Gaming Brer Rabbit: The Trickster and the Limits of Knowledge

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Introduction

Uncle Remus eased himself into a worn wooden seat by the fire one Georgia evening. A young visitor, a sandy-haired little boy, sat on the ground of the humble cabin, his eyes upturned to the kindly face of his old friend. Still in high spirits from the boyish amusements of the day, he knew it was almost, but not quite, bedtime. It was nightfall and the plantation would soon turn in. Against the warm crackle of the fire, Uncle Remus, "the old 'servant,'" bided his time before pulling the little boy up into his lap and settling in to tell a story of Brer Rabbit's misadventures. The reader turns the page of the book; Uncle Remus begins to tell his tales.

American journalist Joel Chandler Harris (1848 –1908) constructed this cabin scene to frame the animal trickster tales he adopted from African-American oral folklore during the mid- to late nineteenth century. In the esoteric (or in-group) spoken performance of these stories, which developed from a violent system of plantation slavery, the trickster figure of Brer Rabbit taught strategies of survival, subversion, and resistance in a world that condemned African- Americans to political, social, economic, and cultural marginality.[1] Although folklorists had published Brer Rabbit tales before, Harris was able to popularize them to an overwhelmingly white mass audience through the cartoonish character of the harmless and affectionate Uncle Remus. Against the plantation backdrop, Harris's writings were as much humorous minstrel story as Brer Rabbit lore. In other words, the figure of Brer Rabbit entered mainstream American discourse through the peculiar marriage of slave protest culture and Old South nostalgia within Harris's two books, *Uncle Remus, His Songs, and His Sayings* (1880) and *Nights with Uncle Remus* (1881).

There has been some debate about how Harris's frame transforms the political and social impact of the Brer Rabbit trickster. Darwin Turner argues that that the tone of interracial harmony between the little boy and Uncle Remus "whitewashes" the figure of Brer Rabbit, obscuring the tones of racial discontent and violence that exist within the spoken tales.[2] The

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[1] William Hugh Jansen, "The Esoteric-Exoteric Factor in Folklore," *Fabula* 2 (1959): 205–211.

[2] Darwin T. Turner contextualizes Brer Rabbit within a utopian Old South plantation myth, writing that "Joel Chandler Harris in his fiction molded actual Negroes into the old-time slaves essential to the romantic myth of a utopian plantation, governed by a kingly and paternal master. All too soon, this Anglo-Saxon myth became more

subversive message is lost, "the private transcript" of slave rebellion is neutralized and, instead, Harris's idealized frame becomes the primary element, depicting slavery as a benign institution filled with interracial harmony and good-natured humor.[3] Jay Martin argues that Harris used the mask of Uncle Remus primarily to celebrate the allure and "the power of the Old Plantation against the New Industry."[4] However, scholars such as Bernard Wolfe see the collected Brer Rabbit stories as more subversive. While Wolfe admits that Harris "fitted the hate-imbued folk materials into a framework, a white man's framework, of 'love'," he also locates paradoxes that "helped to rip open the racial myth – and, with it, the interracial grin."[5] Robert Bone, on the other hand, highlights the possibility of an either/or interpretation, concluding, "Uncle Remus tales confront us with two distinct…versions of reality. One is white, the other black."[6] For Bone, this split echoes an ambivalence towards slavery and African Americans that is at the heart of the South and of "white America" in general.[7] How could scholars reach such diverse opinions about the same text? What really happens to the narratives of the oppressed when they are framed by the humor of the oppressors?

We believe the first argument – that the minstrel show aspects of the frame entirely nullify the message of slave rebellion – is too absolute for a trickster as cunning as Brer Rabbit. At the same time, we reject any argument casting Harris as an unambiguously subversive agent, given the role blackface minstrelsy played in justifying Jim Crow policies and racial violence in the post-Reconstruction United States. We find the third argument, which acknowledges a two-tiered, competing narrative system, compelling; however, note that so far, scholars have stopped short of demonstrating how these competing narratives can intersect and interact. Through an intertextual and historically situated reading of Harris's two books, *Uncle Remus, His Songs, and His Sayings* and *Nights with Uncle Remus*, we argue that the books' powerful ambiguity operates through a split between the trickster figure (i.e. the Brer Rabbit character) and the trickster's central narrative function, that is, the generation of semiotic ambiguity. Therefore, this paper investigates the trickster as both a character and narrative force. Going beyond a reflective model (i.e. reading the books' paradoxes as reflecting a general white moral ambivalence about slavery), we propose a potential subversive impact to be gained from the intersection of the two narrative layers. To theorize this possibility, we transfer the question away from Harris's intentions, and even the text's declarations, and towards the readers.

