Riggins R. Earl, Jr.*

Dark Symbols and Obscure Figures

A few short years ago I left North Carolina a slave. (Hallelujah, oh yes.) I now return a man. (Amen) I have the honor to be a regular minister of the Gospel in the Methodist Episcopal Church of the United States (glory to God, Amen) and also a regularly commissioned chaplain in the American Army. (Amen) I am proud to inform you that just three weeks ago today, as black a man as you ever saw, preached in the city of Washington to the Congress of the United States; and that a short time ago another colored man was admitted to the bar of the Supreme Court of the United States as a lawyer. (Long, loud and continued applause, beating on benches, etc.) One week ago you were all slaves; now you are all free. (Uproarious screamings) Thank God the armies of the Lord and of Gideon has triumphed and the rebels have been driven back in confusion and scattered like chaff before the wind. (Amen! Hallelujah!) I listened to your prayers, but I did not hear a single prayer offered for the President of the United States or for the success of the American Army. (Amen! O, yes, I prayed all last night, etc.) But I knew what you meant. You were not quite sure that you were free, therefore a little afraid to say boldly what you felt. I know how it is. *I remember how we used*

*Riggins, R. Earl is Professor of Ethics and Society at the I.T.C. This Copher Lecture was delivered in March 1984. It is also an excerpt from his forthcoming book, *Self, God, and Community in the Slave Mind: Foundations for African American Theology and Ethics*, to be published by Orbis Books in 1993.

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> *to have to employ our dark symbols and obscure figures to cover up our real meaning*. The profoundest philosopher could not understand us. (Amen! Hallelujah! That's so.)[1]

Nothing is more powerful than when adults tell children's stories for more than entertainment purposes. When this happens the stories, the tellers of them, and their hearers become dark symbols and obscure figures for their oppressor. This is what slaves did during slavery with their fictitious hero that they affectionately called Brer Rabbit. While they entertained themselves with Brer Rabbit, slaves also educated each other to the realities of human nature with the Brer Rabbit stories. This probably explains why no fictitious character in the folklore of slaves compared, for them, with Brer Rabbit. He was the paradox of both weakness and strength. Many scholars of African American culture, from Melville Herskovits to Sterling Stuckey, have posited that for the slaves the Brer Rabbit myth had its antecedents in the Anansi myth of West Africa. Anansi was the spider trickster about whom slaves wove tales.[2] The Brer Rabbit stories also show the creative way in which the slave community responded to the oppressor's failure to address them as persons created in the image of God. Such stories reflect the genius of the oppressed community to create its own symbols in defiance of the perverted logic of the oppressor. "Brer" Rabbit paradoxically symbolized the combination of a fragile body and a deceptively strong mind. It was the fragility of Brer Rabbit's small body that gave him such a deceptive appearance in the eyes of the slave community. Slaves knew that his adversaries rightly wondered how such a tough mind could be embodied in such small and fragile body.

Facts and Fiction: Brer Rabbit and the Male Slave

It was because Brer Rabbit paradoxically symbolized both the weakness of body and the strength of mind that slaves vicariously identified with him. Male slaves learned quickly the wisdom of masking their mental prowess behind the believed innocent mask of Brer Rabbit. They took delight, before their masters, in minimizing their physical strength. Documented folk sources all seem to indicate that the slave community's storytelling about Brer Rabbit's capers was a typical pastime of elderly slave men. This paradoxical symbol of having a weak body and strong mind symbolized the way elderly slave men portrayed themselves to the imposing authority figures of the plantation. In the same vein, slave masters saw elderly slave men as the personification of docility. They believed that the aging process, having rendered them no longer a physical threat, had cured elderly slaves of all desires of rebellion. Masters commonly, for this reason, related to many elderly slave men as one would a trusted house pet. These male slaves (e.g. Uncle Remus) were considered safe around White women and their children. They were affectionately loved for their buffoonery and their often uncanny art of storytelling. Behind the mask of Brer Rabbit, old slaves of the plantation often demonstrated their intellectual prowess in a way that was not fully comprehended by those Whites who heard and laughed at them.

The above being the case, it stands to reason that the animal tales of elderly slave men had profound meanings for the slave community. The storytellers and the stories themselves created a needed buffer between powerful White males of the plantations and enchained Black males. Brer Rabbit symbolized the mediator, in a system that disallowed male slaves the right of free speech. It was Rabbit's genius for applying humor to

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potential daily encounters with superiors that prevented inevitable bloodshed. Violently inclined male slaves readily came to see the wisdom of Brer Rabbit. Slaves, male and female, knew that powerful White men were less threatened by a deceptively strong mind in a weak body.

