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Radical Folk Heroes: Anansi & Br'er Rabbit's West African Origins & Their Forced Pilgrimages

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by

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Dedication

To my grandparents for being the first storytellers in my parents lives

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“Disney is the Devil” - Alisha Patterson-Swaby, my mother

Introduction

When one thinks of a trickster, it is usually someone who plays tricks to achieve a goal or make someone look like a fool. Growing up, a main trickster in my life was my younger brother, Adisa. His Yoruba derivan name means one who [makes himself] clear and he definitely did. He was always looking for ways to embarrass me. I still think about one trick he played on me years ago. We were getting ready for bed and I was completing my bedtime routine. He had used the bathroom before me and was taking a long time, shuffling around. I remember him exiting the bathroom, looking sneaky but didn't think much about it. I figured he was just being his usual annoying self. I went in to brush my teeth. I decided to pee as well so I didn't get the urge to pee after I already settled into bed. I plopped down on the toilet and ketchup squirted all over my fresh pajama pants. Adisa had placed two ketchup packets parallel to one another underneath the seat of the toilet. I immediately started screaming. He cackled next door, in the room we shared. I stormed out to the living room where my parents were watching television to complain to them and demand a punishment for him. My parents laughed, agreeing with him that it was a good trick. They made him apologize to me but that was all. When they asked him where he got the idea from, he said his *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* book. I remember wanting to rip the book up for providing him with such a horrible idea. Even after changing my pajamas, I still went to bed with a faint smell of old ketchup. I was livid for days. If I remind my brother of this story, he most likely won't remember it. He's played so many pranks on me and loved to rope me into pranking our parents. Outside of books and oral stories, he was the first trickster in my life. Him tricking me could be chalked up to simple sibling rivalry. I could have also represented a symbol of power that my brother wanted to knock down a peg similar to how West African animal

tricksters do in many of their own stories. I'm the eldest sibling and he tends to get into more trouble than me, receiving more punishments from my parents than I do. By vexing me, it gave him a good laugh and probably allowed him to feel a sense of control over a situation. My parents appreciated the good trick; looking back on it, they weren't necessarily laughing at my distress but rather how witty my brother's trick was. While they did make him apologize and recognize he was wrong, their laughter affirmed that it was indeed a great trick. While I did check under the toilet for a week following, I can now look back at the moment with humor and nostalgia.

The West African animal trickster is an antecedent to a variety of Caribbean and African American animal tricksters. The trickster creates a link between vastly different countries, languages, cultures, tribes, and people with its stories. For example, this link is evident in the animals Rabbit or Hare, Tortoise, and Spider being chief actors in West African trickster tales and represented frequently in Caribbean and African American ones. What makes a trickster a trickster, however? The trickster is generally defined as a comical figure who highlights important social values.[1] The trickster is not an universal figure or archetype; every trickster is different across cultures and countries. The sociocultural setting can be very important to a trickster character as it can inform the reasoning behind their actions. As tricksters differ per country and culture, their tricks do as well. When we look into animal tricksters in West Africa, we can identify how specific tricks operate in a specific community and why. Animal tricksters are known for resisting dominant power structures and can stand as political symbols against them. Their many tricks have worked in favor of themselves and or the people.

[1] Hynes and Doty, *Mythical Trickster Figures*, 1-2.

The trickster has been seen as a symbolic agent of human struggle. As readers, we must concentrate on each trickster's individual relationship with the society that has imagined them and the culture they exist in. Removing a trickster from its cultural environment removes the explanation of specific tricks that were executed. In Jamaica, during enslavement from 1498 - 1834, spider trickster Anansi's tricks worked against enslavers, plantation owners, and Jamaica's colonial government. His tricks were utilized by enslaved Jamaican people to push back against their inhumane treatment and resist the plantation structure. To the Wolof community of Gambia, Leuk the Hare represents a griot and is able to critique others within the community without consequence. Leuk has a sharp tongue and the freedom of language. Within every facet of a community, an animal trickster fits providing lessons, cautions, or establishing why things are the way they are.

West African trickster folktales often have etiological explanations, offering insight into why certain aspects of society are accepted and why others are rejected. These etiological narratives are attempts within the oral tradition to raise human actions to the cosmological.[2] What a trickster does can affect their external world; Gods are not the only ones who affect the world. The trickster is a liminal being; they are in the state of betwixt and between.[3] They are split between the divine trickster and the profane trickster. The divine trickster has a connection within the Gods, or is a God themselves. An example is Legba, a trickster god to the Fon people of Benin. The profane trickster does not have such a connection and is earth bound. An example

[2] Scheub, *Trickster and Hero*, 7.
[3] Scheub, *Trickster and Hero*, 6.

is the Yoruba tortoise trickster, Àjàpá. Tricksters can exist between divine and earth bound; they have access to the best of both worlds.[4]

Tricksters are "endowed with a mental nimbleness that more often than not eases their passage through a treacherous and dangerous world, usually in spite of and at the expense of more powerful adversaries."[5] They are empowered with their cunning mind, usually in defense against a seemingly stronger opponent. West African tricksters have a strong presence in their trickster counterparts in the Caribbean and America. Their stories are usually told by the local griot or a familial elder. Growing up, my parents read books to me about animal tricksters, mainly Caribbean, African, and African American ones. I have vivid memories of my mom buying mountains of books and my dad reading to us at night, putting on special voices for each character. I was always entertained by how persistent the animal trickster was and the means they would go to for their goal. I understood that my father's Jamaican side of the family descended from Jamaican Maroons who descended from West Africa, most likely Ghana, themselves. I felt closer to my heritage even without the full scope of my ancestors journey simply by hearing stories that they themselves passed down.

Learning about how Anansi and Br'er Rabbit came to be folk heroes informed me on why I felt emotionally close to any stories involving their characters or similar animal tricksters. I heard more Anansi stories than Br'er Rabbit ones as a child. I had heard of the Tar Baby and knew rabbit tricksters such as Bugs Bunny but didn't read any Br'er Rabbit stories specifically. I would hear about other African rabbit tricksters but his name wasn't one I was familiar with.

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[4] In an American context, this could be connected to W.E.B DuBois' idea of double consciousness. Double consciousness speaks of the two-ness between being Black and an American, two identities that war with one another. This could explain why tricksters are prevalent in Black American folklore as Black American people are liminal like them. They occupy an identity on both sides.

[5] Owomoyela, *Yoruba Trickster Tales,* x.

When crafting this project, I knew I wanted to focus on something related to my childhood. Anansi, I was already familiar with but I wanted to expand on something I didn't know much about. That's where Br'er Rabbit came in. Once I began looking up Black animal tricksters, Br'er Rabbit kept popping up. I knew I had to investigate his character, his importance, and why I only knew little about him.

This project follows both Anansi and Br'er Rabbit through their journeys of becoming folk heroes in their respective communities; Anansi in Jamaica and Br'er Rabbit in America. I explore how white folklorists, anthropologists, and researchers affected the stories of both characters, influencing the way they were spread and written. In chapter one, I introduce Anansi. I open with an anecdote from my Aunt Anette, showing how close to home the character is to my Jamaican family. I, then, establish Anansi's beginnings with the Akan Asante people of the Gold Coast and the role he serves in their community. Following, I explore how Anansi entered colonial Jamaica during enslavement by the Spanish and English. We see Anansi's transformation from helping to maintain Asante society to becoming a Jamaican slave hero. Chapter one concludes with how Anansi brought cultural pride to Jamaicans as he entered the 19th and 20th centuries with Jamaican storyteller Louise Bennett building a welcoming road for him.

In chapter two, I introduce Leuk the Hare. Leuk is a popular rabbit trickster character in Wolof oral narratives in Senegal, Gambia, and Mauritania. I specifically look into his griot role in the Wolof community of the Saloum region in Gambia. I go on to explain how he utilizes signifying, a linguistic tool for resistance used in African American English, in his own language. This is to show the link between Leuk and Br'er Rabbit through language. Next, I

show how Leuk transforms into Br'er Rabbit once he enters America. I open with Br'er Rabbit's popular Tar Baby story and the impact this story had on enslaved Africans in America. I, then, introduce Br'er Rabbit, his character, and his tricks. Following, I introduce Joel Chandler Harris, the white American folklorist, who popularized Br'er Rabbit's stories in America, recrafting them into the white American child's literary canon. Harris created the minstrel character Uncle Remus, an older black man, who narrated the stories to children. Concluding the chapter, I explain how Disney turned Harris' stories into their 1946 movie *Song of the South* and incorporated it into their amusement park ride, Splash Mountain.

Both chapters start with the characters origins and expand to show how they became folk heroes to Black people in Jamaica and America, and their evolution following. Before chapter one, I wanted to explain how the audience of the West African trickster tale is expected to relate to it using professor Ropo Sekoni's book, *Folk Poetics: A Sociosemiotic Study of Yoruba Trickster Tales.* Then I break down an element of trickster tales that I have always found intriguing, the friendship frame between the trickster and the tricked. I used American folklorist Alan Dundes' paper, *The Making and Breaking of Friendship as a Structural Frame in African Folk Tales* to investigate this phenomenon.

The Trickster Tale's Audience

The audience of the trickster folktale is expected to relate to the trickster on some level. Professor Ropo Sekoni details how the range of identification with the trickster ranges from unconditional rejection to sympathetic identification or solidarization.[6] While Sekoni is focusing on Yoruba trickster tales, I believe this could also be applied to non-Yoruba West African animal trickster tales as well. Unconditional rejection refers to the imposition of the most anti human traits on the trickster.[7] These are stories told to elicit hatred from the audience towards the trickster. The audience is encouraged to condemn them. Sympathetic identification concerns the trickster as a victim of circumstances.[8] The audience wishes to help them; this usually occurs when a trickster is in protest against a social authority. The trickster is making an attempt to fight an obsolete norm. With these audience responses, the trickster narrative mode can be split into the tale of negation and the tale of affirmation. While the audience could be caught between the two, feeling hate towards the character but also recognizing what they do right, these two narrative modes exist to show the two different general responses West African trickster folktales elicit. In the tale of negation, the trickster is shown as a destroyer of the norm. These tales encourage the audience to be attracted to the norm as the trickster destroys it and is seen as wrong. In the tale of affirmation, the trickster is depicted as a helper of their community and endangers themselves by challenging the norm, exposing its negative aspects.[9] Growing up, I often found myself typically choosing solidarization and being empathetic towards the trickster.

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[6] Sekoni, *Folk Poetics*, 23.
[7] See note 6 above.
[8] See note 6 above.
[9] Sekoni, *Folk Poetics*, 24.

Most of the stories I heard were of the trickster righting a wrong or seeking revenge. Unless a trickster played a trick unprovoked then I usually understood their point of view.

A range of trickster stories I remember that swayed my opinions between negation and affirmation were Nelson Mandela's favorite African folktales. My parents used to play the audiobook CD in the car where a range of celebrities would read a selection of Mandela's favorite stories. Even at a young age, I knew how to distinguish between a necessary trick and an unnecessary one. I was a part of the audience that Sekoni speaks of. I was engaging with the material as a child raised in an Afro-Caribbean American home with limited knowledge of the histories of the stories. The audience of a trickster tale is just as important as the tale itself. How does this group of people react to this trickster tale? Why? What affects them in their community and environment to elicit such a response?

The Trickster's Structural Frame of Friendship

A structural pattern found prominent in trickster tales is the movement from friendship to enmity. African trickster folktales hold a pattern of a progression from an implied contract of friendship to the violation of this contract, ending in the contract's dissolution.[10] Friendship is used in a contractual sense between the trickster and others. When this contract is violated, it will trigger a trick. In an example of a tale, two animal characters will be friends and the breaking of their friendship serves as a structural frame within which this pattern occurs. This cessation of friendship is temporary as the same characters can be portrayed as friends in another story down

[10] Dundes, "The Making and Breaking of Friendship as a Structural Frame in African Folk Tales," 176.

the line. In trickster tales, friendship is fluid. Relationships constantly move from equilibrium to disequilibrium.[11] Equilibrium is set with the aforementioned contract.

Folklorist Alan Dundes identifies this contract as part of the plot action. The contract is one of the motifemes of the trickster story. Motifemes are a basic unit of story used in comparative analysis of folktales. Alongside contracts, the other motifemes are friendship, violation, discovery of violation, and end of friendship.[12] These motifemes dictate what identifiable themes are used in a trickster tale. The importance of this friendship frame can be seen as an extension of an oicotype, a specific folktale pattern popular with a particular social group or in a limited geographic region.[13] This friendship frame is oicotypal for the continent of Africa; there is an absence of this frame in other narrative tradition areas of the world. In other traditions, once a contract is violated, the friendship is ended forever. In Africa, this frame shows the importance of friendship across African cultures. With the violation of the contract, the folk tale structure provides an outlet against the binding nature of obligations imposed by institutional friendship pacts. In other words, when the trickster performs their trick, it is also a maneuver to get out of a relationship they no longer want to be in.

