Baby Story

Joel Chandler Harris

"Didn't the fox never catch the rabbit, Uncle Remus?" asked the little boy the next evening. "He come mighty nigh it, honey, sho's you born -- Brer Fox did."

One day atter Brer Rabbit fool 'im wid dat calamus root, Brer Fox went ter wuk en got 'im some tar, en mix it wid some turkentime, en fix up a contrapshun w'at he call a Tar-Baby, en he tuck dish yer Tar-Baby en he sot 'er in de big road, en den he lay off in de bushes fer to see what de news wuz gwine ter be. En he didn't hatter wait long, nudder, kaze bimeby here come Brer Rabbit pacin' down de road -- lippity-clippity, clippity-lippity -- dez ez sassy ez a jay-bird. Brer Fox, he lay low. Brer Rabbit come prancin' 'long twel he spy de Tar-Baby, en den he fotch up on his behime legs like he wuz 'stonished. De Tar Baby, she sot dar, she did, en Brer Fox, he lay low.

"Mawnin'!" sez Brer Rabbit, sezee - "nice wedder dis mawnin'," sezee. Tar-Baby ain't sayin' nuthin', en Brer Fox he lay low.

"How duz yo' sym'tums seem ter segashuate?" sez Brer Rabbit, sezee. Brer Fox, he wink his eye slow, en lay low, en de Tar-Baby, she ain't sayin' nuthin'.

"How you come on, den? Is you deaf?" sez Brer Rabbit, sezee. "Kaze if you is, I kin holler louder," sezee. Tar-Baby stay still, en Brer Fox, he lay low.

You er stuck up, dat's w'at you is," says Brer Rabbit, sezee, "en I'm gwine ter kyore you, dat's w'at I'm a gwine ter do," sezee. Brer Fox, he sorter chuckle in his stummick, he did, but Tar-Baby ain't sayin' nothin'.

"I'm gwine ter larn you how ter talk ter 'spectubble folks ef hit's de las' ack," sez Brer Rabbit, sezee. "Ef you don't take off dat hat en tell me howdy, I'm gwine ter bus' you wide open, sezee." Tar-Baby stay still, en Brer Fox, he lay low.

Brer Rabbit keep on axin' 'im, en de Tar-Baby, she keep on sayin' nothin', twel present'y Brer Rabbit draw back wid his fis', he did, en blip he tuck 'er side er de head. Right dar's whar he broke his merlasses jug. His fis' stuck, en he can't pull loose. De tar hilt 'im. But Tar-Baby, she stay still, en Brer Fox, he lay low.

"Ef you don't lemme loose, I'll knock you agin," sez Brer Rabbit, sezee, en wid dat he fotch 'er a wipe wid de udder han', en dat stuck. Tar-Baby, she ain't sayin' nuthin', en Brer Fox, he lay low.

"Tu'n me loose, fo' I kick de natal stuffin' outen you," sez Brer Rabbit, sezee, but de Tar-Baby, she ain't sayin' nuthin'. She des hilt on, en de Brer Rabbit lose de use er his feet in de same way. Brer Fox, he lay low.

Den Brer Rabbit squall out dat ef de Tar-Baby don't tu'n 'im loose he butt 'er cranksided. En den he butted, en his head got stuck. Den Brer Fox, he sa'ntered fort', lookin' dez ez innercent ez wunner yo' mammy's mockin'-birds.

"Howdy, Brer Rabbit," sez Brer Fox, sezee. "You look sorter stuck up dis mawnin'," sezee, en den he rolled on de groun', en laft en laft twel he couldn't laff no mo'. "I speck you'll take dinner wid me dis time, Brer Rabbit. I done laid in some calamus root, en I ain't gwineter take no skuse," sez Brer Fox, sezee.

Here Uncle Remus paused, and drew a two-pound yam out of the ashes. "Did the fox eat the rabbit?" asked the little boy to whom the story had been told. "Dat's all de fur de tale goes," replied the old man. "He mout, an den agin he moutent. Some say Judge B'ar come 'long en loosed 'im - some say he didn't. I hear Miss Sally callin'. You better run 'long.

The Wonderful Tar Baby Story

Julius Lester

Early one morning, even before Sister Moon had put on her negligee, Brer Fox was up and moving around. He had a glint in his eye, so you know he was up to no good.

He mixed up a big batch of tar and made it into the shape of a baby. By the time he finished, Brer Sun was yawning himself awake and peeping one eye over the topside of the earth.