High John and Brer Rabbit: the Making of a Myth

The explanation for the need for this weak body and strong mind paradox, personified in Brer Rabbit, slaves mythically traced back to having been brought by ships from Africa. Evidence of this fact is seen in an account of a folktale, recorded by Zora Neale Hurston, about High John De Conqueror. Tellers of the story believed that slaves had given the rest of America the gifts of "song and laughter." Slaves attributed High John De Conqueror with being the "source and soul" of laughter and song. They called him "our hopebringer, High John De Conquer." Slaves believed that High John De Conqueror, as was cited above, was really a supernatural cosmic force that became flesh. He came from a supernatural state in the beginning to a natural one. Slaves said of him: "First off, he was a whisper, a will to hope, a wish to find something worthy of laughter and song."[3] In their description of his transition from the world of the supernatural to that of a person of the natural state, slaves implied that High John became embodied in the flesh: "Then the whisper put on flesh." As a consequence, "the Black folks had an irresistible impulse to laugh." This happened because "High John de Conquer was a man in full, and had come to live on the plantations, and all of the slave folks knew him in the flesh." High John's gift of laughter empowered slaves to endure their burdens in the heat of the day "when the work was hardest, and the lot most cruel."[4] Incarnate among them, masters still were oblivious to the fact that High John was among slaves giving

out laughter daily to them.

Slaves were of the opinion that High John came from Africa as a supernatural spiritual force: "walking on the waves of sound." The transition from being a supernatural force to being a natural person did not take place until slaves arrived in America. All during the Middle Passage "High John de Conquer was walking the very winds that filled the sails of the ship," while "black bodies huddled down there" in the hole of the ship. It was said that High John "followed over them like the albatross."

Slaves' rationale for why White people were unable to discern the presence of High John among their slaves must be considered insightful for our discussion. The first explanation given was that: "Slaves were secretive around White people about who High John was. They refused to tell them who he was." The second was that "If the White people, heard some scraps, they could not understand because they had nothing like that to hear things with." Third, White people "were not looking for any hope in those days, and it was not much of a strain for them to find something to laugh over. Old John would have been out of place for them."[5] The subsequent statement clearly illustrates slaves' rationale for construing the paradox of the weak body and the strong mind as a way of protecting themselves from the master's wrath:

> Old Massa met our hope-bringer all right, but when Old Massa met him, he was not going by his right name. He was traveling, and touristing around on the plantations as the laugh-provoking Brer Rabbit. So Old Massa and Old Miss and their young ones laugh with and at Brer Rabbit and wished him well. And all the time, there was High John de Conquer playing his tricks of making a way out of no-way. Hitting a

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> straight lick with a crooked stick. Winning the jack pot with no other stake but a laugh. Fighting a mighty battle without outside-showing force, and winning his war from within. Really winning in a permanent way, for he was winning with the soul of the black man whole and free. So he could use it afterwards. For what shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his soul? You would have nothing but a cruel, vengeful, grasping monster come to power.[6]

The ingenious act, subsequently, of telling animal stories involving the protagonist Brer Rabbit became a ritual, employed by elderly slave men, for the self-preservation of young male slaves. Had male slaves confronted their masters as the actual living embodiment of the spirit of High John de Conqueror the consequences would have been a violent confrontation. All of the different traditional folk accounts about what High John looked like physically clearly illustrates why slaves believed there was a need to create for themselves the paradoxical symbol of physical weakness and deceptive mental strength. There was no established picture of what sort of looking-man High John De Conqueror was. According to the storyteller, there were varied opinions: "To some, he was a big physical-looking man like John Henry. To others, he was a little hammered-down, low-built man like the Devil's doll baby."[7] Such portraits of the physical appearance of High John De Conqueror undoubtedly explains why slaves accented and celebrated Brer Rabbit's mental strength. In the words of the former slave, Simon Brown, Brer Rabbit was adored for his intelligence rather than ferocious strength: "Brer Rabbit can't fight like a wild cat or climb a tree. But he's got big eyes that can see to the front and the sides and behind without turning his head. He's got long legs and a heap of sense! To the slave, he's like a brother!"[8] The community's belief that its

members were of the same intellectual fraternity with Brer Rabbit gave them a potent weapon of self-defense. It gave them a creative way of surviving in the midst inhumane conditions. An analysis of several or more different versions of the Brer Rabbit stories from both the White and slave communities will illuminate our thesis.