Friendship and contractual relationships are displayed as cultural ideal norms but, at the same time the narrator and audience can identify with the trickster who ignores these norms, ending the friendship. Folklorist William Bascom has termed this the "basic paradox of folklore."[14] This friendship frame reflects on its community and shows how friendship flows within it. This frame reminds me of television shows I watched growing up and how the concept

[11] Dundes, "The Making and Breaking of Friendship as a Structural Frame in African Folk Tales," 177.
[12] Dundes, "The Making and Breaking of Friendship as a Structural Frame in African Folk Tales," 176.
[13] Dundes, "The Making and Breaking of Friendship as a Structural Frame in African Folk Tales," 178.
[14] Dundes, "The Making and Breaking of Friendship as a Structural Frame in African Folk Tales," 180.

of the frenemy was depicted. There were characters that did not like one another but would sometimes team up or find common ground. This concept of the frenemy showed me a fluid concept of relationships, much like the African friendship frame.

CHAPTER ONE

The Spider

My first memory was my mom always tell me what goes around, comes around and I, I asked her, what do you mean by that? And she said, always do good, because if you don't do good, it will come back to haunt you. So when I went to, I was in school like about, I think I was about eight years old and my teacher read this Anancy story to me. And the Anancy story was Anancy and Turtle go to dinner. I remember that. And back then, or all the time, if you have anything, especially food, you always share with anyone who come by. So Anancy, Anancy was eating, was about to have dinner. And as soon as Anancy was about to have dinner, Turtle knock on the door. So Anancy invited Turtle into dinner. When they were about to eat, Anancy told Turtle to wash his hand before he eat.

So Turtle went to wash his hand, came back and Anancy said, "You need to wash your hand again." But in that meantime, Anancy was busy eating up all the food. So, by the time Turtle get back to Anancy, there was no food. So, Anancy play a trick on Turtle. So Turtle went home hungry, and Anancy think he get away with everything. Then Turtle invited Anancy for dinner and Turtle play the same trick on Anancy. He ate all the food while he sent Anancy to, um, I think he [told] Anancy that he need[ed] to take off his jacket. And Anancy went to take off his jacket and Turtle ate all the food. So the moral of that story that I learn after reading that, whatever you do, it'll come back to haunt you.

So what goes around, comes around. That's where it came back. So that's why by listening, [to what] my mom said to me, [was important] and I didn't have the full understanding

[at first]. And after I go to school and my teacher read that story over and over, that's when I get the full understanding. Right? So all the time, everything that I'm doing, I'm always saying, "I have to do this right."

My 60-year-old Aunt Anette was born in the parish of St. James, Jamaica. She's one of twelve siblings, with my father being the last born. Stories were an important component of her life by relaying life lessons and cautions. She heard an Anansi tale for the first time from her mother, my grandmother. Anansi plays a trick on Turtle who turns around and plays the same trick on him. What goes around, comes around. This sentence hovers over Aunt Anette's entire life and is a lesson that she continues to live by. When we spoke, she said, "I try not to cut any corners, because I know it's gonna come back to haunt me. And that's the moral of the story that I learned."

I was introduced to Anansi stories by my parents. My Jamaican father mentioned the spider trickster but did not remember many stories about him. One of my earliest memories of the trickster is from Gerald McDermott's beautifully illustrated book *Anansi the Spider: A Tale from the Ashanti*. In this story, Anansi is saved by his six sons after being eaten by Fish and captured by Falcon. On their way home, he discovers a globe of light. He wants to give it to the son that rescued him but cannot decide which son deserves the prize. He asks Nyame, the god of all things, for help, and Nyame says he'll hold the light until Anansi can decide. Anansi and his sons argue all night over who deserves the gift. Nyame observes this and decides to put the globe of light in the sky for all to see. This globe is alluded to as the moon, explaining how Anansi brought the moon to Nyame. My father used to read the book to my brother and me before bed, putting on voices for each character. One of his favorite things to do was read to us, a childhood memory that helped inspire this project.

Figure 1. Illustration of Anansi.
Image from McDermott. *Anansi the Spider*, 2.

Anansi's Beginnings

The Anansi character originates from the folklore of the Akan Asante peoples of Ghana. The Asante, also spelled Ashanti, reside mainly in today's south-central Ghana and adjacent areas of Côte d'Ivoire and Togo.[15] They are a subgroup of the Akan ethno-linguistic group and speak a Twi language of the Kwa branch, a branch of the Niger-Congo language family.[16] In the Asante's Twi language, Ananse translates to spider.[17] Amongst the Asante,

[15] Manning, *Britain at War with the Asante Nation 1823-1900*, 3. Asante is pronounced as Ashanti. It became written as Ashanti as the contemporary English spelling due to the British writing it as they heard it pronounced, as-hanti. The hyphenation was dropped and Ashanti remained. The British came into contact with the Asante in the 19th century, mainly due to the Anglo-Ashanti Wars.
[16] Britannica, "Asante." https://www.britannica.com/topic/Asante.
[17] In West Africa, it can be spelled Ananse or Anànse however, the most popular contemporary spelling is Anansi, which is one of the ways it is spelled in Jamaica alongside Anancy & [Brer] Nancy. Throughout this paper, I will personally utilize the most popular spelling of Anansi unless I am quoting a person or story.

Anansi is a master of self-transformation and metamorphosis. He inhabits a space between the human and non-human worlds; he crosses the physical and social boundaries within both worlds and the space between them, sometimes serving as a mediator or go-between. Boundaries are an important element of Asante life. The geographical layout of an Asante community reflects the boundary between clean and unclean. Unclean things include domestic refuse and bodily waste, children before adolescence, menstruating women, and latrines. These things are situated in a fringe area between the village and the bush.[18] The village is the site of human activities, while the bush holds chaotic forces and spirits. An example of Anansi crossing the boundaries of the human and non-human worlds is visible in the story "How Death came to Mankind." *Kwaku Ananse* brings Death into contact with humans.[19] Before, only animals suffered from Death's existence.

The story begins with a famine in the land. Anansi's wife encourages him to find food or it will be known that he has lost the wisdom that he claims he has. Anansi wanders across a clearing where an old graying man sits on a log. Surrounding the man are newly dead animals. Anansi greets the man, asking if he could take some meat home. The man does not acknowledge Anansi. Eventually, Anansi takes the meat. He continues to do so for many nights. One night, he witnesses the old man laying hunting traps. Each trap successfully captures prey. Anansi decides he will marry his daughter off to the old man so his family will always have a good supply of meat. He brings his daughter to the old man and tells her to prepare a nice meal for her new husband. She obliges and Anansi returns home, a happy father. The next day, he returns to find his daughter upset. Her new husband won't acknowledge her or eat her food. She begs Ananse to take her home. Ananse consoles her and

[18] Marshall. "Liminal Anansi," 35.
[19] Appiah, *Tales of an Ashanti Father*, 139 - 145.

tells her to give the old man another chance. He leaves and returns the following afternoon. Anansi finds his daughter dead, laid atop dead animals. Anansi grows angry and threatens to beat the old man. The old man grows in stature, staring at Anansi with pure malevolence. He proceeds to chase Anansi through the forest to the village. Ananse shouts to the village people that an old man is chasing him. "Who are you?," the village people ask. "I am Death," the old man answers.[20] Death decides he was wasting time in the forest with animals and decides to stay in the village. He lays traps for people wherever he can. Endless reasons were given to how Death found people but Anansi knew that it was he who had brought him.

In accordance with the Asante tradition by which children are named for the day on which they are born, Anansi has a day name, Kwaku Anansi, meaning Wednesday born.[21] He is tied to traditional Asante religion, which focuses on spiritual forces that structure the universe. It is difficult to pinpoint Anansi's exact religious position within the Asante world, as there are multiple different accounts of his role. R.S. Rattray, an anthropologist whose research focuses on the Asante, describes Anansi as a "soul washer to the Sky-God," while historian A.B. Ellis explains that there was a traditional belief that the origin of man can be traced back to Anansi.[22] There are many more accounts and writings on the religious role Anansi played in his Asante community, some supported by more evidence than others. However, we can conclude that Anansi is an intermediary figure in the Asante religion.

In Asante religion, Nyame[23] is the Omnipotent Great deity, who resides in the sky.[24] He

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[20] Appiah, *Tales of an Ashanti Father*, 145.
[21] Marshall. "Liminal Anansi," 31.
[22] Marshall, *Anansi's Journey*, 31.
[23] Vecsey. "The Exception Who Proves The Rules: Ananse The Akan Trickster," 108. Nyame is also known as Onyankopon, Otwereduampon, and Odomankoma.
[24] Marshall. "Liminal Anansi," 31.

is the eldest deity, the one who gave order to the universe, and who named all things.[25] Nyame and Anansi are intertwined. Anansi is related to Nyame by name; Nyame is given the title *Ananse Kokuroko*, the Great Spider.[26] Anansi possesses wisdom, like Nyame, and is said to be the father of the grandfathers, an Asante ancestor. Nyame is said to be the father of all people. They share similarities between one another however, the Asante venerate Nyame and not Anansi. Due to his lack of veneration, Anansi imitates Nyame's power and challenges his authority. He is seen as both Nyame's rival and accomplice. He tricks Nyame and consistently finds a way out of punishment. Anansi is the constant exception to Nyame's spiritual rule. In the story, "You Are As Wonderful As Ananse, The Spider," [27] Nyame's mother, Nsia, is sick. Anansi tells Nyame that instead of paying the doctor gold dust to take care of his mother, he can pay Anansi to take care of her. Under Anansi's care, Nsia dies. Anansi asks Okusie the Rat to dig a tunnel until it reaches the raised mound where Nyame sits. Then he calls his son, Ntikuma. Anansi cuts him a horn and tells him that when Nyame sits on the mound, he should say, "When you kill Ananse, the tribe will come to ruin! When you pardon Ananse, the tribe will shake with voices!" Anansi, then, went in front of Nyame on his own accord. Nyame wants to kill him since his mother died under his care. Underneath the tunnel, Ntikuma says what Anansi told him to. Upon hearing this, Nyame believes it to be a message from Ya, Old-mother-earth. He tells his executioners to release Anansi as Ya wants him alive. That is why there is the saying, "You are as wonderful as Ananse." Anansi evades Nyame's power by any means. Due to their connection, he understands under what circumstances Nyame will grant his freedom.

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[25] Vecsey. "The Exception Who Proves The Rules: Ananse The Akan Trickster," 108.
[26] Vecsey. "The Exception Who Proves The Rules: Ananse The Akan Trickster," 112.
[27] Rattray, *Akan-Ashanti Folktales*, 265-267.

Alongside Nyame, there are *abosom*. Abosom are divinities, who manifest themselves through aspects of nature.[28] Each one has powers through Nyame as he is the source of all power. One of the most powerful abosom is Asase Yaa (Asase meaning Earth and Yaa meaning female born on Thursday).[29] It is believed that she created the Earth on a Thursday. The Asante state that as a person has many needs, they need many abosom. There are four types of abosom: tribal-wide, town, family, and personal.[30] To expect to live without recognizing abosom is unwise for the Asante need them to survive. They direct their prayers through shrines to Nyame and abosom. Anansi bullies abosom and challenges their power. In "Kwaku Ananse and the Rain Maker,"[31] abosom, Efu the Hunchback, creates rain when one beats his back. Anansi hears of this phenomenon from his friend Kwaku Tsin. He decides to beat Esu with two large clubs to secure three days of rain for his crops. Anansi beats Esu so hard that he dies. Anansi hides Esu's body in a mango tree. He finds Kwaku Tsin and tells him to shake the tree. When Tsin shakes the tree, the hunchback falls from it, dead. Kwaku Tsin was no stranger to Anansi's tricks and pretends to fetch for help. He comes back and tells Anansi that one of Nyame's messengers told him that Nyame had tired of Esu and was offering a reward to whoever killed him. Anansi rushes to claim his reward from Nyame. In anger, Nyame punishes Anansi by not allowing rain to fall on his farm ever again.

In this story, Anansi loses in the end. When he fails, he may be publicly humiliated and feel the pain of his trick upon himself. Surrounding Anansi's tricks and failures is a

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[28] Marshall, *Anansi's Journey*, 19. Also spelled Obosom.
[29] See note 28 above. Asasa Yaa is Ya, Old-mother-earth from "You Are As Wonderful as Ananse, The Spider."
[30] Vecsey. "The Exception Who Proves The Rules: Ananse The Akan Trickster," 109.
[31] Appiah, *Ananse the Spider*, 115-121.

well-functioning society. His movements away from order creates order in the end. While Anansi is stealing, his neighbors are cooperating. While he is violating rules, his neighbors are abiding by them.[32] Anansi operates in mythic time, changing the boundaries of the present world as the world is created by his actions.[33] Through his disregard of Asante societal and communal ideals, Anansi unintentionally creates new ones. With his actions and their consequences, he allows the Asante to reaffirm their faith in their community structure.[34] The ways the community reacts to his actions show how strong the Asante community is. Anansi incorporates skepticism in their belief system, making them more resilient.[35] Robert Pelton, historian, writes, "He shows the power of liminality precisely by stressing its negation of ordinary structure. Thus there is a double doubleness about him: if he parodies sacred mysteries by disguising himself as a bird, by claiming the power to heal, or by fishing with the spirits, his parody brings about creation, not destruction."[36] Anansi always manages to make an impact on the human world, whether beneficial or harmful. He is a vessel of freedom from the ordinary. An Asante individual can live vicariously through Anansi's tales while still maintaining societal boundaries.