The mid- to late nineteenth century saw an immense decline in illiteracy rates for white men and women: illiteracy went down to 6.2% for all whites, yet hovered at about 45% for non-

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popular than the African tales." Darwin Turner, "Daddy Joel Chandler Harris and His Old-Time Darkies," reprinted in *Critical Essays on Joel Chandler Harris* ed. R. Bruce Bickley, Jr. (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1981), 128.

[3] James Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 136.

[4] Jay Martin, "Joel Chandler Harris and the Cornfield Journalist," reprinted in *Critical Essays on Joel Chandler Harris* ed. R. Bruce Bickley, Jr. (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1981), 95-96.

[5] Bernard Wolfe, "Uncle Remus and the Malevolent Rabbit: 'Takes a Limber-Toe Gemmun fer ter Jump Jim Crow," reprinted in *Critical Essays on Joel Chandler Harris* ed. R. Bruce Bickley, Jr. (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1981), 75, 76, 84.

[6] Robert Bone, "The Oral Tradition," reprinted in *Critical Essays on Joel Chandler Harris*, ed. R. Bruce Bickley, Jr. (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1981), 137.

[7] Ibid.

whites in 1900.[8] The same era saw the development of what can be called a mainstream white popular culture, promulgated through print media, the growth of a mass commercial culture, and the medium of the minstrel show.[9] Thus the white American public was increasingly connected in terms of shared public transcripts about race. However, within immigrant, indigenous, and dominantly black enclaves, alternate transcripts continued to flourish, advancing different modes of knowing and oppositional visions of justice. We argue that by publishing esoteric folklore emerging from enslaved African-Americans within mainstream (read: white, middle class) popular culture, Harris's books offered the white readers a version of what sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois called "double consciousness," an awareness of how those outside their cultural group view them.[10] However, instead of Du Boisian "second sight," an emotionally scarring but epistemologically empowering self-awareness for the marginalized, the overall effect of such moments is to highlight non-access, a potential awareness of one's own blind spots. Both hindered and aided by the new narrative framing, the trickster in the mainstream brings with it the potential to infect white popular culture with an uneasy awareness of other ways of being and knowing, muddying the regime of racial truth that justified slavery and the Jim Crow system. Any epistemological gains to be made from this exposure ultimately will depend upon the reader, with whom the final act of interpretation resides.

Hare in the Wild: The Brer Rabbit Oral Tradition

Brer Rabbit was born out of a mixture of African folklore, Cherokee mythologies, and Anglo-American traditions and loosely based on the African trickster deity Eshu Elegba.[11] In a world of talking animals set in a landscape much like the plantations of the Southern United States, each story depicts Brer Rabbit tricking his way into and out of trouble in an endless series of misadventures against his animal neighbors and the local farmer, Mr. Man. Told via call and response in oral performances, these trickster tales made their way across the American South through winks, dances, and songs, producing a cycle of tales always in flux. Needless to say, we don't have direct access to this spoken trickster – only collections and analyses by folklorists like Richard Dorson and Lawrence Levine, whom we cite below to get at what the hare might have been in the wild. We underline the limits of our own knowledge here to acknowledge that the trickster will inevitably elude us throughout this entire essay even as we track its form and spirit through Harris's books.

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[8] Carl F. Kaestle, et. al., *Literacy in the United States: Readers and Reading Since 1880* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 25.

[9] Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (Macmillan, 1977); Paul Dimaggio, "Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston: The Creation of an Organizational Base for High Culture in America," *Media, Culture & Society* 4, no. 1 (January 1, 1982): 33–50.

[10] W.E.B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 8-9.

[11] Babacar M'Baye, *The Trickster Comes West Pan-African Influence in Early Black Diasporan Narratives* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 14; Jeanne Campbell Reesman, *Trickster Lives: Culture and Myth in American Fiction* (University of Georgia Press, 2001), 39; Gates, Henry Louis. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 7-9.

Lawrence Levine tells us that the Brer Rabbit trickster stories are the "most important single mechanism produced by antebellum blacks to…enhance survival among themselves."[12] The trickster in the oral tradition functioned by giving a veiled voice to the disempowered. Due to their marginalized status, the enslaved were unable to freely challenge the system of slavery. The well-known "Tar Baby" story exemplifies the dangers of openly challenging the social order. In this tale, Brer Rabbit gets mad, because a doll made out of the tar he finds on the road does not acknowledge his presence or show him any courtesy.[13] Getting no reply from the figure, Brer Rabbit loses his temper and punches and kicks the tar baby, thus getting stuck. While he eventually wheedles his way out of being killed when Brer Fox comes along to find him immobilized, the tale also contains an important message against public displays of aggression: Brer Rabbit got stuck in the tar for openly demanding respect, and so would the enslaved Africans.