A White Man's Version

White men and women of the plantation South had a deep psychological need for both the mythic figures known as Uncle Remus and Brer Rabbit. This is clearly seen in Chandler Harris' voluminous collection of Brer Rabbit stories as told by Uncle Remus. Joel Chandler Harris (1848-1908) was a son of Georgia. A journalist, novelist, and short-story writer, Harris was primarily known for his creation of the fictitious character known as Uncle Remus. Harris claims that he heard these stories told by an old slave while coming up in the master's house on the plantation. It was for several decades that Harris ran his version of Uncle Remus and the Brer Rabbit stories in the Atlanta *Constitution* where he worked as a writer. Harris obviously redacts these stories for the White readership of his newspaper.

Harris' Uncle Remus portrays the mythic hero Brer Rabbit as having "creature sense." Remus' remarks about Brer Rabbit's intelligence are made in response to the little White boy's observation that his father says "that the animals have got sure enough sense."[9] Remus tells the little White boy that while the animals do not have "law sense" and "business sense," they have "creature sense." Uncle Remus continues in his observation to make a distinction between animal size and sense:

> The littler the creatures are, the more sense they got, because they have to have it. You hear folks say that

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> Brer Rabbit is full of tricks. It is just the name they give it. What folks call tricks is creature sense. If old Brer Lion had as much sense as Brer Rabbit, what the name of goodness would the rest of the creatures do? There would not be none of them left by this time.[10]

It is not accidental that Uncle Remus, in the conversation with the little White boy, explicitly compares himself physically, and implicitly mentally, with Brer Rabbit. Uncle Remus, correcting the little boy's opinion that Brer Lion does not have much sense, notes that "he had some but he ain't got as much as Brer Rabbit."[11] It is at this point that Harris has his old slave storyteller make a subtle statement that the little White boy will obviously not understand until he is a man:

> Them what got strength ain't got much sense. You take niggers—they are lots stronger than what white folks is. I am not so strong myself,' remarked the old man, with a sly touch of vanity that was lost on the little boy, 'but the common run of the niggers is lots stronger than white folks. Yet I have done took notice of the times that what white folks call sense do not turn out to be sense every day and Sunday too. I ain't never seen the patter-roller what can keep up with me. He may go hoss-back , he may go foot-back, it do not make no difference to me. They never have caught me yet, and when they do I will let you know.[12]

Harris, who is the White creator of this legendary slave folk hero, has Uncle Remus compare himself with Brer Rabbit: "That is the way it is with Brer Rabbit. The few times that he has been outdone he mighty willing for to let them talk about it, if it will do them any good. Those that have outdone him

have the right to brag and he makes no deniance of it."[13]

The inevitable question that readers of Harris' stories are faced with is: Why has Harris a need for a mythic character such as Uncle Remus? Before answering this question the point ought be made that African American scholars have found Harris' stereotypical image of the old darky storyteller very offensive and degrading to African Americans as a whole. Harris creates for the reader the image of an impotent old male slave, plantation handyman, who yarns what appears to be childish stories during his leisure time for the plantation owner's male children. It is my contention here that African American scholars have been too quick to dismiss Harris' stereotypical image of Uncle Remus before trying to understand critically his suppositions. Beyond the race stereotype, the critical student detects a radically subtle process of pedagogy at work in the mind of the old slave storyteller.

We noted above that Harris has Uncle Remus portray himself as being physically weak, but in the mold of Brer Rabbit, mentally strong. Remus truly personifies what I have termed above a creative counter response to the oppressor's false mind and body dichotomy. Note that Harris has Uncle Remus define himself so as not to appear a violent threat to his White readers. Harris, also, has Remus make note of the fact that those young male slaves who are physically strong are non-threatening to White people because they are mentally weaker. Harris' view, as voiced by Uncle Remus, rightly reinforces the stereotype that his White readers believed already. Such description of Uncle Remus presents him as a benignly qualified storyteller on the plantation. What Harris knows, and subtly demonstrates, is that Uncle Remus' age and fragile physical appearance won him the privileged position of being the storyteller of the plantation owner's male children.