Anansi's stories are told after dark. People sit in a circle or horseshoe shape with the storyteller at the focal point of the group. During storytelling, actors will enter the circle with humorous impersonations of the characters, calling forth laughter from the audience. Sacred subjects, such as Nyame, spirit ancestors or chiefs, are treated as profane and can be subject to ridicule.[37] Rattray attended many of these storytelling circles in the 1920's when working on his

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[32] Vecsey. "The Exception Who Proves The Rules: Ananse The Akan Trickster," 119.
[33] Pelton, *The Trickster in West Africa*, 36.
[34] Marshall, "Liminal Anansi," 38.
[35] See note 34 above.
[36] Pelton, *The Trickster in West Africa*, 36.
[37] Rattray, *Akan-Ashanti Folktales*, x.

book, *Akan-Ashanti Folktales*. One time, when listening to a story, he observes laughter and is troubled by it. He asks someone seated next to him if Asante people habitually laugh at persons inflicted by a sacred subject and suggests it's unkind to ridicule them. The person tells him that it is an appropriate time to laugh as the stories address things everyone knows about but do not ordinarily speak about in public. It is good for everyone concerned to laugh.

FIGURE 2. Ghanian children "ready for a story"
(Barker and Sinclair 1917, frontispiece)
Image from Marshall, *Anansi's Journey*, 10.

The tradition of letting loose and releasing emotions in stories is longstanding. During the days of the Asante kingdom, it was an organized custom for anyone with a grievance against someone to hold them up to disguised ridicule by exposing undesirable traits in their character.[38] The storyteller is licensed to do this; stories expressing grievances were considered appropriate and legitimate by Asante kingdom authorities.[39] The storyteller exposes people by describing

[38] Rattray, *Akan-Ashanti Folktales*, xi.
[39] Marshall. "Liminal Anansi," 33.

them as subjects tied to their traditional religion such as Nyame or Anansi. For example, if a person who grievances them reminds them of Anansi, that person is assigned the identity of Anansi for the purpose of the story. The storyteller protects themselves with the declaration that it is all make believe. In the circle during storytelling, children are closest to the storyteller with adults behind them. Pelton says the scene is an image of Asante social life in which the children are born in the center and, as they grow, move outward to adulthood.[40] Adulthood comes with the element of relaying social life and imparting tradition, which is the reason the Asante refer to the oral storytelling tradition as *anansesem.*[41] These stories are told to children as they are important to their orderly upbringing. This tradition is evident in the way the Anansi story influenced my Aunt Anette, reminding her to be an orderly child and, later, adult. Each anansesem begins with the disclaimer, "We don't really mean to say so; we don't really mean to say so."[42] This disclaimer affirms the realness of the stories in a folkloric sense and shows the Asante's importance of their children knowing the inner shaping of their world. Ghanian scholar Kwesi Yanka argues that Akan Anansi tales are not myths but rather fictional narratives with etiological features.[43] Anansi stories are used to discuss the surrounding world. As children learn from these anansesem, they become a source of renewing tradition and the present world in the Asante community. As I read about the anansesem's purpose in this sense, I thought back to my Aunt Anette's lesson of *what goes around, comes around.* The stable tradition that goes around to the children, comes around to the continued stability of the social order in their Asante community.

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[40] Rattray, *Akan-Ashanti Folktales*, 68.
[41] Rattray, *Akan Ashanti Folktales*, 67.
[42] Rattray, *Akan-Ashanti Folktales*, x.
[43] Marshall, *Anansi's Journey*, 15.

A Binding Journey to Jamaica

While anansesem served the purpose of teaching Asante children tradition and community rules, in Jamaica they served as stories of survival and resistance for enslaved Africans. Spain transported the first enslaved people to Jamaica during their colonial rule from 1498 to 1655. These enslaved people were mainly of Akan Asante origin, emerging as the dominant cultural group on the island.[44] In 1655, the English invaded and took over from the Spanish, continuing enslavement until its formal end in 1834. Once those enslaved reached the island, Anansi entered Jamaican colonial society.

In Jamaica, Anansi and his stories went through their own metamorphosis. African characters were replaced with Jamaican animals and African food was replaced with Jamaican foods. Jamaican foods such as saltfish, callaloo, and gungo peas enter his stories. The Omnipotent Deity Nyame is replaced by Tiger, owner of all stories. Anansi doesn't have the same reverence or respect for Tiger as he does for Nyame. Tigers are not local to Jamaica and may have been used to describe the West African leopard or lion by colonials.[45]

Through the forced contact of a slave society, white European people were frequently and influentially engaging with Anansi stories and West African cultures. In Jamaica, character traits used to describe Anansi are lewd, lazy, cunning, deceitful, and greedy.[46] He was now a threat to the colonial social order. Whereas in Asante society he reaffirmed faith in the society's structures, in Jamaica he symbolized African resistance and survival, becoming both man and

[44] Marshall, *Anansi's Journey*, 39.
[45] Marshall, *Anansi's Journey*, 54.
[46] Marshall, *Anansi's Journey*, 77.

spider. He embodies instability reflecting the plantation environment and the life enslaved Africans were thrown into.[47]

Amongst the enslaved, Anansi symbolized a break from labor and a desire for meals. He valued rest and despised physical exertion.[48] The act of stealing, food especially, was legitimized through Anansi. Anansi was motivated by his stomach and would steal from anyone to appeal to his appetite.[49] Slaves were poorly fed and were not given food to support their survival; Anansi taught them that in order to live, they had to steal. The enslaved used Anansi's tactics and behaviors to defy the plantation structure.

In the story, "Nansi Steals Backra Sheep," Anansi is the headman on Backra's property and starts stealing his sheep.[50] Backra means white man and is an equivalent to massa.[51] Anansi, representing the black Jamaican, believes Backra has too many sheep. He kills them and stores their skin. When Backra becomes concerned about the thefts, Anansi says he will find the thief and send him to Backra's party. Anansi tricks Monkey into dressing up as a sheep, with one of the skins he stole, and sends him to the party. When Backra sees Monkey in the skin, he orders his men to tie Monkey to a tree. Monkey, understanding he was tricked, calls out to Rabbit telling him that he was tied to the tree because he was meant to marry Backra's daughter. He tells Rabbit that he believes he is too poor and lowly for the daughter's hand in marriage but Backra means to force him into it by tying him up. Rabbit, hearing this, trades places with Monkey as he would like to marry Backra's daughter; he was very interested in the rich white

[47] Marshall, *Anansi's Journey*, 65.
[48] Marshall, *Anansi's Journey*, 78.
[49] See note 48 above.
[50] Marshall, *Anansi's Journey*, 71.
[51] See note 50 above.

girl. Backra's men come back to the tree and throw Rabbit in the fire, believing him to be Monkey. Rabbit manages to jump to safety.

This story shows how Anansi justifies stealing as Backra, the white man, had too many sheep that he did not need. The sheep could be used to benefit Anansi, a poor Black man, who does not have easy access to food. Monkey and Rabbit also represent the poor Black Jamaican. Monkey knows what society grants a black man married to a white woman and uses that potential status to persuade Rabbit to trade places with him. The story is a great example of how Black Jamaicans used Anansi's tactics of lying and thievery, against the white man, in order to survive.

Anansi is the epitome of survival. This is seen in his involvement in the Quashie role. Quashie, originally an Akan name for a child born on Sunday, referred to a stereotypical Black male peasant in Jamaica who was stupid, subservient, and inept.[52] Emily Zobell Marshall, author of *Anansi's Journey*, believes it to be a survival technique. For Anansi and the enslaved who were defined as Quashie, it was simply a performance. This behavior allowed them space to devise plans against the plantation system. If the enslaver did not think you were intellectually capable of hatching any plan, then they would not suspect you. Anansi was a master of lying and acting, which were indeed useful tools in plantation Jamaica.

Anansi is also known to use the Quashie performance to express his gender fluidity. In many stories, Anansi becomes Little Miss Nancy. He mimics women, with the help of his falsetto voice, and is referred to as "she" in both West African and Jamaican tales.[53] Several

[52] Marshall, *Anansi's Journey*, 72.
[53] Marshall, *Anansi's Journey*, 76.

Jamaican riddles are the subject of Little Miss Nancy; one example is "riddle me riddle, riddle me dat, guess me this riddle and perhaps not, Little Miss Nancy tore her beautiful yellow gown and no one could mend it. Answer: the skin of a banana."[54] Anansi's gender fluidity is explicit in such riddles and stories in which he pretends to be a woman to attain his goal. This fluidity supports Anansi as a master of transformation and metamorphosis as he changes shape by his own will. He continues to break boundaries, an action he was already known for in Ghana.

In Jamaica, Anansi's distinct physical characteristics were his limp, lisp, and falsetto voice. With his lisp, Anansi cannot pronounce "r" or "s" sounds.[55] He speaks Jamaican creole or Patois, but his speech contains lisps and stuttering. His speech impediment and pattern may be termed as Bungo talk in Jamaica. In colonial Jamaica, a Bungo talker was a term used derogatorily against African people, encompassing their "negative" traits.[56] It describes poor, uneducated peasants. Anansi's Bungo reputation caused some enslaved people to be embarrassed by his stories. Internalized anti-blackness made them despise the Anansi tales. This a testament to Anansi's subversive power. He was the complete opposite of the colonial system, a system he undermined with intention to destroy. Responses to his subversion included anti-blackness, affecting the enslaved. Shame of Anansi stories also came from the Christian church. While Anansi in Jamaica was not strongly lodged within the Ghanian Akan Asante religion, Anansi still had a connection with the indigenous African spiritual world. Anansi is connected to obeah, a spiritual practice in Jamaica following traditional West African beliefs and natural medicines. Bungo-man is also another name for an obeah practitioner; obeah was seen as

[54] Marshall, *Anansi's Journey*, 76.
[55] Marshall, *Anansi's Journey*, 79.
[56] See note 55 above.

a negative aspect of African culture by colonials.[57] Obeah, while fearfully respected on the island, was rejected by European Christianity. Anansi was, and still is, perceived as un-Christian in Jamaica. Anti-blackness shrouded Anansi, Bungo talk, and obeah as they were deemed too African and primitive. While his connection with the god Nyame did not extend to Jamaica, Anansi still occupies a space between secular and spiritual. He is involved in many Jamaican superstitions, creation myths, and obeah and nine-night ceremonies.[58] Nine-night ceremonies are wakes where on the ninth night, there is a final ceremony with music, dancing, and the telling of Anansi tales.[59] The tales entertain the mourners, keeping their spirits up. They can also be told to fend off or entertain the ghost of the deceased. The Anansi tales are accompanied with "outrageous" actions, songs, dances, and games.[60] You are bringing outside activities inside. In doing this, you channel Anansi as a boundary breaker. You break the boundary between the public street versus the private home. In Ghana, Anansi tested social structures and boundaries for the Asante; in the nine-night ceremony, he does the same as he tests the social structures of what behavior is deemed acceptable to do inside your home. His spiritual role was clearly altered when he entered Jamaica, but we can see that it did not completely disappear and instead changed itself to fit the new Jamaican life the enslaved were living. Nine-night ceremonies are still carried out in Jamaica today as well as in Suriname, Trinidad, and St. Vincent.[61]

Anansi was an important figure to all Black people on the island during enslavement, but especially the Maroons. Maroons were enslaved people who escaped, first under the Spanish

[57] Marshall, *Anansi's Journey*, 82.
[58] Marshall, *Anansi's Journey*, 86.
[59] Marshall, *Anansi's Journey*, 83.
[60] See note 59 above.
[61] Marshall, *Anansi's Journey*, 83.

regime, and were joined by more escapees during the British regime. They lived far away from colonial influence in the forest, high up in the mountains, and were a great threat to the British and their colonial forces. Growing up, my father told me that his family is descended from Maroons. He would tell me stories about Nanny of the Maroons, an obeah woman who led successful feats against the British. She is still celebrated in Jamaica today as a national hero. She is much like Anansi as she used her intelligence, tricks, and obeah to resist. Maroons are split into two communities, the Windward and Leeward. Nanny was part of the Windward group. The Windward occupied the northeast of the island while the Leeward occupied the northwest.[62] In 1793, both groups signed treaties with the British, who promised them autonomy, on the condition that they captured and returned runaways. There was a drop in the number of runaways after the treaties were signed.[63] Maroons understood that in order for them to survive, away from enslavement and colonial life, they would have to catch the vulnerable. They would encourage others to join their way of life; they would taunt Black and Indian soldiers in the British army to join them.[64] Maroons are still a celebrated and respected group in Jamaica, given their complicated history, due to their fight of resistance. They experienced much violence as they attacked colonial settlements and intimidated the British with their guerilla tactics.[65] Anansi tales tell of violence in the lives of the enslaved and Maroons. Anansi is not a meek trickster; in many Jamaican tales, I would describe him as ruthless and violence. Take, for example, in the tale, "Tiger's Death," recorded by English collector Walter Jekyll in his book, *Jamaican Song and Story: Annancy Stories, Digging Sings, Dancing Tunes and Ring Tunes*:

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[62] Marshall, *Anansi's Journey*, 97.
[63] Marshall, *Anansi's Journey*, 96.
[64] Marshall, *Anansi's Journey*, 99.
[65] See note 64 above.

One day Mr. Annancy an’ Monkey made a bargain to kill Tiger, an’ they didn' know how to make the confusion for Tiger was Monkey godfather.

An' being Monkey have more strength than Annancy, Annancy try to keep close Monkey an' wouldn' leave Monkey company at all by he afraid for Tiger.