Brer Fox took his Tar Baby down to the road, the very road Brer Rabbit walked along every morning. He sat the Tar Baby in the road, put a hat on it, and then hid in a ditch.

He had scarcely gotten comfortable (as comfortable as one can get in a ditch), before Brer Rabbit came strutting along like he owned the world and was collecting rent from everybody in it.

Seeing the Tar Baby, Brer Rabbit tipped his hat. "Good morning! Nice day, ain't it? Of course, any day I wake up and find I'm still alive is a nice day far as I'm concerned." He laughed at his joke, which he thought was pretty good. (Ain't too bad if I say so myself.)

Tar Baby don't say a word. Brer Fox stuck his head up out of the ditch, grinning.

"You deaf?" Brer Rabbit asked the Tar Baby. "If you are, I can talk louder." He yelled, "*How are you this morning? Nice day, ain't it?*"

Tar Baby still don't say nothing.

Brer Rabbit was getting kinna annoyed. "I don't know what's wrong with this young generation. Didn't your parents teach you no manners?"

Tar Baby don't say nothing.

"Well, I reckon I'll teach you some!" He hauls off and hits the Tar Baby. BIP! And his fist was stuck to the side of the Tar Baby's face.

"You let me go!" Brer Rabbit yelled. "Let me go or I'll really pop you one." He twisted and turned but he couldn't get loose. "All right! I warned you!" And he smacked the Tar Baby on the other side of its head. BIP! His other fist was stuck.

Brer Rabbit was sho' nuf' mad now. "You turn me loose or I'll make you wish you'd never been born." THUNK! He kicked the Tar Baby and his foot was caught. He was cussing and carrying on something terrible and kicked the Tar Baby with the other foot and THUNK! That foot was caught. "You let me go or I'll butt you with my head." He butted the Tar Baby under the chin and THUNK! His head was stuck.

Brer Fox sauntered out of the ditch just as cool as the sweat on the side of a glass of ice tea. He looked at Brer Rabbit stuck to the Tar Baby and laughed until he was almost sick.

"Well, I got you now, " Brer Fox said when he was able to catch his breath. "You floppy-eared, pom-pom-tailed good-for-nothing! I guess you know who's having rabbit for dinner this night!"

Brer Rabbit would've turned around and looked at him if he could've unstuck his head. Didn't matter. He heard the drool in Brer Fox's voice and knew he was in a world of trouble.

The Rabbit and the Tar Wolf (Cherokee)

Version I:

Once there was such a long spell of dry weather that there was no more water in the creeks and springs, and the animals held a council to see what to do about it. They decided to dig a well, and all agreed to help except the Rabbit, who was a lazy fellow, and said, "I don't need to dig for water. The dew on the grass is enough for me." The others did not like this, but they went to work together and dug their well. They noticed that the Rabbit kept sleek and lively, although it was still dry weather and the water was getting low in the well. They said, "That tricky Rabbit steals our water at night," so they made a wolf of pine gum and tar and set it up by the well to scare the thief.

That night the Rabbit came, as he had been coming every night, to drink enough to last him all next day. He saw the queer black thing by the well and said, "Who's there?" but the tar wolf said nothing. He came nearer, but the wolf never moved, so he grew braver and said, "Get out of my way or I'll strike you." Still the wolf never moved and the Rabbit came up and struck it with his paw, but the gum held his foot and it stuck fast. Now he was angry and said, "Let me go or I'll kick you." Still the wolf said nothing. Then the Rabbit struck again with his hind foot, so hard that it was caught in the gum and he could not move, and there he stuck until the animals came for water in the morning. When they found who the thief was they had great sport over him for a while and then got ready to kill him, but as soon as he was unfastened from the tar wolf he managed to get away.

Version II:

Once upon a time there was such a severe drought that all streams of water and all lakes were dried up. In this emergency the beasts assembled together to devise means to procure water. It was proposed by one to dig a well. All agreed to do so except the hare. She refused because it would soil her tiny paws. The rest, however, dug their well and were fortunate enough to find water. The hare beginning to suffer and thirst, and having no right to the well, was thrown upon her wits to procure water. She determined, as the easiest way, to steal from the public well. The rest of the animals, surprised to find that the hare was so well supplied with water, asked her where she got it. She replied that she arose betimes in the morning and gathered the dewdrops. However the wolf and the fox suspected her of theft and hit on the following plan to detect her: They made a wolf of tar and placed it near the well.