It is my contention that Harris, by virtue of the fact that

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he places the old slave in the role of storyteller, creates a role for Uncle Remus to be the shaper of the consciousness of the next generation's plantation owner. Theoretically the storyteller, according to Socrates, indulges in two kinds of discourse, "the true and the untrue." Socrates reminds his students that the one in a society who tells stories to the children is the one who leaves the greatest impression upon them. They are in the position to shape the soul and character of children. It was for this reason that Socrates asks:

> Shall we then carelessly allow children to hear any kind of stories composed by anybody, and to take in their souls beliefs which are for the most part contrary to those we think they should hold in maturity?[14]

What Harris makes clear in the *Nights with Uncle Remus* on the plantation is that Uncle Remus was an uncensored storyteller primarily because he was deemed harmless. The other point is that Uncle Remus constructs for these little White boys a hero figure in Brer Rabbit, who is antithetical to the heroic values of the plantation masters. Socrates' definition of "the bad story" was the one that "gives a bad image of the god and heroes, like a painter drawing a bad picture, unlike the model he is wanting to portray."[15] The lesson that Uncle Remus teaches has been learned all too well by Harris who himself was a son of "Brer Lion."

Sense as a Neutral Value

Harris makes Uncle Remus less of a threat to the White community by having him define "creature sense" for the little White boy as being of neutral value: "sense do not stand for goodness."[16] The creatures of Uncle Remus' world live by the

first law of nature—the survival of the fittest. Remus says that "they do not know nothing at all about that that is good and that that is not good. They do not know right from wrong."[17] There are no moral boundaries in the world of the creatures. This is Remus' way of counteracting the criticism that the little boy's mother has made about his animal stories. She has critically observed that his stories are in conflict with the moral lessons of the Bible that the little boy learned in his Sunday School class at church. Keenly aware of this fact, Uncle Remus proceeds to tell the boy why he is telling him these stories in the first place. He says that: "I am telling them on account of the way the creatures do."

It is at this point that Remus implicates the moral lesson that the stories have for critiquing the oppressor's behavior toward the oppressed. Uncle Remus asked the little boy: "How the name of goodness can folks go on and steal and tell fibs like the creatures do, and not get hurt?"[18] Uncle Remus makes the point that he does not like stories about folks because "folks can not play tricks, never get even with the neighbors, without hurting somebodies feelings, or breaking some law, or going against what the preachers says."[19] It is for this reason that Uncle Remus says that he "does not enjoy telling his stories to grown White folks."[20] It seems that the point being made here is that in the mythic realm of "creatures" there is no sacred space or time. Uncle Remus protects himself, against the little boy misrepresenting his words to his parents by explaining that his stories originate from the realm of dream consciousness.

Metaphysical Origin

One of the fascinating things about Harris' Uncle Remus is the source of his stories. Harris makes it clear that Remus' stories about animals and their behavior originate from the

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subconscious mind. These imaginary animals surface on rainy and wintry days in the mind of the old slave when it is impossible to do hard jobs on the plantation. Harris notes that it was on such days that Remus would find himself dozing into the twilight zone of sleep. It was at this moment when Brer Rabbit and the other creatures entered his conscious mind. Harris has Uncle Remus say that: "It is at this moment that Brer Rabbit sticks his head in the crack of the door and see my eye partly shot, and then he'll beckon back at the other creatures, and then they will all come slipping in on tip toes, and they will set there and run over the old times with one another, and crack jokes same at they use to."[21]

The idea being conveyed is that there was a mythic moment when animals and humans conversed with each other freely. Uncle Remus says that these animals "created a regular Jubilee; a regular time of freedom." What is unique about what Uncle Remus experiences is the creatures' activity in the dream. Remus says that they "take up his cooking utensils, the trivet, and the griddle, and the frying pan, and play tunes" of some mythic past. When the little boy wants to know "if they play like a band," Uncle Remus responds:

> They come just like I told you honey. When I shut my eyes and doze, and they come and play, but when I open my eyes they are not there. Now and then that is the shape of matters, what does I do? I just shut my eyes and hold them shut, and let them come in and play them old time tunes until long after bedtime done come and gone.[22]

It is not surprising that Harris called the recording of these stories "Nights with Uncle Remus." Uncle Remus' imagi-

nary animal creatures come out of his subconscious mind. They come from that part of the mind that is easiest evoked by a child's innocent questions.