Until one day Annancy went to river an’ catch some fish, an’ send an’ call Brother Monkey to come an’ help him enjoy the fish.

An' when the breakfast ready, instead of Mr. Monkey come, it was that cravin’ man Mr. Tiger who Annancy really hate, an’ to every piece of the fish Annancy take up to put in his mouth, Tiger take away every bit an’ never cease till him finish the whole.

An’ when Mr. Annancy friend who he invite come, there was none of the fish to give him.

An’ as Monkey being love fish he began to cuss his godfather Tiger.

An' that time Puss was passing when the confusion occurred.

An’ they go on an’ go on till Puss laugh. An’ as Puss laugh Tiger get worser vex an’ begun to cuss Puss, an' Puss said to Monkey: — “Come, make we beat him off to deat’.”

An' Monkey wasn’ agree to beat his godfather, but Annancy an' Puss force him.

An' Tiger get cross begun to lick, an' the first man him lick was his godson. An' then as him lick him god- son Puss catch a fire 'tick, an' Annancy catch up a mortar tick, an' they never cease murder Tiger till they kill him.

An’ they ‘kin Tiger an’ just going to share.

An’ there comes a singing from the tree : — [SONG]

An’ all the look Monkey an' Annancy look, they never find the person that was singing.

So they salt Tiger.

Then Peafowl come down in the yard say: — "Good evening Mr. Annancy an' Mr. Monkey, I am very hungry. I was on a long journey bring a message to Tiger that him wife dead, but Tiger dead already.”

So the whole of them stop an’ eat of Tiger.

Peafowl never go back with no answer to report, for Puss an’ Monkey an’ Annancy give Peafowl gold not to talk that they kill Tiger.

So Peafowl never can be a poor man for he keep the t'ree friend secret.

Jack Mantora me no choose any.[66]

The story begins with Anansi and Monkey wanting to kill Tiger. There is no explanation as to why they want him dead. In other stories where Anansi is violent, there are reasons. Either he kills due to hunger, he will receive something as a result of killing someone, or kills someone for his survival. In Jekyll's collection of Anansi stories, "Tiger's Death" is the most outright violent story. Tiger replaced Nyame in Jamaica and was an enemy of Anansi. He represented a strong bully and served as a representation of the white man. Anansi, representing the Black Jamaican, is constantly defying him in his stories. The story continues with Anansi cooking fish for breakfast. Instead of Monkey arriving to share, it's Tiger. Tiger eats all the fish and leaves none for Monkey. Monkey curses out Tiger, which Puss hears as he passes by. Puss laughs at Tiger's beration which causes Tiger to get vexed. Puss and Anansi convince Monkey to help them beat Tiger to death. Once he's dead, they skin Tiger and divide the skin amongst themselves. Peafowl sings from a tree however, the three cannot identify him. They salt Tiger's skin and Peafowl comes down from the tree. Peafowl tells the others that he was meant to give a message to Tiger, but unfortunately he's dead. Due to his hunger, he joins the others in eating the rest of Tiger. Anansi, Monkey, and Puss give Peafowl gold as incentive for him keeping his mouth shut on Tiger's murder. The story ends with the Jamaican saying, *Jack Mantora me no choose any,* which is also written as *Jack Mandora me nuh choose none*. This means that no accountability should be attributed to the listener, storyteller or writer of the tale.[67] Jack can be interpreted as "Jack, man of the door" or "Jack, heaven's doorkeeper." Jekyll says that the "Jack" is a member of the company to whom the story is told; the saying clarifies that the story

[66] Jekyll, Walter. and Folklore Society (Great Britain). *Jamaican Song and Story,* 135-137.
[67] Cumber Dance, "'Me Nuh Choose None.'"

is not aimed at him.[68] Each story ends with this disclaimer. It mirrors the Asante disclaimer that comes prior to their stories: "We don't really mean to say so; we don't really mean to say so." I look at this as more of the West African Asante tradition staying strong in Jamaica.

Author Marian Stewart, in her analysis of Jamaican Anansi stories and West African oral literature, argues that Maroon communities provided a favorable environment for Anansi stories and West African cultural norms to be maintained.[69] I agree. Due to Maroons' separation from colonial life, they were able to maintain their African cultural identity more strongly than those who were enslaved on the plantation. The latter had their stories altered by the enslavers and colonials who heard them, they were forced to speak English and their Patois was disregarded, and they had to utilize Anansi's skills within the restrictions of a plantation. While they were forced to abandon the cultures they were snatched from, they still maintained them in a new Afro-Caribbean tradition through language, stories, riddles, and spiritual practices. Away from the inhumane labor conditions of the plantations, Maroons were able to hold their stories closer to them. Maroons used Anansi's linguistic capabilities towards enslaved people, encouraging them towards their way of life. They would ask about their families and persuade them not to fight for the "White Men." [70] Maroons watched the movements of white people below from where they lived high up in the forest.[71] With Anansi's linguistic prowess of lying, boasting, and persuading, they were able to keep tabs on them and know when it was a good time to exercise such skills.[72]

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[68] Jekyll and Folklore Society, *Jamaican Song and Story*, 10.
[69] Marshall, *Anansi's Journey*, 109.
[70] Marshall, *Anansi's Journey*, 112.
[71] Marshall, *Anansi's Journey*, 112.
[72] This Anansi tactic used by Maroons is evident in the tale called "House in the Air: Tracking Anansi." It was told to folklorist Martha Warren Beckwith by Simeon Falconer who lived in Santa Cruz Mountains in Jamaica's St.Elizabeth Parish. In the story, Anansi lives in a tree with his wife and children. He robs others and they cannot

Anansi stories served both the enslaved and Maroons in a new environment far away from their West African one. No longer were the Asante in a physical environment that they immediately understood. Anansi helped them understand it and explained the reasons behind what was new to them on the island. Anansi was a teacher, voice of reason, security, tradition, home, and heart. Even with his metamorphosis into the "New World", this was never forgotten.

Written Anansi

Written recordings of Anansi tales began to materialize in the 19th century. The earliest accounts of Anansi stories were recorded by enslaver Thistlewood and plantation owner Lewis in their diaries. Written recordings of Jamaican folklore increased throughout the 19th century and into the 20th by white women folklorists and anthropologists who lived in Jamaica.[73] The function of the tales shifted from tales teaching survival to tales of entertainment with elements changed to appeal to a white audience. In 1904, Englishman Walter Jekyll published the first major collection of Anansi stories. Martha Warren Beckwith published the second major collection, *Jamaican Anansi Stories*, in 1924. Continuing throughout the rest of the 20th century, white folklorists and anthropologists continued to publish Anansi stories, dampening Anansi's violence and changing the Jamaican Patois to Standard English. Some researchers included the

find where he lives to seek revenge. Bredder Tiger and Bredder Tacoomah spy on Anansi and see him sending up the robbed goods to his tree home by rope. Tiger decides to trick Anansi's wife. After a first failed attempt, the goldsmith gives Tiger a new voice to sing a greeting like Anansi. He sings the song to Anansi's wife and believing it to be her husband, she receives Tiger on the rope. Before he can get to the home, Anansi, from a distance, calls to his wife to cut the rope as it's not him on it. She cuts the rope and Tiger falls, breaking his neck. Anansi takes Tiger and cooks him for dinner. The story ends with the declaration that Anansi is the smartest one of all.

[73] Marshall, *Anansi's Journey*, 142. Examples are Martha Warren Beckwith, Pamela Milne-Home, Ada Wilson Trowbridge, Pamela Colman-Smith, & Una Jeffrey-Smith.

Patois as they heard stories and songs straight from Jamaican storytellers themselves; MacEdward Leach and David DeCamp's collections are examples of this.[74]

Anansi continued to be sanitized as he entered schools and was incorporated into educational material. The colonial government did not want Patois in schools and pushed Standard English to the forefront. Even with this push, Patois versions of the stories were still very popular among the public. Reverend Joseph Williams compiled a collection of Anansi stories written by Jamaican school children in the 1930's.[75] Majority of the stories were written phonetically in Patois showing that it was still being spoken and written in schools by the children themselves as well as its continued popularity amongst the public. From the late 1950's to 70's, Anansi stories were told on Jamaican radio. Unfortunately, tales were narrated in Standard English with little Patois included. While Anansi stories were being recorded in text, which was beneficial as having a written record of anything can often make it easier to trace, the recordings were appropriative and stripped of their roots. They did not include the full aspects of the Jamaican identities they were derived from and ignored its history pertaining to slavery. Leading up to and following Jamaica's 1962 independence, however, there was a shift in Anansi's perception. Jamaicans tapped into their cultural pride and heritage heavily. They began to call for a redefinition of folklore on the island with the want to flee from colonial presence and influence. Storyteller Louise Bennett was a major component in this redefinition.

[74] Marshall, *Anansi's Journey*, 145.
[75] Marshall, *Anansi's Journey*, 150.

Louise Bennett: Jamaica's Animated Storyteller

Louise Bennett, 1919 - 2006, was a Jamaican folklorist, historian and poet, known for her telling of Anancy stories to the public and as a well-loved authority on Jamaican culture. When telling the stories, Miss Lou, as she was called, was a performer. She controlled her timing, pitch and timbre perfectly.[76] In her writing, she would include the tunes of the folk songs and describe the missing aspects of her spoken performance. Bennett recorded cassette tapes with her performances, bringing the flavor of her voice to people's homes and schools. My 67-year-old Aunt Barbara remembers her influence: "Miss Lou. She was a folklorist, but she, she does it in a way of that, our parents who just tell us little stories, but she really researched it and, you know, actually get a book on it. And, you know, while we were in school, even while we were in school going to school, every kid in school know something on Louise Bennett. Every kid."

Growing up, everyone knew a story Bennett told. She spread the histories of Jamaica everywhere she went and throughout all of her work. Bennett had her stories mainly printed in Jamaican Patois; however, she also printed some in Standard English. Her Patois versions were more rhythmic and, in my opinion, capture the essence of Anansi's tricks much better. Bennett published many Anansi collections such as her 1979 collection "Anancy and Miss Lou." She wanted Jamaicans to take pride in their language and heritage, perceiving Anansi away from the colonial gaze. I was fortunate to find Youtube videos of her telling stories thanks to the National Library of Jamaica.[77] Her facial expressions, animated voice, and rhythm reminded me of the

[76] Morris, *Miss Lou*, 66.
[77] I watched "Miss Lou on Anancy and Smoked Pork" on the National Library of Jamaica's YouTube channel.

way my dad used to tell stories, getting my brother and I to giggle and beg him to do it over again. You can see and hear the love she has for Anansi stories.

FIGURE 3. Louise Bennett pictured during a reading. Image from Morris, *Miss Lou*, 73.

There is still condemnation of Anansi's stories despite the great reception of Bennett's tellings. Many disapproved of Anansi stories being told in school and to children in general. The Jamaican newspaper, The Gleaner, reported that at the 2001 conference of the Jamaica Teachers' Association, teachers called for a ban on Anansi as a folk hero. In 2012, a letter to the Observer read, "Anancy is no longer a mere spider that fills the corners of our houses, but has grown into a gigantic insect that has woven webs of deception, greed, corruption, murders, lies, and more over our country, Jamaica. Anancy's ginnalship [trickery] now pervades the society."[78] Some Jamaican citizens were using Anancyism[79] against other citizens by lying, cheating and committing other crimes. Condemners saw "Anancy" as a bad influence to the entire island.

[78] Morris, *Miss Lou*, 76.
[79] To practice Anancyism is to behave like the trickster in your everyday life.

Bennett however, said, “Anancy points up human weaknesses and shows how easily we can be injured and destroyed by our greed, or stupidity, or by confidence in the wrong people and things.”[80] She believed Anancy served as a reminder of our humanity and read as a warning against violence.

Anansi is a complex trickster that exists in between everything, pushing his reader and listener to question themselves. As a child, I admired Anansi’s persistence, wit, and his skill of conversation. I understood from a young age how to utilize these traits for good. Many folktale trickster characters can be used to define what one should not do; however, it is up to the receiver of the story to decide how they want the trickster to influence them. All I know is that at the end of the day, Anansi always gets the last laugh.

[80] Morris, *Miss Lou*, 77.

CHAPTER TWO
The Rabbit

I vividly remember reading *Zomo the Rabbit: A Trickster tale from West Africa*, when I was growing up. In this Nigerian folktale told by white American author, Gerald McDermott, Zomo wants to gain wisdom from the Sky God. In order to achieve this, he must complete three impossible tasks: getting the scales of the Big Fish, the milk of the Wild Cow, and the tooth of the Leopard. Zomo succeeds. While he's not strong, he is clever and fast and able to get the better of these bigger stronger animals. He gains three enemies, but he gains the wisdom he sought. This is one of the earliest rabbit stories I remember my father reading to me. It provided me with the lesson that with courage and good sense must come caution. Zomo had the former but, because he made three enemies, lacked the latter.

While the rabbit was the protagonist of this American retelling of a Nigerian tale, in West African folktales the hare is more commonly the protagonist. Rabbits are not common to West Africa, hares are. When, as a result of the transatlantic slave trade, hare stories reached America and other places, they were changed into rabbits.[81] In this chapter, I will introduce the hare trickster Leuk and explore his significance to the Wolof community. I will discuss how Leuk's language connects to signifying spoken in Black vernaculars. I will then connect Leuk to his popular African American counterpart, Br'er Rabbit.[82] With Br'er Rabbit, I will dissect his most popular Tar Baby story, how author Joel Chandler Harris spread the character through

[81] Due to this language, both rabbit and hare may be used interchangeably throughout this chapter.
[82] Depending on the source, Br'er or Brer is used in front of Rabbit. Both are a shortening of brother and mean the same thing. Br'er and Brer will be used equally interchangeably throughout the paper.