On the following night the hare came as usual after her supply of water. On seeing the tar wolf she demanded who was there. Receiving no answer she repeated the demand, threatening to kick the wolf if he did not reply. She receiving no reply kicked the wolf, and by this means adhered to the tar and was caught. When the fox and wolf got hold of her they consulted what it was best to do with her. One proposed cutting her head off. This the hare protested would be useless, as it had often been tried without hurting her. Other methods were proposed for dispatching her, all of which she said would be useless. At last it was proposed to let her loose to perish in a thicket. Upon this the hare affected great uneasiness and pleaded hard for life. Her enemies, however, refused to listen and she was accordingly let loose. As soon, however, as she was out of reach of her enemies she gave a whoop, and bounding away she exclaimed: "This is where I live."

from Jamaican Anansi Stories by Martha Warren Beckwith (1924):

Anansi and the Tar-baby (Jamaica)

Tiger got a groun' plant some peas an' get Hanansi to watch it. Me'while Hanansi are de watchman, himself stealin' de peas. Tiger tar a 'tump, put on broad hat on de 'tump. Hanansi come an' say, "Who are you in de groun'?" Him don hear no answer. He hol' him. His han' fasten. He hol' him wid de odder han'. Dat han' fasten. He said, "Aw right! you hol' me two han', I bet you I buck you!" He head fasten. Said, "I bet you, I kick you!" Him two feet fasten. Den he say, "Poor me bwoy! you a watchman an' me a watchman!"

So begin to sing, "Mediany dead an' gone."

Nex' mawnin' Tiger come an' say, "Why Brar Hanansi, a you been mashin' me up?" Tiger tak him out. Tiger said wha' fe him do wid him now? Hanansi say, "What you fe do? Mak a fire, bu'n me." Tiger go 'way, mak up him fire, ketch Hanansi go fe t'row him in de fire. Hanansi say, "Brer Tiger, you don' know to burn somebody yet? You mus' jump ober de fire t'ree time, den me a count." Tiger jump one, an' jump again, two, an' jump again, t'ree, an' go fe jump again. Hanansi kick down Tiger into de fire, den go back now go finish off de peas.

The Substitute

Tacoomah is Anansi friend an' neighbor, live very near in one house but different apartment, so whenever one talk the other can hear. Anansi an' Tacoomah both of them work groun' together at one place. Anansi don't wait upon his food till it is ripe, but dig out an' eat it. Tacoomah wait until it fit to eat it. After Anansi eat off his own, he turn to Tacoomah an' begin to t'ief it. Every morning Tacoomah go, he find his groun' mashed up. He said, "Brar Nansi, tak care a no you deh mash up me groun' a nighttime!" Anansi said, "No-o, Brar, but if you t'ink dat a me deh t'ief a yo' groun' a night-time, you call me t'-night see if me no 'peak to you."

Tacoomah went to his groun' and get some tar an' tar a 'tump an' lef' it in de center of de groun'. Now night come, Anansi get a gourd, fill it wid water, bore a hole underneat' de gourd jus' as much as de water can drop tip, tip, tip. He cut a banana-leaf an' put it underneat' de gourd so de water could drop on it. After dey bot' went to bed, every now and again Tacoomah called out and Anansi say, "Eh!" Afterward Anansi say, "Me tired fe say 'eh', me wi' say 'tip'." So Anansi put de gourd of water up on a stand wid de banana-leaf underneat', so when Tacoomah say, "Anansi?" de water drop "tip." An' at dis time Anansi gone to de groun'.

He saw de black 'tump which Tacoomah tar an' lef' in de groun'. So Anansi open his right han' an' box de 'tump. His right han' fasten. He said to de 'tump, "If you no let me go I box you wid de lef' han'!" He box him wid de lef', so bot' han' fasten now. He say now, "Den you hol' me two han'? If you not le' me go I kick you!" He then kick the 'tump an' the right foot fasten first. He kick it with the lef' foot an' the lef' foot fasten too. He say, "Now you hol' me two han' an' me two foot! I gwine to buck you if you don' le' go me han' an' foot!" He den buck de 'tump an' his whole body now fasten on de 'tump. He was deh for some minutes.

He see Goat was passing. He said, "Brar Goat, you come heah see if you kyan't more 'an we t'-day." So Goat come. Anansi say, "Brar Goat, you buck him!" Goat buck de 'tump; Anansi head come off an' Goat head fasten. He said, "Brar Goat, you kick him wid you two foot!" An' Goat kick him an' Anansi two han' come off an' Goat two foot fasten. He said, "Brar Goat, now you push him!" Goat push him, an' Anansi two foot come off an' Anansi free an' Goat fasten. So Anansi go back home an' say to Tacoomah, "Me tired fe say 'tip', now; me wi' say 'eh'."