Enslaved blacks were able to resist the powerful white supremacist plantation system through codifying their language and masking their subversive resistance through folklore. Since folklore has no definitive author and because these tales could be interpreted as simple animal fables rather than allegories of opposition, the Brer Rabbit stories represented an anonymous way to communicate a message of dissent. Brer Rabbit's trickster strategies also taught the enslaved how to slip between oppressive structures of society, utilizing "those crossroad places that the trickster, because of his synchronous duplicity, is able to forge out."[14] Consider how Brer Rabbit, stuck in the tar trap, escapes punishment at the end of the Tar Baby tale: he begs and begs Brer Fox to not throw him into the briar patch.[15] Brer Fox decides this must be the worst punishment available and throws him to the briar patch, unwittingly facilitating his escape. Such tales reminded enslaved Africans that their agency could reside between the cracks in language, the inevitable "*différance"* between the signifier (i.e. the form of a word) and the signified (i.e. the word's meaning).[16] Through lying, cheating, and playing with language, they, too, might be able to find food for survival, avoid the wrath of the Master, and not be defeated by slavery.

Like Brer Rabbit, enslaved Africans and African Americans "developed codes of language and character that allowed them to be outwardly subservient while communicating to each other visions of revenge and reversal of authority."[17] Through the use of subtle codes that permeated every aspect of life – colloquialisms, dress, stories, songs – the enslaved were able to communicate discontent esoterically, but keep the rebellious meaning opaque to those in power, thus protecting themselves. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has influentially identified this strategy of playing with language and context, thus repeatedly subverting received tropes, as

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[12] Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2007), 101.

[13] Richard Mercer Dorson, *American Negro Folktales* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications, 1967), 75-6. In Harris's rendering, he shouts, "'I'm gwineter lam you howter talk ter 'specttubble fokes…'Ef you don't take off dat hat en tell me howdy, I'm gwineter bus' you wide open,' sezee". Harris, *Uncle Remus, His Songs, and His Sayings: The Folk Lore of the Old Plantation*, 24.

[14] Jon Michael Spencer, "The Rhythm of Black Folks," in *Ain't Gonna Lay my 'Ligion Down: African American Religion in the South*, ed. Alonzo Johnson and Paul Jersild (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), 44-45.

[15] Richard Mercer Dorson, *American Negro Folktales* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications, 1967), 75-77.

[16] Jacques Derrida, "Différance," trans. Alan Bass, reprinted in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1982), 3-27, http://hydra.humanities.uci.edu/derrida/diff.html.

[17] Nancy Walker, "Introduction: What is Humor? Why American Humor?" in *What's So Funny? Humor in American Culture*, ed. Nancy Walker (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1998), 34.

"signifyin(g)."[18] The enslaved may have appeared to be consenting to the racial hierarchy of the time, but they were using both the spirit and stories of Brer Rabbit to comment on and to open up a relatively safe space in which they could figure out where to start in resisting their oppression. Masters may have thought Brer Rabbit was just a fool, but the enslaved knew the trickster.

The Character Trap: Situating Joel Chandler Harris in Minstrelsy

"Cornfield" journalist Joel Chandler Harris collected his Brer Rabbit stories from black communities in Georgia during the 1860s and 1870s, as the radical promise of the Reconstruction turned into a North-South compromise that yielded the rise of the Jim Crow caste system. Harris was already known for his occasional comedic newspaper columns, but when his first Brer Rabbit story, "Tar Baby," was published in July 1879 in the *Atlanta Constitution*, he became a household name.[19] By November 1880, he had published his first Brer Rabbit book; within two weeks all 3,000 copies sold out and the book entered its third reprint.[20] Navigating various versions of the stories, Harris ultimately published 113 stories in two books and cemented the character of Brer Rabbit in American popular culture.