America, and how Harris' Uncle Remus stories became the popular Disney film, *Song of the South*.

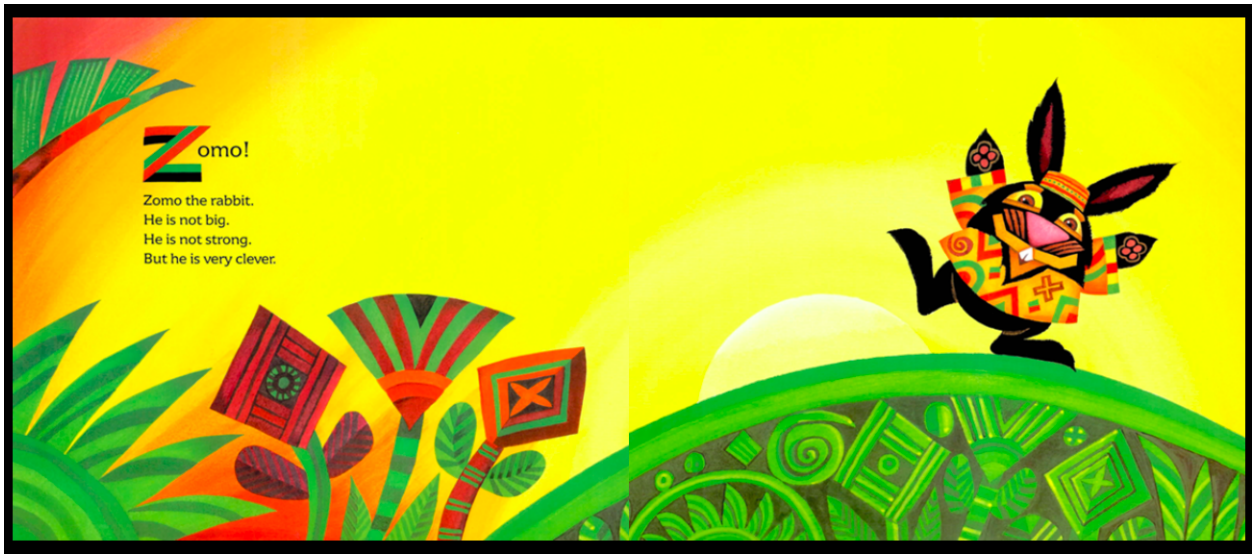

FIGURE 4. Excerpt from *Zomo the Rabbit: A Trickster tale from West Africa*
Image from McDermott, 1.

A Wolof Beginning

The Wolof are a people based in Senegal, Gambia and Mauritania.[83] In Wolof oral narratives, *Leuk* the hare is a popular trickster folktale character. Many European folklorists and writers have portrayed Leuk in a predominately negative light and do not situate him in the respective social environments of the West African communities from which he originates. Baron Jacques François Roger, a French colonial administrator in Senegal in 1828, published *Fables sénégalaises*[84], the first written collection of Wolof folktales versed in French. He described Leuk as cunning and deceitful and analyzed the character as a mechanism of emotional release: the Wolof, he claimed, used Leuk to overcome the distress of their own lives by

[83] The Wolof people are the largest ethnic group in Senegal while a minority in Gambia and Mauritania. Wolof is also the most widely spoken language of Senegal, belonging to the Senegambian branch of the Niger-Congo language family. It is also spoken in Mauritania and Gambia & is the native language of the Wolof people.
[84] Translates to *Senegalese Fables*

releasing repressed feelings. To Roger, Leuk was an extension of the Wolof, allowing them to embed their human emotions into the trickster. Other folklorists agreed with this analysis, while some offered a sociological interpretation in which the hare expressed resentment of the inequality between the Wolof social castes.

The Senegalese folklorist Bodiel Thiam, in 1948, turned to the latter interpretation. He classified characters as either weak, average or powerful. He identified the hare as weak, the hyena as average and the lion and elephant as powerful. This scale relies on physical strength and what these animals can do with their bodies; these animals sit on these tiers in the animal kingdom. Thiam's interpretation mirrors the hierarchies of Wolof caste society, with the "weakest" being the griots and the "strongest" being nobility. While Thiam is right in the connection between Leuk and the Wolof caste system, it is not because Leuk is rejecting the caste system. He is simply a component of it as a trickster character of his Wolof community. A discussion about Leuk's character and what he represents cannot be had without the Wolof's community structure coming into play. The oral literary and narrative context of Leuk in the Wolof caste system comes from recordings of the Wolof of the Saloum region of Gambia collected in 1973 and 1974.[85] Amongst this Wolof community, Leuk is seen as a *géwël*[86], a griot. Griots are West African storytellers and musicians who maintain oral traditions in their respective countries. Senegalese sociologist Abdoulaye Bara-Diop separates the Wolof caste system into two categories, the *géer* (nobles/freeman) and *ñeeño* (artisans).[87] The first three sub castes from ñeeño are *jëf-lekk* (those who make a living with their hands), *sab-lekk* (those who

[85] Magel. "Caste Identification of the Hare in Wolof Oral Narratives," 189, 200.
[86] Magel. "Caste Identification of the Hare in Wolof Oral Narratives," 200. "The Wolof term for oral performer or griot; encompasses historian, fictional narrator, musician, or entertainer."
[87] Tang. "The Griot Lineage—We Are One," 49.

make a living from singing), and *ñoole* (marginal groups, such as servants and courtiers). The jef-lekk subgroup is made up of *tëgg* (blacksmiths), *wuude* (leatherworkers) and *rabb* (weavers). [88] Griots or géwël belong to the sab-lekk subgroup as they are musicians and oral historians.

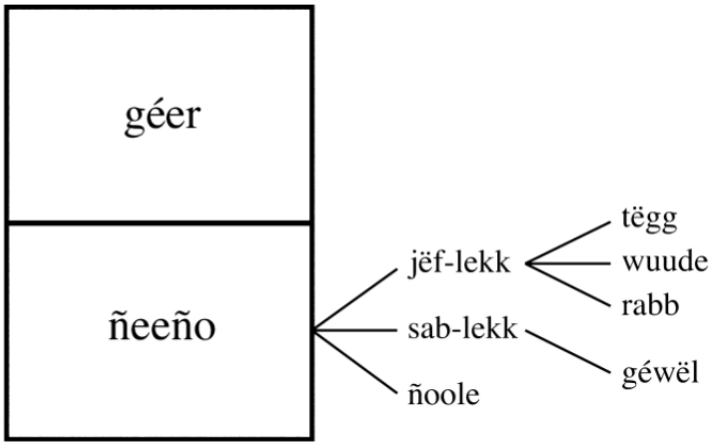

FIGURE 5. Bara-Diop's interpretation of the Wolof caste system.
Image from Tang, 50.

Senegalese storyteller and poet, Birago Diop observes the hare's géwël identification in relation to his verbal proficiency and confrontation. In *Contes et Lavanes*[89] Diop writes, "Everyone knows, and has always known that Leuk the Hare's tongue is his, that it's his only good, because [it's] his only weapon… in the end everyone had always let him say what that he wanted… ." In the Wolof community, only géwël's are reserved the freedom to speak with impunity. They hold the right to mock anyone and use insulting language to do so. Géwël are themselves tricksters, they are able to speak without any action being taken against them. Leuk has the ability to narrate personal and familial histories of near and far peoples just like a géwël does. He holds power through his use of language. This mirrors Anansi with his mastery of

[88] Tang, 51.
[89] Translates from French to *Tales and Lavanes*

language; the spider is seen as the holder of knowledge and stories.[90] Linguistic aptitude is a prominent characteristic of the trickster. Leuk's social distinction is seen further in his performance of géwël duties in opposition to *Bouki the hyena*, who operates as a *jambur* or freeman/non-artisan noble.[91] Jambur may be equated with géer; Diop uses jambur specifically in regards to the Wolof political system when discussing the dichotomy between them and jaam (slaves). Kebba Hadi Sisé, a géwël from the Gambian village Njau tells the story, "The Hyena Engages the Hare as a Gewel", illustrating Leuk's role as a direct reference to the Wolof caste system. Here is an excerpt:

> One day the hyena went out into the bush in order to establish his own town. Since he founded this village, he was also the one who administered it. He was the master of it all. He went and built his village together with his wives, his children and his nephews. At that time the hyena was very young and strong; he was in the prime of his life.
>
> Only five days later, after the hyena had accomplished that task, the hare arrived and introduced himself to the hyena right in the middle of the village. The hare greeted him. "Bisimillahi!" replied the hyena.[92] "I heard that you constructed your own village here," stated the hare. "I have my drum. Today I also heard that you are a good man who truly loves himself." The hyena replied "Very much so!" He asked the hare "Do you see this area?" "Yes," replied the hare. "That is where you can build your own compound today. Where is the rest of your family?" The hare replied "They are following right behind me with all our baggage." Just then the hare's family arrived and carried all of their possessions into the compound.
>
> Afterwards the hyena sat down and said "Hare, you are a *gewel*." "That is right," replied the hare. "That is good. Now, since this is my village, I will give you this commission: whenever I have the occasion where I want a *gewel*, you will do the drumming for me. In turn, I will provide the food for you and your family. I will kill all of the meat that your family needs and provide your wives with their millet." The hare responded "That is very good!"[93]

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[90] Marshall, *Anansi's Journey*, 28. One of the most well known Anansi tales is "How It Came About That the Sky-God's Stories Came to Be Known as 'Spider-Stories'". This tale is about how Anansi became the owner of all the stories in the world.

[91] Magel. "Caste Identification of the Hare in Wolof Oral Narratives," 200. "The caste of noble nonartisan, nonslave Wolof lineages."

[92] Translates to "In the name of Allah" and is said before eating a meal or as a greeting.

[93] Magel. "Caste Identification of the Hare in Wolof Oral Narratives," 192-193.

Note that Hare and Hyena, Leuk and Bouki, establish an agreement that follows the caste tradition of a client-patron relationship between jambur and gewel. Hyena as the jambur supplies housing and food to his gewel, Hare, in return for musical services. Both parties agree to live within the obligations of their relationship to ensure their mutual benefaction. Leuk being a géwël is not a negative role. He simply fits into a multifaceted position in Wolof society and is in service to his community. Leuk is an exemplary model of a géwël as he appears in multiple narratives performing his role well. While géwëls are at the lower end of the Wolof caste system, their role is deeply necessary. Leuk knows the techniques behind his craft and the rules "governing their implementation".[94] He accepts his role in Wolof society, rather supporting the hierarchical system than resenting it; thus the argument that Leuk represents inequality between the castes is not supported by evidence. Leuk does not represent the European literary concept of the Everyman, which French author Marcelle Colardelle-Diarrasouba suggested, but rather exclusively represents the Wolof géwël.[95]

While I focused on Leuk in the Saloum region of Gambia because an extensive body of research on the Wolof community there was accessible, the hare trickster exists across other West African countries. In Senegal, he continues by the name Leuk. In Mali, however, he is *Samba*. In Burkina Faso, he is *Môrô*.[96] Leuk also has a home in the Caribbean. In Haiti, he is called *Malice* [97] and in Jamaica, *Br'er Rabbit*. In America, he is also *Br'er Rabbit*, except that in Louisiana, he is also named *Compair Lapin*.

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[94] Magel. "Caste Identification of the Hare in Wolof Oral Narratives," 196.
[95] Magel. "Caste Identification of the Hare in Wolof Oral Narratives," 188.
[96] Colardelle-Diarrassouba, *Le lièvre et l'araignée dans les contes de l'Ouest africain*, 20.
[97] Seck. "Crossing the Atlantic," 77.

Signifying & Indirection

In Wolof folklore, Leuk utilizes signifying, the indirect tool of resistance used in African American English. Signifying is used by African Americans as a " 'technique of indirect argument or persuasion', 'a language of implication,' 'to imply, goad, beg, boast, by indirect verbal or gestural means.'"[98] Signifying is the language of trickery; it is a set of words or gestures which arrives at "'direction through indirection.'"[99] To put it plainly, for African Americans, it's simply talking shit, smart-talking, or telling lies. You're utilizing your words to make someone believe a myth while criticizing them simultaneously. The tricked individual will not always be smart to said signifying, taking the myth for truth which benefits the trickster in the end.