In de morning, bot' of dem went to groun'. Anansi say, "Brar Tacoomah, look de fellah deh t'ief yo' groun', dat fe' a Goat!" Goat say, "No, Brar Tacoomah, Anansi lirs' fasten on de 'tump heah an' he ask me fe buck him off!" Anansi say, "A yaie, sah!" an' say, "Brar Tacoomah, no me an' you sleep fe de whole night an' ev'ry time yo' call me, me 'peak to you?" Tacoomah say yes. He say Tacoomah, "Mak we ki' de fallah Goat!" So dey kill Goat an' carry him home go an' eat him.

The Brier Patch
Joel Chandler Harris

"UNCLE REMUS," said the little boy one evening, when he had found the old man with little or nothing to do, "did the fox kill and eat the rabbit when he caught him with the Tar-Baby?" "Law, honey, ain't I tell you 'bout dat? replied the old darkey, chuckling slyly. I 'clar ter grashus I ought er tole you dat, but old man Nod wuz ridin' on my eyeleds 'twel a leetle mo'n I'd a dis'member'd my own name, en den on to dat here come yo mammy hollerin' atter you. W'at I tell you w'en I fus' begin? I tole you Brer Rabbit wuz a monstus soon creetur; leas'ways dat's w'at I laid out fer ter tell you. Well, den, honey, don't you go en make no udder calkashuns, kaze in dem days Brer Rabbit en his fambly wuz at de head er de gang w'en enny racket wuz on han', en dar dey stayed. 'Fo' you begins fer ter wipe yo' eyes 'bout Brer Rabbit, you wait en see whar'bouts Brer Rabbit gwineter fetch up at. But dat's needer yer ner dar."

W'en Brer Fox fine Brer Rabbit mixt up wid de Tar-Baby, he feel mighty good, en he roll on de groun' en laff. Bimeby he up'n say, sezee: "Well, I speck I got you dis time, Brer Rabbit," sezee; "maybe I ain't, but I speck I is. You been runnin' roun' here sassin' atter me a mighty long time, but I speck you done come ter de een' er de row. You bin cuttin' up yo' capers en bouncin' roun' in dis neighborhood ontwel you come ter b'leeve yo'se'f de boss er de whole gang. En den youer allers some'rs whar you got no bizness," sez Brer Fox, sezee. "Who ax you fer ter come en strike up a 'quaintance wid dish yer Tar-Baby? En who stuck you up dar whar you iz? Nobody in de roun' worril. You des tuck en jam yo'se'f on dat Tar-Baby widout waitin' fer enny invite," sez Brer Fox, sezee, "en dar you is, en dar youll stay twel I fixes up a bresh-pile and fires her up, kaze I'm gwineter bobby-cue you dis day, sho," sez Brer Fox, sezee.

Den Brer Rabbit talk mighty 'umble. "I don't keer w'at you do wid me, Brer Fox, sezee, so you don't fling me in dat brier-patch. Roas' me, Brer Fox sezee, but don't fling me in dat brierpatch," sezee.

"Hit's so much trouble fer ter kindle a fier," sez Brer Fox, sezee, "dat I speck I'll hatter hang you, sezee." "Hang me des ez high as you please, Brer Fox," sez Brer Rabbit, sezee, "but do fer de Lord's sake don't fling me in dat brier-patch," sezee.

"I ain't got no string," sez Brer Fox, sezee, "en now I speck I'll hatter drown you, sezee." "Drown me des ez deep ez you please, Brer Fox," sez Brer Rabbit, sezee, "but do don't fling me in dat brier-patch," sezee.

"Dey ain't no water nigh," sez Brer Fox, sezee, "en now I speck I'll hatter skin you, sezee." "Skin me, Brer Fox," sez Brer Rabbit, sezee, "snatch out my eyeballs, t'ar out my years by de roots, en cut off my legs, sezee, but do please, Brer Fox, don't fling me in dat brier-patch," sezee.

Co'se Brer Fox wanter hurt Brer Rabbit bad ez he kin, so he cotch 'im by de behime legs en slung 'im right in de middle er de brier-patch. Dar wuz a considerbul flutter whar Brer Rabbit struck de bushes, en Brer Fox sorter hang 'roun' fer ter see w'at wuz gwineter happen. Bimeby he hear somebody call 'im, en way up de hill he see Brer Rabbit settin' crosslegged on a chinkapin log koamin' de pitch outen his har wid a chip. Den Brer Fox know dat he bin swop off mighty bad. Brer Rabbit wuz bleedzed fer ter fling back some er his sass, en he holler out: "Bred en bawn in a brier-patch, Brer Fox - bred en bawn in a brier-patch!" en wid dat he skip out des ez lively ez a cricket in de embers.