The two books, *Uncle Remus, His Songs, and His Sayings* and *Nights with Uncle Remus,* are embedded within the Reconstruction era context of racial tumult, published during a time when rural plantation ways of life were being threatened by industrial progress, a time when Southern "values" were being challenged by Northern policies, and a time when the nation was debating the personhood of the first generation of freed blacks. In this context of change, the minstrel show took on new significance. Born of the Jacksonian era, the minstrel show had become America's first national popular culture genre in the 1840s. Before the Civil War, the light, humorous themes of minstrelsy helped defend slavery as a benign institution beloved by the enslaved; after the war, minstrel show narratives constructed the slave plantation nostalgically, presenting "the Old South" as a symbolic childhood home "where simplicity, happiness, and all the things we have left behind, exist outside of time."[21]

The extent to which Harris personally believed in this Old South ideal is unclear. From humble origins, Harris once wrote that "even the bare suggestion of slavery's reestablishment is unsavory," but his biographer suggests he could not abandon an elementary belief in white supremacy and the necessity of white control over black Americans.[22] Either way, Harris's writing built upon established motifs of white mainstream popular culture, specifically foregrounding a key element in the Old South myth: "the tender relationship between kind

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[18] Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

[19] Thomas English, "In Memory of Uncle Remus," in *Critical Essays on Joel Chandler Harris*, ed. R. Bruce Bickley, Jr. (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1981), 64.

[20] Joseph Griska, "'In Stead of a 'Gift of Gab': Some New Perspectives on Joel Chandler Harris Biography," in *Critical Essays on Joel Chandler Harris*, ed. R. Bruce Bickley, Jr. (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1981), 221.

[21] Alexander Saxton, "Blackface Minstrelsy and Jacksonian Ideology," *American Quarterly,* 27:1, 1975, 14. See also *Ethnic Notions*, dir. Marlon Riggs (California Newsreel, 1986).

[22] R. Bruce Bickley, *Joel Chandler Harris: A Biography and Critical Study* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 36.

masters and devoted 'old-time darkies'."[23] The relationship between Uncle Remus and the little boy embodies this Old South tenderness in Harris's books and is the lens through which Harris intended his books to be read, instructing the reader before his first chapter, "To give a cue to the imagination of the reader, it may be necessary to state that the stories related in this volume are supposed to be told to a little boy on a Southern plantation, before the war, by an old family servant."[24]

The "old darky" theme is as influential a storyline within Harris' books as the animal stories themselves. For example, the reader learns that one night the little boy fails to appear at his usual hour. By the next morning, Uncle Remus has learned his young companion was so sick that two doctors had been called. Overcome with a desire to cheer the bed-bound boy, "Uncle Remus would creep softly into the back piazza, place his hat carefully on the floor, rap gently on the door by way of announcement, and so pass into the nursery. How patient his vigils, how tender his ministrations, only the mother of the little boy knew."[25] To many contemporary readers, this relationship between Uncle Remus and the little boy was so powerful that a 1911 review did not mention the Brer Rabbit tales at all, instead expressing a widespread yearning for the supposedly idyllic relationship between enslaved and enslaver: "both young and old, as they read these tales, feel themselves drawn very close to the old man, whose humble cabin and warm heart were ever open as a haven of refuge to the little boy."[26] No matter his personal beliefs, Harris capitalized on southern nostalgia and created a narrative that reinforced an antebellum racial order by depicting interracial harmony within the Southern plantation. He inserted the Brer Rabbit tales into a fun house mirror of slavery, inevitably binding them to the dominant archive of blackface minstrelsy.

Uncle Remus was only the most dominant of the humorous stock characters that populated Harris's books and seemed plucked right off the minstrel stage. Daddy Jack, another character, is a barbaric African who can see ghosts and is described as "some wild animal, while his small eyes glistened under their heavy lids with a suggestion of cunning not unmixed with ferocity."[27] Aunt Tempy is the typical Mammy: "a fat, middle-aged woman, who always wore a head handkerchief, and kept her sleeves rolled up, displaying her plump, black arms... she was thoroughly good-natured, usually good-humored, and always trustworthy."[28] With their grotesque and comical appearance, all operated as variations on the familiar minstrel characters America knew so well.

Harris's dialectic writing style directly influenced the construction of these African-American characters as minstrel caricatures. By the nineteenth century, American humor had come to be defined through the use of regional and local dialects contrasting standardized and colloquial speech; humorists used dialects as a way to mark group boundaries and police cultural

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[23] Turner, "Daddy Joel Chandler Harris and His Old-Time Darkies," 117.

[24] Joel Chandler Harris, *Nights with Uncle Remus: Myths and Legends of the Old Plantation,* Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1917, 45.

[25] Ibid, 84.

[26] John McBryde, *Brer Rabbit in the Folk-Tales of the Negro and Other Races* (Sewanee: The University Press at the University of the South, 1911), 3.

[27] Harris, *Nights with Uncle Remus: Myths and Legends of the Old Plantation*, 381.