Leuk makes disguised criticisms of authority and nobility as a géwël. The act of signifying is used by him in Sisé's aforementioned tale "The Hyena Engages Hare as a Gewel." The rest of the story continues with Hare and Hyena's relationship deteriorating.[100] Hyena banishes Hare from the village compound and barricades him in his own compound. Hare grows weak over three days of being barricaded. One night, he sees thick smoke and understands that it's smoke from a field fire. He sneaks out of the barricade through a small hole and travels to the king's town. The king asks him to find whoever burned the fields and declares that he will reward the finder with 100 cows, goats, and sheep. Back in the village, Hare sings a song with his lie that whoever burned the fields would receive the hundreds of cows, goats, and sheep. Hyena hears the song and is elated. He tells Hare to tell the king that he was the burner. The king asks that Hyena return to him the next day singing an appropriate song. It is implied that the king

[98] Gates, *Signifying Monkey*, 59.
[99] Gates, *Signifying Monkey*, 81.
[100] Magel, *Folktales from the Gambia*, 53-57.

wanted a song of forgiveness; however, with Hare's lie, Hyena enters the kingdom with a song of pride for his action. The king orders for the Hyena to be executed as he was so bold to sing proudly about the field fire. Hare's plan concludes successfully. He got revenge on Hyena for banishing him and received enough livestock to sustain his family forever.[101]

In this story, Leuk uses indirection as a way to resist Bouki the Hyena's power. He criticizes Bouki's burning of the fields indirectly. He warps the truth, pretending to speak only to what Bouki wants to hear while also criticizing him underhandedly. With indirection, Leuk strengthens his misdirection. He misdirects Bouki into the hands of the king; Bouki is led under false pretenses. Bouki hears that if the king learns who is responsible, he will be paid handsomely. He has no inkling that the "he" will be Hare. Leuk utilizes the Wolof rhetoric device known as "wax", the parallel of the African American signifying. In his book, *Apprentissage Rapide Du Wolof: Jàng Wolof*[102] Abdoulaye Dial defines wax as parler (to speak).[103] Performing wax is to speak and be able to manipulate the significance of words. One speaks indirectly from the act of speaking directly. In many trickster tales, a type of signifying is used. Language can be manipulated many ways in order to trick an enemy into walking into a well laid trap. Leuk was aware that he was physically and situationally weaker than Bouki, so he used his words as a géwël to enact revenge in the best way that he knew how. West African animal tricksters are often weaker than their opponents and must use other, typically verbal means in order to prevail. For Leuk, in this instance and in many others, it was signifying.

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[101] Magel, *Folktales from the Gambia*, 53-57.
[102] Translates to *Quick Wolof Learning: Jàng Wolof*
[103] M'Baye, *Trickster Comes West,* 53.

The Wonderful Tar-Baby

“Didn't the fox never catch the rabbit, Uncle Remus?" asked the little boy the next evening.

“He come mighty nigh it, honey, shos! you born—— Brer Fox did. One day atter Brer Rabbit fool 'im wid dat calamus root, Brer Fox went ter wuk en go 'im some tar, en mix it wid some turkentime, en fix up a contrapshun wat he call a Tar-Baby, en he [took this here] Tar-Baby en [he put her] in de big road, en den he lay off in de bushes fer to see what da news wuz gwine ter be. En he didn't hatter wait long, nudder, [because by and by] here come Brer Rabbit pacin' down de road — lippity-clippity, clippity-lippity — [just as sassy] ez a jay-bird. Brer Fox, he lay low.

“ ‘Mawnin’!’ sez Brer Rabbit, sezzee — ‘nice wedder dis mawnin’,’ sezee.

“Tar-Baby ain't sayin’ nuthin'; en Brer Fox he lay low.

“ ‘How duz [symptoms seem to sagaciate]?’ 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 stummic, 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 presen’ 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 wipe wid de udder han' en dat stuck. Tar-Baby, she ain't sain’ nuthin’, en Brer Fox he lay low.

“ ‘Tun me loose, fo' I kick de natchul 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 for', lookin' dez ez innercent ez [one of your] 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 don 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 lossed 'im — some say he didn't. I hear Miss Sally callin'. You better run 'long." [104]

The Wonderful Tar-Baby story is one of the most told and well known Br'er Rabbit stories, specifically Joel Chandler Harris' rendition transcribed above which can be read in his 1880 book, *Uncle Remus, His Song and His Sayings*: *The Folk-Lore of the Old Plantation*. In Harris' rendition, Uncle Remus is reciting this story to a white boy, a son of a plantation owner. Br'er Rabbit is stealing calamus root from Br'er Fox so Br'er Fox sets the tar baby as a trap. Br'er Rabbit comes across the tar baby and gets upset when she doesn't respond to his greetings.

[104] Louis Gates Jr. and Tatar, *The Annotated African American Folktales*, 155.

He hits her upside her head, getting stuck. He proceeds to continue hitting her, eventually getting all four of his limbs and head stuck to the tar baby. Br'er Fox proceeds to laugh at Br'er Rabbit's misfortune and leaves Br'er Rabbit stuck to the tar baby. Folklorist Richard Dorson recorded a rendition of the story told by African American storyteller E.L Smith; In this version, the story concludes when Br'er Rabbit tricks Br'er Fox into throwing him into the briar patch as his punishment. Br'er Rabbit sways Br'er Fox with his words, utilizing signifying like his West African cousin Leuk, so that he can place himself in a familiar place and get away freely.[105]

The Tar Baby story is one of the most familiar Br'er Rabbit stories that many are familiar with. When speaking with a friend about Br'er Rabbit, their memories were jolted when I mentioned the Tar Baby. They remember a story of a baby made from tar, with beautiful black skin, coming to life. My friend recalls that the baby did not live in the end but, cannot remember what the cause of death was. The object of the Tar Baby has been dissected many times, by theorists & folklorists, in its relation to American slavery and American racism. Iterations of the Tar Baby story are found in countries such as Cuba, Jamaica, Mexico, and the Congo. Aspects of the story change, such as the food the rabbit or hare steals and what object he gets stuck to.

In Harris' rendition, he uses pronouns of she and her denoting that the tar baby is gendered as a girl. Author Toni Morrison said, "It is his being ignored and her being ill-mannered that annoy, then infuriate him."[106] Br'er Rabbit becomes so upset at a lack of response to his good manners that he physically strikes the tar baby multiple times. He expected a girl to respond correctly in accordance with the code of Southern manners. This Br'er Rabbit is

[105] Lindahl, *American Folktales*, 568-570.
[106] Louis Gates Jr. and Tatar, *The Annotated African American Folktales*, 157.

impulsive and violent. Br'er Rabbit is often seen as representative of the enslaved and Br'er Fox as the enslaver. In *The Tar Baby,* however, Bryan Wagner suggests a more complex identity:

> Rather than the slave discovering agency by identifying with his or her image as reflected in the character of the rabbit, we witness the rabbit trying and failing abjectly to identify with a stereotyped likeness of a slave… the story is nevertheless explicit that we are witnessing not dialogue but dramatic monologue, not identification between two creatures (slave and rabbit) but instead a single creature (at once rabbit and slave) staring in disbelief at its own mirror image…[107]

For Wagner, it is ironic that the tar baby is representative of a sculpted image of a slave while Br'er Rabbit represents the slave in his ability to deceive Br'er Fox in the same breath. Br'er Rabbit doesn't identify with the tar baby, he is astonished at her. Both figures represent aspects of being an enslaved person: first, not having a voice and being used as a vehicle to trick, and second, persevering with one's wits in order to escape danger.

Some commentators argue that racist derogatory usage of "tar baby" is not part of Harris' story, but the racial connotation predates Harris' rendition. The term tar baby appears in print as a racial slur in an 1839 blackface sketch in the Saturday Evening Post in which a character addresses his rival saying, "Look heaw … you tar-baby."[108] The term continues to be used recurrently across the 19th century.[109] Illustrations for Harris' story visually show race. Illustrator Frederick S. Church's line drawing in *Uncle Remus: His Song and Sayings* depicts the tar baby with extremely dark skin, an arching nasal bridge, and protrusion of the mouth and jaw.[110] These physical traits were associated with what were called "Negroid" features determined by white anthropologists at the time. Race was never excluded from Harris' Tar Baby rendition. Across the world, Blackness is noted in other Tar Baby stories. In Sierra Leone, the tar baby is

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[107] Wagner. *The Tar Baby*, 65.
[108] Wagner, *The Tar Baby*, 69.
[109] See note 108 above.
[110] Wagner, *The Tar Baby*, 63.

characterized as a “black police”, in Venezuela, Rabbit addresses the tar baby, “You black man!”, and in Mexico, Rabbit announces, “Good day to you, old blackie!”[111] Blackness is differently defined across these countries; Blackness does not mean the same thing in Sierra Leone that it does in America. Regardless of definition, types of Blackness are broadly intrinsic to many variations of the Tar Baby story, serving as an anchor.

FIGURE 6. Frederick S. Church’s 1881 illustration, “The Rabbit and the Tar Baby.” in Harris’ *Uncle Remus: His Song and Sayings.* Image from Wagner, *The Tar Baby*, 66.

Meet Br’er Rabbit

In the American South, Br’er Rabbit is an animal trickster well known to Black and white communities alike. In 1892, Octave Thanet, a novelist and writer, wrote, “All over the South the stories of Br’er Rabbit are told. Everywhere not only ideas and plots are repeated, but the very words often are the same; one gets a new vision of the power of oral tradition.” Br’er Rabbit’s trickster tales are similar to animal trickster tales told in West African oral traditions. He uses his

[111] Wagner, *The Tar Baby*, 63.

physical, verbal, and mental capabilities, and his target's shortcomings, in order to trick successfully. He was brought to America alongside enslaved Africans and served as a folk hero for them. Enslaved African people made Br'er Rabbit into a folk heroic creation as trickster tales served them greatly in their enslavement. They used him and other animal tricksters to offer individual solutions to a collective problem without endangering themselves or the wellbeing of other enslaved people.[112] The egotistical and individualistic approach of the trickster represented an ideal model of behavior to continue to survive under an inhumane system. The stories showed that there was survival of the fittest and that it was possible for enslaved Africans to gain the advantage to survive another day.

The animal trickster was recreated in America as the enslaved were no longer in their home countries. They recreated the stories to serve as a model of behavior under the system imposed upon them. Enslaved Africans had their religions and languages suppressed when they were brought to America, which influenced the way they utilized animal trickster behaviors and characteristics to protect and maintain their cultural values. Instead of justifying the trickster's behaviors in religious terms, they justified them in social terms, in accordance with how they were treated by slave owners.[113] The animal trickster, Br'er Rabbit in this case, evolved into a folk hero as a result. Enslaved Africans embodied the conception of Br'er Rabbit and animals who were typically seen as prey, due to them being seen as weak people. Br'er Rabbit always successfully tricked his dupes even if he was physically smaller than them. His stories were used as a metaphor for the way enslaved African people were treated by their white enslavers. Enslaved Africans were always in a state of indeterminate duration of physical and cultural

[112] Roberts, *From Trickster to Badman,* 33.
[113] Roberts, *From Trickster to Badman*, 34.

survival; they recognized this and expanded animal trickster tales to provide them with some protection within the system.[114] When Abigail Christensen, folklore collector, spoke to an African American informant for her collection of animal trickster tales, he told her, "he regards the rabbit stories with much respect, evidently considering them types of human experience, his own in particular. He praises the Rabbit when successful in spite of his treachery."[115] Christensen was repulsed by his praise of what she viewed as immoral antics; Br'er Rabbit was a symbolic folk hero to enslaved Africans as he was them. As a child reading Zomo the Rabbit, I related to his drive to do whatever was necessary to succeed especially due to his physical incapabilities. Rooting for the underdog was never (and still isn't) a difficult thing for me to do. I would read and be reminded of times I outwitted bullies with my words or successfully got away with saying something was my brother's fault when it was mine. When a story is kinship to your own situation, you find empathy and connection with the characters. Enslaved African people needed these stories just as much as the stories needed them to survive.

Many African American trickster tales have a Native American connection to them. Br'er Rabbit stories share similarities with rabbit stories from the Creek and Cherokee peoples. We have access to these stories due to ethnographic documentation of slave folklore from the Gullah people in the Carolinas and Georgia coastal areas where the Creek and Cherokee tribes lived.[116] Indigenous influence on Br'er Rabbit stories have been and are continuously overlooked. In Native American rabbit stories, there are specific cultural and tribal elements that distinguish them from African American rabbit stories. As my paper is focusing specifically on West African origins of animal trickster folkloric experience, I will not go in depth on the Native American

[114] Roberts, *From Trickster to Badman*, 38.
[115] Roberts, *From Trickster to Badman*, 41.
[116] *When Brer Rabbit Meets Coyote: African-Native American Literature*, 120.

backgrounds in relation. Folklorists and those interested in folklore cannot negate the Native American history and influence upon these stories, however.

Joel Chandler Harris & His Uncle Remus

Joel Chandler Harris, 1846 - 1908, was a collector of Br'er Rabbit tales who popularized them in print in the 19th century. Harris did not shy away from the African origins of the tales. He said, "One thing is certain, they did not get them from the whites: they are probably of remote African origins."[117] Some white folklorists agreed with Harris under the guise that Br'er Rabbit's stories reflected aspects of savagery that could only be traced back to Africa. Thanet's view was that the trickster characters expressed the immoral behavior of Africans. The African trickster's immorality was "a reflection of the African religion… Br'er Rabbit personifies the obscure ideals of his race."[118] African American people having moral ideals was not possible as it was contradicted by their embrace of tricksters. In contrast, Richard Dorson, folklorist, gave the animal trickster tales a heavy European origin. In his book *American Negro Folktales*, he wrote, "Many of the fictions, notably the animal tales, are of demonstrably European origin… Only a few plots and incidents can be distinguished as West African." Dorson utilized his own system of folktale analysis in tale-type and motif analysis to demonstrate the dominance of European influence on African American folktales.