The Brier Patch

Julius Lester

"Well, I got you now, " Brer Fox said when he was able to catch his breath. "You floppy-eared, pom-pom-tailed good-for-nothing! I guess you know who's having rabbit for dinner this night!"

Brer Rabbit would've turned around and looked at him if he could've unstuck his head. Didn't matter. He heard the drool in Brer Fox's voice and knew he was in a world of trouble.

"You ain't gon' be going around through the community raising commotion anymore, Brer Rabbit. And it's your own fault too. Didn't nobody tell you to be so friendly with the Tar Baby. You stuck yourself on that Tar Baby without so much as an invitation. There you are and there you'll be until I get my fire started and my barbecue sauce ready."

Brer Rabbit always got enough lip for anybody and everybody. He even told God once what He'd done wrong on the third day of Creation. This time, though Brer Rabbit talked mighty humble. "Well, Brer Fox. No doubt about it. You got me and no point in my saying that I would improve my ways if you spared me."

"No point at all," Brer Fox agreed as he started gathering kindling for the fire.

"I guess I'm going to be barbecue this day." Brer Rabbit sighed. "But getting barbecued is a whole lot better than getting thrown in the briar patch." He sighed again. "No doubt about it. Getting barbecued is almost a blessing compared to being thrown in that briar patch on the other side of the road. If you got to go, go in a barbecue sauce. That's what I always say. How much lemon juice and brown sugar you put in yours?"

When Brer Fox heard this, he had to do some more thinking, because he wanted the worst death possible for that rabbit. "Now that I thinks on it, it's too hot to be standing over a hot fire. I think I'll hang you."

Brer Rabbit shuddered. "Hanging is a terrible way to die! Just terrible! But I thank you for being so considerate. Hanging is better than being thrown in the briar patch."

Brer Fox thought that over a minute. "Come to think of it, I can't hang you, 'cause I didn't bring my rope. I'll drown you in the creek over yonder."

Brer Rabbit sniffed like he was about the cry. "No, no, Brer Fox. You know I can't stand water, but I guess drowning, awful as it is, is better than the briar patch."

"I got it!" Brer Fox exclaimed. "I don't feel like dragging you all the way down to the creek. I got my knife right here. I'm going to skin you!" He pulled out his knife.

Brer Rabbit's ears shivered. "That's all right, Brer Fox. It'll hurt something awful, but go ahead and skin me. Scratch out my eyeballs! Tear out my ears by the roots! Cut off my legs! Do what'nsoever you want to do with me, Brer Fox, but please, please, please! Don't throw me in that briar patch!"

Brer Fox was convinced now that the worst thing he could do to Brer Rabbit was the very thing Brer Rabbit didn't want him to do. He snatched him off the Tar Baby and wound up his arm like he was trying to throw a fastball past Hank Aaron and chunked that rabbit across the road and smack dab in the middle of the briar patch.

Brer Fox waited. Didn't hear a thing. He waited a little longer. Still no sound. And just about the time he decided he was rid of Brer Rabbit, just about the time a big grin started to spread across his face, he heard a little giggle.

"Tee-hee! Tee-hee!" And the giggle broke into the loudest laughing you've ever heard.

Brer Fox looked up to see Brer Rabbit sitting on top of the hill on the other side of the briar patch.

Brer Rabbit waved. "I was born and raised in the briar patch, Brer Fox! Born and raised in the briar patch!" And he hopped on over the hill and out of sight.

“Brer Rabbit in Africa”

from Alice Werner, Myths and Legends of the Bantu (1933)

THE Uncle Remus stories, which suddenly became so popular about fifty years ago, not only delighted both young and old, but attracted the serious attention of folklore students. It is now generally recognized-though the point was hotly debated at first-that they originally came from Africa, brought by the Negro slaves, who, in the southern states, seem mostly to have belonged to Bantu-speaking tribes.[1] When it was discovered that the Indians of the Amazon had numbers of similar tales it was suggested by some that the Negro stories had been directly or indirectly borrowed from them; by others that the Indians had borrowed them from the Brazilian Negroes. Neither suggestion seems to fit the facts. On the one hand, every story in "Uncle Remus" can be shown to exist in a more primitive shape in Africa, and among people who cannot be suspected of having imported it from America or elsewhere. Thus the "Tar-baby" story is known, in slightly differing forms, to the Duala, the Sumbwa (a tribe to the south of Lake Victoria), the Mbundu of Angola, the Makua, the people of the Lower Congo, and several more.