[28] Ibid., 149-150.

differences.[29] Harris wrote Uncle Remus, Aunt Tempy, and Daddy Jack in dialect, but kept the words of the little boy in standard and unaccented English, even though, as the son of plantation owners, he could have realistically spoken in a different version of the Southern dialect. Instead, his unaccented English marked him as a part of the in-group, allowing readers to "laugh comfortably at incongruities of language associated with a regional stereotype that a significant segment of American society has been conditioned to regard as socially and culturally inferior."[30] The unmarked speech of the little boy would have made it easier for all white Americans to identify with him, symbolizing the post-Reconstruction compromise made between the South and the North over black lives.

Harris often indicates that the little boy's English is not just standard but also superior. For example, Uncle Remus says "Mackersons" and is corrected by the little boy: "Mexicans, Uncle Remus."[31] By having the little boy correct the old man, Harris illustrates a power dynamic in which the boy is depicted as superior to the man. Similarly, when Uncle Remus says "Rhynossyhoss" instead of rhinoceros, there is the indication that this pronunciation is a mark of intellectual inferiority.[32] The tales that Uncle Remus narrates still depict a rabbit character using language to take back agency, but Harris's humorous minstrel setting contains an entirely different lesson, depicting a naturalized, eternal, and cherished hierarchy that is, in part, built on linguistic certainty. Dividing speech into a correct/incorrect binary goes against the trickster's insistence that language itself is unstable, messy business.

Does Harris's frame and language nullify the power of the trickster stories? The above observations point to a complete inversion of the original tales. Instead of proving that the weak can overcome the strong, instead of clouding the limits of language and identity, Harris's characterization posits the enslaved as naturally inferior people trapped in (and enjoying) an eternal developmental childhood. Plenty of scholars have concluded as much. Yet differentiating between the narrative function of the trickster and its role as a character might complicate this picture, reminding us that the trickster's specialty is in thriving within oppressive boundaries and through indirection.

Creetur Talk and the Limits of White Knowledge

On the most concrete level, the trickster character in a Brer Rabbit tale uses linguistic play to reverse the power dynamic – letting the weak (i.e. rabbit) outwit the strong (e.g. the bear or the fox). On a deeper level, however, the trickster spirit also muddies the order of things, infecting the hearer with unease and uncertainty, blurring the boundaries between the sacred and the

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[29] Walter Blair, "The Requisites for American Humor," in *What's So Funny? Humor in American Culture*, ed. Nancy Walker (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1998), 96-101. See also Louis Rubin, "The Great American Joke," in *What's So Funny? Humor in American Culture*, ed. Nancy Walker (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1998), 118.

[30] Ed Piacentino, "Intersecting Paths: the Humor of the Old Southwest as Intertext," in *The Enduring Legacy of Old Southwest Humor* ed. Ed Piacentino (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 28.

[31] Harris, *Nights with Uncle Remus: Myths and Legends of the Old Plantation*, 229.

[32] Joel Chandler Harris, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings,* New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1881, 32.

profane, true and false, good and bad. This manifests in the porousness of the trickster's physical form, his/her ability to shape-shift and complicate received notions of identity through acts and words. As Morgan notes, the trickster figure is a "both/and" character, a liminal joker who lives in the margins and accentuates ambiguities.[33] More than any other narrative element, the trickster is associated with fluidity of language and identity. Consider how Brer Rabbit plays dead, pretending to be game himself, to cheat Brer Fox out of his recently hunted game in one tale reported by Harris:

> One day Brer Fox came along all rigged out and asked Brer Rabbit to go hunting with him, but Brer Rabbit, he sort of felt lazy, and he told Brer Fox that he had some other fish to fry. Brer Fox felt might sorry, he did, but he said he believed he would try his hand anyhow, and off he went.
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> He was gone all day, and he had a monstrous streak of luck, Brer Fox did, and he bagged a sight of game. By and by, towards the shank of evening, Brer Rabbit sort of stretched himself, he did, and allowed that it was almost time for Brer Fox to be getting along home.
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> Then Brer Rabbit, he went and mounted a stump to see if he could hear Brer Fox coming. He hadn't been there long when sure enough here came Brer Fox through the woods singing like a Negro at a frolic. Brer Rabbit, he leapt down off the stump, he did, and lay down in the road and made like he was dead.
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> Brer Fox, he came along, he did, and saw Brer Rabbit lying there. He turned him over, he did, and examined him, and he said, "This here rabbit is dead. He looks like he's been dead a long time. He's dead, but he's mighty fat. He is the fattest rabbit that I ever saw, but he's been dead too long. I am afraid to take him home," he said.
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> Brer Rabbit didn't say anything. Brer Fox, he sort of licked his chops, but he went on and left Brer Rabbit lying in the road. Directly he was out of sight, Brer Rabbit, he jumped up, he did, and ran around through the woods and got in front of Brer Fox again. Brer Fox, he came up and there lay Brer Rabbit, apparently cold and stiff.
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> Brer Fox, he looked at Brer Rabbit, and he sort of studied. After a while he unslung his game bag, and he said to himself, "This here rabbit is going to waste. I'll just leave my game here, and I'll go back and get that other rabbit, and I'll make folks believe that I'm Old Man Hunter from Huntsville," he said.
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> With that he dropped his game and loped back up the road after the other rabbit, and when he was out of sight, old Brer Rabbit, he snatched up Brer Fox's game and put out for home.
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> The next time he saw Brer Fox he hollered out, "What did you kill the other day?" he said.
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> Then Brer Fox, he sort of combed his flank with his tongue, and hollered back, "I caught a handful of hard sense, Brer Rabbit," he said.

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[33] "Tricksters cannot be pinned down. They are 'both/and' creatures – both villains, for example, and cultural heroes." Winifred Morgan, *The Trickster Figure in American Literature* (New York City: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 5.

> Then old Brer Rabbit, he laughed, he did, and up and responded, "If I'd have known you were after that, Brer Fox, I'd have loaned you some of mine," he said.[34]

Retold here by Harris/Remus, this is a version of the tale type "Playing Dead Twice in the Road," which might have roots in the West Indies.[35] Here we first see Brer Fox invite Brer Rabbit to go hunting. Yet, when Brer Fox sees Brer Rabbit playing dead on the ground, he does not recognize the potential hunting partner with whom he had spoken that morning. Instead, he sees a dead rabbit and an exceptionally fat one at that. The second dead rabbit on his way, in turn, operates as a generic placeholder for dead-rabbit-ness, reminding him of the first rabbit. By this time, the rabbits in the narrative have multiplied to a dizzying extent: the lazy friend who did not want to go hunting (1), the first "fat" game (2), the second reminder game (3), and the final rabbit who steals Fox's game (4) and returns to his original position as interlocutor the next day (5).[36] Somehow, we are to believe that all of these are Brer Rabbit even though Brer Fox can only recognize 1 and 5, i.e. the talking rabbits, as such. It is an uncanny multiplication that does not just lead to Brer Fox's loss but also teases the reader/listener. Harris's insertion of minstrel show stereotypes (e.g. "singing like a Negro at a frolic") into the tale does nothing to tidy up the identity confusion and even exacerbates it. The story plays with our suspension of disbelief when listening to an animal folktale, reminding us that Brer Rabbit is about as *rabbit* as can be, yet also so much more.

The indeterminacy of the trickster is compounded by the nature of folklore itself. Unlike print texts, living oral traditions can never be fixed. Instead, they exhibit "multiple existence" and "variation": different tellers will tell the same tale in different ways.[37] Although folklorists have long worked to locate original forms and dissect tales into motifs and narrative skeletons, there really is no one true form to the any Brer Rabbit tale. In writing down the Brer Rabbit narratives inside an Old South frame, Harris picks the rabbit up and carries him along as if it were dead game. Yet, the narrative force of the trickster inevitably lies in mistaken identities, disguises, and cracks in language. Each additional layer offers more opportunities for incongruity and subversion. The trickster may be both game and gamer.

As noted, Harris indirectly inserted the voice of the marginalized into the public sphere by using the hegemonic figures of the oppressors. On top of the coded animal language of the original tale, he added the minstrel show characters. If the tales indeed had a private transcript communicating the discontent of the enslaved when shared among the enslaved, Harris's framing obscured this private transcript even further. In order to get to any such subversive meaning, a reader would now have to read through two layers of masks: that of the animal characters in the source material (i.e. rabbit, fox, etc.) and the minstrel show characters (Uncle Remus, Aunt Tildy, etc.) added by Harris. This final layer, moreover, was the prime mechanism for the popularization

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[34] Joel Chandler Harris, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings: The Folk-Lore of the Old Plantation* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1881), no. 15, pp. 70-72, dialect normalized and reprinted in *Playing Dead: Folktales of Aarne-Thompson-Uther Type 1 and Related Stories*, selected and edited by D. L. Ashliman, http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/type0001.html#harris1 (accessed March 28, 2016).