While West African animal trickster tales changed once they reached America to fit the landscape, both physical and social, they still have an undeniable African origin. There are stories that have European influence however, that was when they came in contact with

[117] Roberts, *From Trickster to Badman*, 18.
[118] Roberts, *From Trickster to Badman*, 19.

European people, who spread them themselves. These stories do not have European origin if African people were not in communal contact with them. As we know, storytelling is a communal oral practice and can be specific to a place, tribe, language and more. Denying how strong the West African origin is to these animal trickster folktales and other stories is racist and xenophobic.[119] American writer Bernard Wolfe argued, in 1959, that Harris knew the attentive nature of the tales but shielded himself from it by emphasizing their African origins.[120] He wanted to place them amongst Africans and not African Americans as that would have pushed him to confront how the stories were those of resistance against the oppression African American people faced. Wolfe deeply disliked Harris' approach to Br'er Rabbit, believing he hid behind the fact that he was simply a compiler of tales. If the tales were from Africa, how could they be commentary on America's plantation structure? Wolfe sums up the icky feeling I have about Harris. Harris did not hold himself accountable for what Br'er Rabbit meant to African Americans, and was not held accountable by his peers who supported his work.

[119] Demby, "The Ugly, Fascinating History of the Word 'Racism.'" The Oxford English Dictionary's first recorded verbalization of the word "racism" was in 1902 by Richard Henry Pratt. Pratt is remembered for coining the term "Kill the Indian… save the man." He was an advocate for Native Americans assimilating into white life through education. I note this as I use racist to describe actions before 1902. I am using racist/racism in the contemporary canon to apply to these actions. Regardless of if they were determined racist then, they were still discriminatory at the time and are racist today.

[120] Marshall, "'Nothing but Pleasant Memories of the Discipline of Slavery',"66.

FIGURE 7. 1880 Cover illustration for Harris' *Uncle Remus, His Songs and His Sayings: The Folk-Lore of the Old Plantation*.

Image from Louis Gates Jr. and Tatar, *The Annotated African American Folktales*, 596.

Harris began his collection of African American tales as a result of his 1877 review of *Folklore of the Southern Negro,* an article by folklorist William Owens. Harris believed Owens lacked an understanding of the lived experience and wisdom in the tales and that he had no connection to the dialect in which the tales were told. He ironically decided that he could do better than Owens with his own collection of African American folktales. Owen's stories didn't relate to his own memories of hearing these stories himself from the enslaved people working on his family's land. Harris went on to write down 263 tales with nearly half featuring Br'er Rabbit. [121] He recorded African American stories, fitting them into a white American child's literary culture using his "Black" vernacular. Harris wanted his stories to be as authentic as possible with the capture of the inflections of the language. While Harris has been commended by

[121] Louis Gates Jr. and Tatar, *The Annotated African American Folktales*, 186-187.

folklorists for including this "authenticity", he still ascribed a minstrel caricature to tell the stories and gave them the narrative of being an important component of the white American child's upbringing and not the Black American child's. He never *truly* acknowledged the significance of these stories for enslaved Africans; In his 1880 book *Uncle Remus, His Song and His Sayings*, he writes that "it needs no scientific investigation to show why he, the negro, selects as his hero the weakest and most harmless of all animals… Indeed the parallel between the case of all animals who must, perforce, triumph through his shrewdness and the humble condition of the slave raconteur is not without its pathos and poetry."[122] Here, we see that Harris understood the tales were allegories of enslavement; however, he reduced the stories to just being the folklore of the old plantation. Harris said that the stories depicted the "roaring comedy of animal life"; it is even more troubling that he was aware of his wrongdoings in his depiction.[123] In a minstrel[124] fashion, Harris created the Uncle Remus character, the narrator of Br'er Rabbit's tales. Uncle Remus is a caricature of a Black man who speaks in the African American Vernacular that Harris perceived. I'm interpreting minstrel here to mean a white actor or narrator performing as a racist image of a Black person. Harris even referred to himself as Uncle Remus, signing letters under the name. He admitted to creating Uncle Remus by combining "three or four darkies whom [he] knew;" He said that he just, "walloped them together into one person and called him 'Uncle Remus'."[125] Harris' renditions of African American stories became canonical in American literature, becoming the basis for African African literature without coming from

[122] Louis Gates Jr. and Tatar, *The Annotated African American Folktales*, 184.
[123] See note 122 above.
[124] A minstrel show, or minstrelsy, was a form of racist American entertainment in the 19th and 20th century. There was typically blackface on white entertainers as they sang and danced. Minstrelsy is still seen in American entertainment today.
[125] Louis Gates Jr. and Tatar, *The Annotated African American Folktales*, 182.

African American people themselves. This canon eventually reached itself to visual entertainment in the form of Disney's 1946 movie, *Song of the South*.

Song of the South: A New Home for Br'er Rabbit

The 1946 Disney film, *Song of the South*, is important to this project as it highlights how Joel Chandler Harris, a white folklorist can interpret stories from African American people and have said interpretation reach the heights of white American media. Once African and African American animal trickster tales came into contact with white Americans, many were altered and interpreted outside of their original contexts.

Song of the South follows the African American actor James Baskett as Uncle Remus, telling Br'er Rabbit stories to young white boy, Johnny. John Sr, Johnny's father, wants Johnny's mother, Sally, to leave Johnny at his grandmother's Georgia plantation while they return to Atlanta for John Sr's newspaper job. Sally disagrees and decides to stay at the plantation with her son and mother. Johnny's father returns to Atlanta by himself. When Johnny runs away to be with his father, he comes across Uncle Remus telling a Br'er Rabbit story to the African American children on the plantation. Uncle Remus notices Johnny, out of the corner of his eye, hiding behind a tree listening. Uncle Remus approaches him and tells him the story of how Br'er Rabbit once ran away from his briar patch, convinced it was nothing but trouble.[126] Br'er Rabbit is caught by a rope trap set by Br'er Fox. He tricks Br'er Bear into trading places with him, telling him that it was a job, paying a dollar a minute. Br'er Rabbit escapes, with the realization

[126] Jackson, *Song of the South*.

that home is everything. Once you leave, you can run into trouble. This story convinces Johnny to stay and from then, he befriends Uncle Remus.

Throughout the movie, Uncle Remus tells Br'er Rabbit stories to Johnny and his two friends, Ginny, a poor white girl, and Toby, a black boy who lives on the plantation.[127] Br'er Rabbit stories are portrayed as highlights of a white American childhood. They teach Johnny and Ginny, young white children, life lessons. Toby pops up sometimes, playing with them, but it is clear that the stories are not meant for his entertainment in the film. In one scene, Ginny trips in a mud puddle and ruins her new dress which she was wearing for Johnny's birthday party. Uncle Remus tells her the story of when Br'er Rabbit was in just as much trouble as she was in the story *Br'er Rabbit Finds His Laughing Place*. In this story, Br'er Fox and Br'er Bear trap Br'er Rabbit and prepare to cook him for dinner. Br'er Rabbit starts laughing as a diversion, telling Br'er Fox that every time he thinks about his laughing place he cannot stop laughing. Br'er Bear asks where the laughing place is located and Br'er Rabbit offers to show him. He leads Br'er Fox and Bear right into a bees' nest in the woods, where Br'er Bear gets stung. Br'er Fox laughs at his foolishness for believing Br'er Rabbit, to which Br'er Bear retaliates by stuffing the bees' nest on Br'er Fox's head. The bees attack both Bear and Fox as Br'er Rabbit laughs, having outwitted them. This story teaches the children that everyone has a laughing place, and they run off to find theirs, no longer upset. The film consistently shows examples of how Harris' rendition of Br'er Rabbit stories have truly become for white children's and families consumption, and are no longer a component, in the sense of a cultural possession, of African American oral culture.

[127] Willis. "Overview." songofthesouth.net, accessed April 20, 2022. https://songofthesouth.net/movie/overview/index.html

In her essay, *Uncle Remus, No Friend of Mine*, Alice Walker remembers watching the film in her segregated town as a child. "Uncle Remus in the movie saw fit to ignore, basically, his own children and grandchildren in order to pass on our heritage — indeed our birthright —to patronizing white children who seemed to regard him as a kind of walking teddy bear."[128] The movie ignores the oratory tradition of Black elders sharing stories with Black children or the community storyteller who keeps the stories alive within its people. Instead, Uncle Remus' stories give life to Johnny and Ginny —at the end of the film, quite literally.[129] As Johnny uses the lessons he learns from Br'er Rabbit stories in his life, his mother doesn't like the outcomes and tells Uncle Remus to stop telling her son stories. Uncle Remus decides it is best to go to Atlanta and leave the plantation. Johnny chases after his carriage, running across a pasture when a bull attacks him. Injured in bed, seemingly between life and death, Johnny calls out for Uncle Remus to return.[130] Uncle Remus, sadly waiting outside the house, is called inside by Johnny's grandmother. At Johnny's bed, he recites the story, *Br'er Rabbit Finds His Laughing Place*. Johnny begins to feel better and survives. In the end, he runs and sings with Ginny, Toby, and Uncle Remus singing the overarching song of the film, *Zip- a- Dee- Doo- Dah*. The lingering presence of this song will be explored in its own section.

The favorite Tar Baby story is included in the film, as *Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby*. It loosely follows Harris' rendition, with changes to the end. Br'er Bear helps Br'er Fox make the Tar Baby and trap Br'er Rabbit. After Br'er Rabbit gets stuck to the Tar Baby from punching it,

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[128] Walker. "Uncle Remus," 636.

[129] Uncle Remus is comparable to Br'er Rabbit through the lens of the griot. Uncle Remus tells stories to help the children and guide them. Br'er Rabbit tells stories to save himself and successfully trick his opponents.

[130] While Johnny laid in bed, all the African American people who lived and worked on the plantation stood outside the home and sang a spiritual. Whenever Johnny was in need, Black people in the movie were there to support him.

Br'er Fox and Br'er Bear laugh at him. They sing, celebrating their tasty capture. Br'er Fox prepares to barbeque Br'er Rabbit but Br'er Bear rather knock his head clean off. Br'er Fox, protecting his meal, pulls Br'er Rabbit out the barbeque pit and his tar encasing. As Fox and Bear argue, Br'er Rabbit begs them not to throw him in the briar patch. Br'er Fox throws Br'er Rabbit in the patch, allowing Br'er Rabbit to make a valiant escape.[131] In the film, the Tar Baby doesn't depict the same racialized physical attributes as seen in Frederick S. Church's 1881 illustration. It is a blob of tar shaped into a body with buttons for his eyes, part of a pipe for his nose, a trench jacket, and Br'er Bear's hat on top of his head with a tuft of his fur for hair. Another contrast from Harris' rendition is the use of "he" pronouns used for the Tar Baby; it is not gendered as a girl but rather a boy. Perhaps Disney decided to use "he" pronouns to appeal to young male viewers or to not depict violence against a girl. In Harris' rendition, Br'er Fox traps Br'er Rabbit as a result of him stealing calamus root from him. In the film, Br'er Fox and Bear trap Br'er Rabbit simply because they want to eat him. There is no action that Br'er Rabbit does that prompts Br'er Fox to plan his trap; he is simply in need of a meal. Disney pushes the story further away from its source; it goes from a story of revenge due to food stolen to simply capturing food.

FIGURE 8. "Tar Baby" from *Song of the South*. Image from Willis. "Characters." songofthesouth.net, accessed April 21, 2022. https://songofthesouth.net/movie/characters.html

[131] Jackson, *Song of the South*. : This ending is the same ending that African American storyteller E.L. Smith gave Richard Dorson. This is mentioned on page 11.

Racism is seeped into the film through the accents given to the animated Br'er characters and the caricatures of Uncle Remus, Toby, and Aunt Tempy. The Br'er characters have stereotypical southern accents and mimic the African American vernacular that Harris wrote down. It was the first thing I noticed when watching the movie, their accents are strong to distinguish that they belong to Georgia. Br'er Rabbit is voiced by Johnny Lee, Br'er Fox by James Baskett, who plays Uncle Remus, Br'er Bear by Nick Stewart, and Br'er Frog by Roy Glenn. All four characters are voiced by black men which I was surprised to learn.[132] Minstrelsy is already a component of Harris' work, so I expected to see it mirrored more in the voicing for the main Br'er characters. However, the actors could have pushed to emphasize the speech patterns that Harris wrote and to speak in a way that a white audience would expect them too. The characters of Uncle Remus, Toby, and Aunt Tempy portray black people whom white audiences are comfortable with. Uncle Remus is a minstrel character as created by Harris. In the movie, this minstrelsy is continued as he portrays an "Uncle Tom."[133] Uncle Remus is always smiling and exists to serve Johnny. Whenever Johnny needs help emotionally, Uncle Remus is there to aid him, without complaint. Aunt Tempy is played by Hattie McDaniel, known for her Oscar winning role in *Gone with the Wind*. McDaniel plays a mammy role; she arrives with Johnny and his parents from Atlanta to work at the plantation.[134] Upon arrival, Aunt Tempy tells Johnny to listen to the frogs and recounts a story of Br'er Frog with Johnny's father, whom she

[132] My project advisor, Pete L'Official, noted that there is a long history of Black performers in minstrel shows, the most famous of which is Bert Williams. I never thought deeply about Black people's involvement in minstrel shows as I mainly focused on it as a white creation and entertainment practice. The history of Black American minstrel involvement is relevant to my emotion of surprise.
[133] Uncle Tom refers to a Black person who is **excessively** subservient and deferential to white people. It is used as a derogatory term against Black people, typically Black men. The name borrows from the character Uncle Tom from Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.
[134] Sperb. *Disney's Most Notorious Film,* 11.

witnessed grow up. It can be assumed that Aunt Tempy helped raise Johnny's father, the same way she is helping to raise Johnny. In the movie when McDaniel appears, it's consistently in a domestic nature, either cooking or caring for the family physically and emotionally. A mammy is visualized as a fat, dark-skinned woman with her hair covered; the racist caricature depicts these black women nursing white children and working for white families. Visually, McDaniel fits the role as her character has her hair covered. Toby is played by Glenn Leedy (in his first role). Toby, as defined by Walt Disney himself, is a pickaninny.[135] A pickaninny, in American Standard English usage, is a derogatory term referring to young Black children of enslaved people.[136] Toby existed simply as a companion to Johnny and Ginny. These three Black primary characters are examples of racist cinematic stereotypes that have been seen in American movies time and time again. Within the world of *Song of the South*, all three live an amicably and worry-free life. They never see them contending with the inequity amongst them; they are portrayed to be safe. Song of the South took Harris' stories and created a visual bliss where its Black characters didn't concern themselves with daily survival or apply the lessons of Br'er Rabbit's stories to themselves.