On the other hand, the more we know of the folk-tales current in different parts of the world the less likely it seems that the Amazonian Indians should have borrowed their stories from the Negroes. In the Malay Peninsula, where the local equivalent for Brer Rabbit is the little mouse-deer, he figures in much the same incidents as the African hare and Hlakanyana. These incidents and the traits of character which they illustrate are common to human nature all the world over; the animal actors, of course, vary locally.

The Jackal

In India it is the jackal who plays clever tricks on the stronger and fiercer animals; in Europe the fox; in New Guinea and Melanesia yet others. The tortoise, however, seems a universal favourite, except, perhaps, in North Germany, where one of his best-known adventures is ascribed to the hedgehog.

The jackal is the hero for the Hottentots, and also for the Galla and Somali of North-eastern Africa, who consider the hare a stupid sort of creature, and blame him (at least the Hottentots do) for-like the chameleon elsewhere taking away men's hope of reviving after death. The Moon, angry with him for failing to deliver his message, threw a chunk of wood at, him, which is why his lip is split to this day.

The Basuto have-apparently through contact with the Hottentots-confused the characters of the jackal and the hare, giving to the former the famous story of the Animals and the Well, which will be related presently, though the hare comes into his own on several other occasions.

Hare, not Rabbit

It is unfortunate that so many writers, no doubt influenced by "Uncle Remus," used the word 'rabbit' in translating African stories. There are, I believe, no rabbits, properly so called, in Africa, and Sungura, Kalulu, Sulwe,[2] and Mutlanyana[2] undoubtedly represent what we mean by a hare. Uncle Remus would naturally speak of the more familiar animal, just as he makes Brer Wolf and Brer Fox take the place of the hyena.

Jacottet, in his translation of a Sesuto tale, speaks of a 'rabbit' victimized by Little Hare. This animal (*hlolo*) is, according to Mabile and Dieterlen's dictionary, the red hare (*Lepus crassicaudatus*). Whether this is the same as the 'March Hare' of the Lalas and Lambas-the name literally means the "Mad Big Hare"-it would be interesting to discover; but I have nowhere met with a description of this latter creature.

[1. Most, as is generally supposed, from the Congo; but there is evidence that slaves were frequently, during the first quarter of the nineteenth century, imported from Mozambique and other ports on the East Coast. "Mombasas," are mentioned among the Negro slaves in Cuba; and many cargoes of slaves were smuggled from Havana into the southern states after the import trade had been declared illegal. This perhaps explains why the African hare (Kalulu of the Nyanja, Sungura of the Swahili) should be such a prominent figure in Negro folklore, while his place is taken on the Congo (where it appears there are no hares) by the little antelope known as the water chevrotain. The slaves of the British West Indies were chiefly West Africans (Yorubas, Ibos, Fantis, etc.), and their 'Nancy' stories are mostly concerned with the spider (Anansi).]

[2. The Shona and Sesuto names for the 'little hare'.]

Animals which figure in the Tales

The hare, then, we may say, is really the most prominent figure in the tales we are considering. Next to him - indeed, in some ways more successful in triumphing over his enemies, and once, at least, getting the better of the hare himself-is the tortoise.

The lion, the elephant, and, more frequently, the hyena are the foils and dupes, whose strength and fierceness are no match for the nimble wits of the little hare and the slow, patient wisdom of the tortoise. More inoffensive creatures, sad to say-the bush-buck, the duiker, and the monitor lizard-occasionally fall victims.

The crocodile is sometimes introduced, and not always in an evil aspect: for instance, a Tumbuka tale shows him helpful to the other animals and treated with gross ingratitude by the tortoise. The hippopotamus also makes an occasional appearance, and it would be possible to make a long list of animals and birds which are mentioned-some of them repeatedly-but play no very conspicuous parts.

The Animals and the Well

I will begin with the story of the Well, though I cannot pretend to arrange the hare's adventures (except for the final and fatal one) in chronological order. Some episodes are linked together in natural sequence, but such groups could, as a rule, be placed anywhere in the series without breaking the connexion.

It was a different matter when some unnamed Low German poet (or succession of poets) combined into the epic of *Reynard the Fox (Reinke Vos)* the scattered beast fables current in the Middle Ages. I have no doubt that one day a genius will arise in some Bantu tribe to perform the same service for Sungura.[1]

I am not forgetting that the Mosuto Azariel Sekese has done something of the kind in his prose story *The Assembly of the Birds*. But this is rather a satire than the kind of epic that I have in mind, though it is a very remarkable work in its own way.