[35] Dorson, *American Negro Folktales*, 91.

[36] In another version recorded by Dorson, the rabbit plays dead three times in the road before Brer Bear decides to go back (93).

[37] Alan Dundes and Carl R. Pagter. *Urban Folklore from the Paperwork Empire* (Austin, Tex. : American Folklore Society, 1975), xviii.

of the stories in white mainstream American culture. While this appears to be a simple case of white appropriation of esoteric black culture for profit, we cannot ignore the exoteric (or outward) drive of the original folk stories themselves. [38] According to James Scott,

> For any subordinate group, there is a tremendous desire and will to express publicly what is in the hidden transcript, even if that form of expression must use metaphors and allusions in the interest of safety. [39]

In popularizing the Brer Rabbit tales, Harris was, in some ways, aiding in making the private transcript public, albeit within an additional constraining frame. But with what results?

We believe the counter-hegemonic potential of the tales, now under another layer of disguise but widely available in the public sphere for the first time, still lies within the cracks in language – the tricksters' forte. Not by coincidence, tricksters are at home in the mental framework of the spoken word and derive their power from playing with meaning. As discussed, trickster pulls apart meaning and opens up any word to new, and multiple, interpretations. [40] Through signifyin(g), the black linguistic realm collides with the dominant white linguistic realm of meaning – opening up new possibilities for interpretation.

The written word is also a hotbed of power relations and social connections: the connotations and intertextual echoes that reside within each word or phrasing inevitably reference and impact what others have said before. These connections situate a text within a hierarchical network of power that reflects dominant cultural interpretations but remains unstable. The trickster spirit of signifyin(g) destabilizes the structure that regulates the 'appropriate' meaning. So, when the trickster pulls apart meaning and highlights the arbitrary and unnatural link between the signifier and the signified, s/he is undermining the established and dominant meanings and allowing for polysemy, or many meanings. So, while it may seem that texts contain a singular meaning, the trickster's narrative role is to open up alternative interpretations through signifyin(g) and to expose the multivocality of a text.

Harris's narrative writing style is particularly ripe for signifyin(g). Since he has created a text that "aspires to the status of oral narration," he is inherently embedding his writing with the stamp of the oral account. [41] By its nature, his writing is double-voiced and dialogical, inherently intertextual. In this case, there is the omnipresent narrative voice of Harris setting the scene, the voices of his characters (Uncle Remus, Aunt Tempy, and Daddy Jack) telling the tales, and the muffled voices of the enslaved who once told and retold the tales in the oral tradition. While it can be argued that Harris himself wrote everything, his source material is the spoken stories he collected from African-Americans, who likely inserted a world of cultural innuendo, which Harris may or may not have understood. There is no reason to assume that the framing has been able to fully contain the power of the ur-text, despite bagging the rabbit character. In fact, given the trickster's delight in linguistic confusion, any added layer of indirection would likely complicate the text more, furthering the trickster's narrative function.

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[38] Jansen, "The Esoteric-Exoteric Factor in Folklore," 205-511.
[39] Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, 164.
[40] Gates Jr., *Signifying Monkey,* 217.
[41] Harris, *Nights with Uncle Remus: Myths and Legends of the Old Plantation*, introduction.

The books even contain hints about the operations of the trickster at the gaps between signifier and signified. Even though most of Harris's minstrel show framing reinforces wrong/right binaries when it comes to language, it also lets slip moments of ambiguity. At one moment, Uncle Remus goads the white audience, telling them that they do not understand what is going on. "Linktum sinktum binktum boo," says Uncle Remus, much to the confusion of the little boy, "des creetur talk...ef you think I got time fer ter stop right short off en stribbit' out all I knows, you er mighty much mistaken."[42] Uncle Remus may have been speaking in Brer Rabbit gibberish, but the message he imparts is significant: there are concealed meanings in the stories that he understands and is not always going to go distributing out. He then tells the little white boy the example of the rat that only comes out once the boy has gone to sleep: "Wy, ders er old gray rat w'at uses 'bout yer, en time atter time he comes out w'en you all done gone ter bed en sets up dar in de cornder en dozes, en me en him talks by de 'our".[43] Essentially, Uncle Remus is telling the little boy that there is a whole world of 'animals' and messages to which he does not have access. This is significant. Since the books both reveal the private transcript and mask it, the reader learns that there is more than one interpretation to these stories. To read such a story fully is to be exposed to the trickster framework of thinking; that is, to see that the word/world contains many meanings and to understand that you lack access to a large number of them.