FIGURE 9. From left to right: James Baskett as Uncle Remus, Hattie McDaniel as Aunt Tempy, and Glenn Leedy as Toby.

Image from Willis. "Cast Biographies." songofthesouth.net, accessed April 20, 2022. https://songofthesouth.net/movie/biographies/baskett.html

[135] Sperb. *Disney's Most Notorious Film,* 11.
[136] In Caribbean/West Indian English patois, pickney is used to refer to all youth/children. Growing up, my family referred to my brother and I as pickney. Variations of the word are used in many other countries and linguistic communities without derogatory intent. However, when used in America by white Americans, it is a racist term.

The recognition of racism in *Song of the South* is not a new phenomenon. On November 28, 1946, the New York Times reported the National Association of Colored People (NAACP) denouncing the film "on the ground that it is helping to perpetuate the impression of 'an idyllic master-slave relationship' in the South."[137] The NAACP were disturbed by Uncle Remus' portrayal and his relationship with Johnny. The movie did not portray race relations in the South realistically. Upon its release, *Song of the South* was not the post-World War II smash that it was expected to be and only made $3.4 million in the United States.[138] Audiences were not interested in seeing racist stereotypes against Black people after just fighting a war alongside them. During the war, the NAACP worked with the Office of War Information and Hollywood studios to create more positive images of African Americans in fiction and nonfiction films. Disney ignored these national efforts and still proceeded to make *Song of the South*. The movie has always been defined as racist and unsatisfactory, so why is its nostalgic presence still felt today even as the movie is unavailable on all streaming platforms? Upon its third release in 1972, Song of the South was suddenly doing well. A central reason was that white audiences enjoyed seeing "civil" Black people on screen post the civil rights movement of the 1960's.[139] It provided the nostalgia that people wanted and did well again with its last two releases in 1980 and '86 during President Reagan's conservative terms. The film's reign ended on good terms with white Americans, serving as a nostalgic memory of the ways things used to be. Today, that nostalgia lives on in the DisneyLand attraction Splash Mountain and the song "Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah".

[137] Crowther, "'Song of the South,' Disney Film Combining Cartoons and Life, Opens of Palace—Abbott and Costello of Loew's Criterion."
[138] Sperb. *Disney's Most Notorious Film,* 7.
[139] Sperb. *Disney's Most Notorious Film,* 17.

Splash Mountain: Have a *Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah* Day!

While *Song of the South* is not available to watch online outside of YouTube due to it being locked in the Disney vault, you could still hear the Academy award winning best song, "Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah", on the California Disneyland ride, Splash Mountain, prior to August 2020.[140] As Disney entered a new period of home videos and internet circulation, they understood that they needed to rebrand *Song of the South* as they would no longer be able to restrict access to the film. The company worked hard to freshen their image post Walt Disney's 1966 death. They limited home video releases to just film excerpts and changed the narrative in its Splash Mountain ride. Splash Mountain opened to the public in July 1989. It was an homage to *Song of the South;* however, the ride was confined to Br'er Rabbit and his adventures. Uncle Remus and the Tar Baby were removed; The Tar Baby was replaced with a pot of honey in the ride.[141] Disney Imagineers[142] were aware that they constructed a ride with a racist narrative as they removed these aspects alongside any Southern context. The song was repackaged in home video "sing-a-long" collections and digital downloads. I heard the song for the first time when I was younger from the *Disney's Greatest Volume I* CD, released in 2001. I had never heard of *Song of the South* or Br'er Rabbit at the time. I simply enjoyed the song because it was upbeat, included onomatopoeia, and reminded me of the voices of Black singers that my mom would play in the house. I was shocked when I came across the song during my research. My entire

[140] Ramirez, "New Adventures with Princess Tiana Coming to Disneyland Park and Magic Kingdom Park." As of August 2020, Disney Parks removed the song from Disneyland Resort music loops and Downtown Disney following their June 2020 announcement that they are reimagining Splash Mountain after the movie, *The Princess and the Frog* (2009). This is ironic as *Song of the South* was the only Disney theatrical film to feature a lead Black character until the 2009 movie.
[141] Sperb. *Disney's Most Notorious Film,* 171.
[142] Contributors, "Walt Disney Imagineering." The Walt Disney Imagineering Research and Development Team is responsible for the creation, design, and construction of Disney theme parks and attractions worldwide. The team is commonly referred to as Imagineers.

view has changed on it; I still feel jovial while listening to it however, I am upset at the reason for its composing and how Disney utilized the song until recently in 2020. In the late 1980's and 90's, "Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah" appeared more than *Song of the South*. Song footage from the film was circulated in the 1986 *Disney's Song Along Songs* VHS tapes.[143] These sing-alongs became a way for Disney to capitalize on the movie without using any of the film itself. Disney was clearly successful in this as people know of the song and love Splash Mountain but know nothing of *Song of the South* or Uncle Remus, such as myself when I first heard it. At the climax of Splash Mountain, the rider goes down a big drop concluding in a huge splash. This drop is meant to parallel Br'er Rabbit's fall into the briar patch that saved him from Br'er Fox. There are some fake briar bushes above the tunnel however, if you have no prior Br'er Rabbit knowledge, you might not be aware of this. After the drop, "Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah" plays and the rider concludes their ride, soaking wet.

FIGURE 10. "Promotional still for Splash Mountain from 1989."

Image from Sperb. *Disney's Most Notorious Film*, 159.

[143] Sperb. *Disney's Most Notorious Film*, 183.

"Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah" has been successfully repackaged as a fun family song, removed from *Song of the South* and Uncle Remus. The song's success shows how far we have strayed from Harris' rendition and from the original African American oratory history of Br'er Rabbit stories. I think back to Walker's concluding sentence of her essay when she wrote, " In creating Uncle Remus, [Joel Chandler Harris] placed an effective barrier between me and the stories that meant so much to me, the stories that could have meant so much to all of our children, the stories that they would have heard from us and not from Walt Disney."[144]

African American oral tales should be documented and honored in the ways that African American people want them to. When white people engage with African and African American folklore, writing their own renditions, adapting them into movies, and eventually famous attractions, a barrier is created between the stories and the people that they belong to.

[144] Walker. "Uncle Remus, No Friend of Mine," 637.

Splash Mountain Version of "Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah"

Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, Zip-a-dee-ay!
My oh my, what a wonderful day!
Welcoming back Brer Rabbit today.
We always knew that he'd get away!

He's had enough of movin' on now.
It's where he's born and bred in.
The briar patch is where he's headin'.

Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, Zip-a-dee-ay!
Wonderful feeling, wonderful day!

Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, Zip-a-dee-ay!
My oh my, what a wonderful day!
Plenty of sunshine heading our way.
We never doubted he'd get away!

Moving on taught him a lesson.
You've learned it well, Brer Rabbit.
Gettin' caught's a nasty habit.

Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, Zip-a-dee-ay!
Wonderful feeling, feeling this way!

Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, Zip-a-dee-ay!
It's a time for celebratin' today!
Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, Zip-a-dee-ay!
Gathered together this wonderful day!

Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, Zip-a-dee-ay!
Brer Fox and Brer Bear are gonna get it today.
Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, Zip-a-dee-ay!
That hungry gator's gettin' his way!

Mr. Bluebird on my shoulder.

It's the truth, it's actual.

Everything is satisfactual.

Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, Zip-a-dee-ay!

Wonderful feelling, wonderful day!

Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, Zip-a-dee-ay!

My oh my what a wonderful day!

Brer Rabbit Solo:

Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah, Zip-A-Dee-Ay,

Home sweet home is the lesson today.

Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah, Zip-A-Dee-Ay,

I'm glad to be here and i'm sure gonna stay!

I'm through with moving on now,

It's where I'm born and bred in,

The briar patch is where i'm headin'!

Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah, Zip-A-Dee-Ay,

I'm back in my home now and I'm sure gonna stay![145]

[145] Willis. "Splash Mountain: Music and Lyrics." songofthesouth.net, accessed April 20, 2022. https://www.songofthesouth.net/splashmtn/lyrics.html#zipadeedoodah

Conclusion

Writing this project was affirming to my inner child as I unpacked stories that raised a young me. I honestly only scrape the surface of Anansi and Br'er Rabbit's lineages. Their histories and impact are much deeper than these two chapters. Reading has always been a safe space for me. Growing up, I was a bookworm. I used to read a book a day and trade books with my friends at school. Once I reached high school however, I stopped reading for fun. I was more engaged with social media and television. Everytime I thought about how I wanted to get back into reading, it saddened me that my passion for it had depleted. When thinking of what I wanted to write about for my senior project, stories were the first thing on my mind. Reading was my first passion and stories were an important component of that.

When I told my Written Arts advisor, Dinaw Mengestu, the beginning thoughts of my project topic, I knew I wanted to focus on West African tales but was not sure of which ones. Dinaw suggested I read *Freshwater* by Nigerian writer Akwaeke Emezi. *Freshwater* is an autobiographical fiction novel telling the story of Ada, a girl with multiple ogbanje[146] living inside of her. The book was simply fantastic. Emezi crafted a beautifully complex book detailing how a trickster was in partial control over Ada's life. I clung to this idea of the trickster and began thinking about the tricksters I grew up with and wanted to know more about. This led me to Anansi and Br'er Rabbit.

My parents contributed heavily to my introduction of animal tricksters. They were always providing books to our in-home library. (I had three full bookshelves in the room I shared with

[146] Emezi, "Transition."An *ogbanje* is an Igbo spirit that's born into a human body, a kind of malevolent trickster, whose goal is to torment the human mother by dying unexpectedly only to return in the next child and do it all over again.

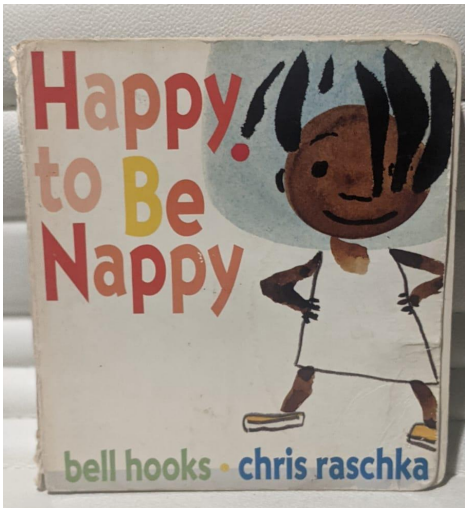
my brother.) When talking to my mom, she said, “I had to have a house full of books. That is a must and privilege. If there's nothing else I could do in this world, it would be to supply houses with books. There’s nothing like a book. There’s something tactile and beautiful about it.” My parents did not simply buy the books for us, they themselves were interested in what we read. It was a learning process for both of them as their cultural stories were told to them orally. My father said when he reached America, he forgot many of the oral stories due to assimilation; “We bought [the books] because it was a missing link for [your mother and I] because we heard the stories orally. When I came to this country, I forgot many stories and assimilated quickly.” The stories affirmed their inner child in the same ways this project did mine.

Animal trickster stories will continue to be passed down in my family line. Tricksters will continue to be literary figures that hold culture, heritage, and pride. I want readers to think about folktales in their own lives that affect them and the ways in which they tell a story of their people. We must remember that one story can have multiple layers within itself.

What was your favorite book or story that you read to us?

Mom

Happy to be Nappy by bell hooks was my favorite book that I bought for you. I love the book and I love bell hooks as a writer, thinker, and feminist. I don't think it was conscious but I never looked at nappy as negative. To me, nappy means your hair is thick, coarse, and beautiful. I was not consciously thinking of reclaiming the word but I wanted you to understand that you were loved and fine just the way you are. I wanted you to like yourself the way that you were born. To me, I felt it was important for you to understand who you were, your culture, and how many sacrifices your culture made.



Dad

I liked the Anansi stories the best. My favorite is when Anansi was sitting at the table and he asked each of his children for something off their plates. He collected all the food and ended up with the biggest dish. He ended up having the biggest meal over all of his kids. He was always trying to get one over even on his own family. That story has always made me laugh.

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