Now for the story.

Once upon a time there was a terrible drought over all the country. No rain had fallen for many months, and the animals were like to die of thirst. All the pools and watercourses were dried up. So the lion called the beasts together to the dry bed of a river, and suggested that they should all stamp on the sand and see whether they could not bring out some water. The elephant began, and stamped his hardest, but produced no result, except a choking cloud of dust. Then the rhinoceros tried, with no better success; then the buffalo; then the rest in turn-still nothing but dust, dust! At the beginning of the proceedings the elephant had sent to call the hare, but he said, "I don't want to come."

Now there was no one left but the tortoise, whom they all had overlooked on account of his insignificance. He came forward and began to stamp; the onlookers laughed and jeered. But, behold I before long there appeared a damp spot in the river-bed. And the rhinoceros, enraged that a little thing like that should succeed where he had failed, tossed him up and dashed him against a rock, so that his shell was broken into a hundred pieces. While he sat, picking up the fragments and painfully sticking them together, the rhinoceros went on stamping, but the damp sand quickly disappeared, and clouds of dust rose, as before. The others repeated their vain efforts, till at last the elephant said, "Let the tortoise come and try." Before he had been at work more than a few minutes the water gushed out and filled the well, which had gradually been excavated by their combined efforts.

The animals then passed a unanimous resolution that the hare, who had refused to share in the work, should not be allowed to take any of the water. Knowing his character, they assumed that he would try to do so, and agreed to take turns in keeping watch over the well.

[1. It seems desirable to have a proper name for occasional use, and perhaps it is most convenient to keep to the Swahili form throughout.]

The hyena took the first watch, and after an hour or two saw the hare coming along with two calabashes, one empty and one full of honey. He called out a greeting to the hyena, was answered, and asked him what he was doing there. The hyena replied, "I am guarding the well because of you, that you may not drink water here." "Oh," said the hare, "I don't want any of your water; it is muddy and bitter. I have much nicer water here." The hyena, his curiosity roused, asked to taste the wonderful water, and Sungura handed him a stalk of grass which he had dipped in the honey. "Oh, indeed, it is sweet! just let me have some more!" I can't do that unless you let me tie you up to the tree; this water is strong enough to knock you over if you are not tied." The hyena had so great a longing for the sweet drink that he readily consented; the hare tied him up so tightly that he could not move, went on to the well, and filled his calabash; then he jumped in, splashed about to his heart's content, and finally departed laughing.

In the morning the animals came and found the hyena tied to the tree. "Why, Hyena, who has done this to you?" "A great host of strong men came in the middle of the night, seized me, and tied me up." The lion said, "No such thing! Of course it was the hare, all by himself." The lion took his turn at watching that night; but, strange to say, he fell a victim to the same trick. Unable to resist the lure of the honey, he was ignominiously tied to the tree.

There they found him next morning, and the hyena, true to his curish nature, sneered: "So it was many men who tied you up, Lion?" The lion replied, with quiet dignity: "You need not talk; he would be too much for any of us."

The elephant then volunteered to keep watch, but with no better success; then the rest of the animals, each in his turn, only to be defeated by one trick or another.

At last the tortoise came forward, saying, "I am going to catch that one who is in the habit of binding people!" The others began to jeer: "Nonsense! Seeing how he has outwitted us, the elders, what can you do-a little one like you?" But the elephant took his part, and said that he should be allowed to try.

The Tortoise is too sharp for the Hare

The tortoise then smeared his shell all over with bird-lime, plunged into the well, and sat quite still at the bottom. When the hare came along that night and saw no watcher he sang out, "Hallo! Hallo! the well! Is there no one here?" Receiving no answer, he said, "They're afraid of me! I've beaten them all! Now for the water!" He sat down beside the well, ate his honey, and filled both his gourds, before starting to bathe. Then he stepped into the water and found both his feet caught. He cried out, "Who are you? I don't want your water; mine is sweet. Let me go, and you can try it." But there was no answer. He struggled; he put down one hand^[1] to free himself; he put down the other; he was caught fast. There was no help for it: there he had to stay till the animals came in the morning.^[2] And when they saw him they said, "Now, indeed, the hare has been shown up!" So they carried him to the *bwalo* for judgment, and the lion said, "Why did you first disobey and afterwards steal the water?" The hare made no attempt to plead his cause, but said, "just tie me up, and I shall die!" The lion ordered him to be bound, but the hare made one more suggestion. "Don't tie me with coconut-rope, but with green banana-fibre; then if you throw me out in the sun I shall die very quickly."