No matter what Harris intended, his written framework is essentially ambiguous – at times serious, at times comical, and at times confusing. The reader is left with an ironic dual-layered story, in which both layers are at odds. The trickster element of misdirection is present throughout the whole text, not simply at those junctures in which we can locate a trickster character. The reader will have to be the one who takes the multiple meanings from this text and interprets them. Barthes writes about how the multiplicity of discourse reflects the key role of the reader in meaning making in his canonical work on the "death of the Author":

> [T]here is one place where this multiplicity is focused, and that place is the reader…the reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.[44]

John Limon locates a similar praxis in Richard Pryor's humor showing how, in his stand up shows, whites and blacks often laugh at the same gag, but they laugh "from different positions that go in and out of symmetry."[45] The same holds for those reading Harris: one could laugh because the frame confirms stereotypes and allows one to feel superior; one could laugh because a plot contains an element of physical slapstick that releases fear; one could laugh because a tale inverts hierarchy; one could laugh because of the incongruity between the blackface writing style and the subversive private transcript; or because of a combination of these factors.

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[42] Ibid, 278.

[43] Harris, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings*, 68.

[44] Roland Barthes, *Image-Music- Text* (New York City: Hill and Wang, 1977), 148.

[45] "Both blacks and whites are presented with the spectacle and cliché of blackness…blacks see themselves as whites see them…whites now see themselves from the outside as well…at no moment are whites and blacks in Pryor's audience laughing for exactly the same reason. They laugh from different positions that go in and out of symmetry." John Limon, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America (*Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 85.

Harris's insertion of the private transcript into the public brings with it a significant counter-hegemonic possibility: a clouded "double-consciousness," or an awareness of one's lack of awareness. Du Bois influentially described double-consciousness as "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others," an intellectual gift/curse for African-Americans, who have access both to the mainstream American transcripts about race and their own experience of race relations.[46] We use the term "double consciousness" cautiously here to describe what may happen when the powerful catch a glimpse of the hidden transcripts of the marginalized. In the shifting frames of reference between the public transcript and the glimpses of the private transcript, the white reader also risks a "division of consciousness that enables the subject to see the world through bifurcated vision."[47] However, in this instance, the double-vision is clouded on one side: the reader has access to the mainstream hegemonic meanings, but only gains the sense that there are other meanings that she or he cannot access.

The Brer Rabbit stories were coded because the enslaved understood the duality between who they were and how they were perceived. We don't believe the double-consciousness gained from the insertion of coded meanings into the public sphere fully replicates the powers of insight available to the marginalized for the powerful. Instead, we argue this creates the potential for some readers to undergo the disorienting experience of discursive marginalization and come face to face with the limits of mainstream language and thought.

Joel Chandler Harris has written, intentionally or not, a text that translates the trickster framework of thought in written form. His narrative structure both obscures and spreads the private transcript. Even through the trickster character itself (i.e. the rabbit) appears trapped within an oppressive frame, the increasing dissemination may result in more readers being infiltrated by the trickster state of mind. However, this is not to say that all readers will necessarily pick up on the contradictions in his work. It is too simplistic to assume that Harris's text has one meaning. He not only confirms and romanticizes the Old South myth, but also popularizes fables that demonize the power structure he is romanticizing. His books contain multiple opportunities for interpretation at the same time. The spoken stories he appropriated represented "the muffled, oblique version of the direct replies" to power. His written stories are even more muffled, yet even more public: "If it is disguised, it is at least not hidden; it is spoken to power. This is no small achievement of voice under domination."[48]

We believe the greatest potential of these multilayered texts lies in the glimpse of double-consciousness available through the shifting frames of reference between the public transcript and the private transcript. Just as the spoken Brer Rabbit stories flirt with hidden meanings and encourage a dual level of understanding, the books' infusion of the trickster spirit offers an insight into one's lack of insight. If and when the white readers catch glimpses of the private transcript, or simply sense its presence, the trickster will have productively "messed up" their minds. Thus, we are left with a text that may not invert society and that may even promote racial stereotypes, but one that also has the chance to open up the readers' consciousness to a greater world vision. Social change requires an epistemological challenge that de-stabilizes received meanings. Democracy requires "re-lease of plurality and multivocality, the dialogic and hybrid

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[46] W.E.B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 8-9.
[47] Andrew Stott, *Comedy: the New Critical Idiom* (London: Routledge, 2014), 15.
[48] Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, 166.

play of different languages, dialects, registers and/or speech genres."[49] This is where Harris's books may come through, perhaps despite Harris.

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[49] Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (New York City: Routledge, 2000), 201.