They did so, and after a while, when they heard the banana-bast cracking as it dried up in the heat, they began to get suspicious, and some one said to the lion that the hare would surely break his bonds. The hare heard him and groaned out, as though at his last gasp, "Let me alone. I'm just going to die!" So he lay still for another hour, and then suddenly stretched himself; the banana-fibre gave way, and he was off before they could recover from their astonishment. They started in pursuit, but he outran them all, and they were nearly giving up despair when they saw him on the top of a distant ant-hill,

[1. It is quite common for Africans to speak of the forefeet of a quadruped as 'hands.' But, in any case, animals in the stories are often spoken of as if they had human form. We find the same thing again and again in "Uncle Remus."]

[2. In the Ila version he is killed on the spot; but I refuse to accept this. Even the tortoise, though more than once too much for the hare, could not bring him to his death; that had to come in the end from a quite unexpected quarter.]

apparently waiting for them to come up. When they got within earshot he called out, "I'm off! You're fools, all of you!" and disappeared into a hole in the side of the ant-hill. The animals hastened up and formed a circle round the hill, while the elephant came forward and thrust his trunk into the hole. After groping about for a while he seized the hare by the ear, and the hare cried, "That's a leaf you've got hold of. You've not caught me!" The elephant let go and tried again, this time seizing the hare's leg. "*O-o-o-o-o!* He's got hold of a root."^[1] Again the elephant let go, and Sungura slipped out of his reach into the depths of the burrow.

The animals grew tired of waiting, and, leaving the elephant to watch the ant-hill, went to fetch hoes, so that they might dig out the hare. While they were gone the hare, disguising his voice, called out to the elephant, "You who are watching the burrow open your eyes wide and keep them fixed on this hole, so that the hare may not get past without your seeing him!" The elephant unsuspectingly obeyed, and Sungura, sitting just inside the entrance, kicked up a cloud of sand into his eyes and dashed out past him. The elephant, blinded and in pain, was quite unaware of his escape, and kept on watching the hole till the other animals came back. They asked if Sungura was still there. "He may be, but he has thrown sand into my eyes." They fell to digging, and, of course, found nothing.

[1. Compare again Brer Tarrypin when caught by Brer Fox: "Tu'n loose dat stump-root an' ketch hold o' me!" This incident occurs in various connexions; it comes in quite appropriately here.]

Bugs Bunny: The Trickster, American Style

J.J. Sutherland, NPR Weekend Edition Sunday

A hero, a bully, appealing, a little scary: Part of Bugs Bunny's appeal is in his contradictions.

Bugs Bunny is one of the most popular, enduring and recognizable characters in the world. His trademark smirk and his ever-present carrot were born in the late 1930s; he exploded into fame during World War II, and became an indelible part of American culture ever after.

So what makes Bugs Bugs? Well, the bunny's mercurial nature is essential to his appeal. Bugs is nice, but a bit of a bully, appealing and scary, high culture and low; he morphs from one to the other seamlessly.

As Billy West, the current voice of Bugs Bunny, puts it: "He can quote Shakespeare and then tell you where there's a barroom in Brooklyn."

Bugs is a uniquely American expression of an ancient archetype — the Trickster.

"If you want to teach Folklore 101, and you need an example of a Trickster, Bugs Bunny is it," says Robert Thompson, director of a Syracuse University pop-culture studies program. "He defies authority. He goes against the rules. But he does it in a way that's often lovable, and that often results in good things for the culture at large."

Other famous tricksters: Puck in *A Midsummer's Night's Dream*, the Coyote in Native American mythology, the spider Anansi in West African stories, the Monkey King in Chinese culture. They're all characters who disregard every convention of their society, even of reality itself.

As Bugs himself said, about one of his own shenanigans: "I know this defies the law of gravity, but I never studied law."

Bugs Bunny gets a charge out of driving people crazy. And that may be why he lasts. He doesn't seem like a character of the '40s, but rather a character of today. His wisecracking, gender-bending, anti-authority antics broke ground long before punk rock, or David Bowie, or Jerry Seinfeld. He's impossible to pin down in any specific sense.

In fact the only way to truly describe Bugs Bunny is to simply show one of the cartoons, point at the rascally rabbit and say, "Him, in toto, not in parts. From high opera to bullfights, Shakespeare to Brooklyn, from man to woman ... he is all of those, and none."