Pedagogy and Storytelling

Harris recorded the stories so as to show that they come to Uncle Remus' memory best when the little boy raised innocent questions with him about the daily events of life. The reader gets the impression that what are simple childlike questions in the mouth of the little boy require complex answers from Uncle Remus. These answers are often so complex that Uncle Remus can only communicate them by appealing to the mythmaking realm of the mind. The little boy asked Uncle Remus, after the latter had initiated him into the imaginary animal world: "Did not Brer Fox never catch the Rabbit?"[23] It was this question that provoked Uncle Remus to tell "The Wonderful Tar-Baby" story where Brer Fox is credited with having caught Brer Rabbit. The little boy is concerned at the end of the story to know: "Did Brer Fox eat Brer Rabbit?" Uncle Remus gives a coy response to this question by telling the little boy "That is all the far the tale goes, he might have and then he might not have."[24]

Contrary to what may be seen in the stories when slaves told them for their own entertainment, Harris portrays the storyteller, Uncle Remus, as being the embodiment of subtlety. This is understandable since Harris' main objective undoubtedly was to share these stories with White literate audiences of the North and South. Consequently Harris' Uncle Remus has a pedagogical task to help Whites understand his mythic world of animal behavior; the world of his dark mind. For Harris Uncle Remus is a craftsman at telling stories that were loaded with biting subtlety. It was the challenge of the little White boy to understand the secrets of Uncle Remus' complex mind. This was

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no less the burdensome challenge of every plantation master. If they failed to understand this phenomenon, the little boy and the master would be unable to make any sense out of Uncle Remus' tales about Brer Rabbit. But what was more important was that their failure to make sense of Uncle Remus' childlike tales meant that masters were not as powerful over slaves as they may have deceived themselves to believe. According to Harris' portrait, the little boy was in a better position than his father, primarily because of his innocence, to share the mysteries of the old man's mind. Harris has the little boy, regarding the Brer Fox and Brer Rabbit story, ask Uncle Remus:

> "Did Brer Rabbit have to go clean away when he got loose from the Tar-Baby?" The boy's question merely evoked in Uncle Remus the enthusiasm needed for telling the story. The old slave therefore countered: "What he going away for?" Then Uncle Remus tells the boy a sobering word: "You do not know anything about Brer Rabbit at all."[25]

In the next breath of the narration, Uncle Remus mentioned "Miss Meadows" at whose name the boy inquired: "Who is Miss Meadows?" It is in response to this question that Harris' Uncle Remus reflects the embodiment of subtlety: "Do not ask me, honey. She was in the tale. I give it like it was given to me." The point here is that it is not the duty of the storyteller to explain the tale when it is being told to White folks; that is left to the hearer. The hearer who pushes his inquiry too far will be told by Uncle Remus: "That what is in the tale I can tell you; that what is not, you have to figure out for yourself."[26]

On another occasion, when vexed by the boy's effort to catch him in a contradiction, Uncle Remus' angered response portrayed him as the living embodiment of hermeneutical subtlety:

> Is I the tale are is the tale me? Tell me that! If I am not the tale and the tale ain't me, then how come you want to take and rake me over the coals for?[27]

The point that Harris would have Uncle Remus make to the little White boy was that the story has a life and character of its own when being told by the storyteller. Uncle Remus reminded the little boy that the White hearer of the story had no right to tell the slave, the one who embodies it, how to tell it. This was why when the little boy commented, "That was the end of Brer Wolf", Uncle Remus said, "That is what the tale say. Old Remus one nigger and the tale, it is another nigger."[28] Remus' point here is that if he and the story that he was telling were not synonymous it really made no difference whether Brer Wolf was dead or alive.[29]

Another significant point Harris makes in his construction of Uncle Remus and the Brer Rabbit stories was that the storyteller was not to be rushed. Remus controls the tempo with which he told the story by comparing himself to "a broke-down plow-mule." Refusing to be dictated to by another, Remus took "the broke-down plow-mule" metaphor full circle when he told the little boy: "I'll go along if you let me take my time, but if you push me, I'll stop right in the middle of the row."[30] Storytelling was that communicative art that the oppressed possessed over which the oppressor had no control. Uncle Remus makes it clear that the story he tells is not the property of the oppressor. Remus said: "The tale come down from my great-grandaddy's great-grandaddy: it come on down to my daddy, and just as he give it to me, just that away I done give it to you."[31] Just as subjective time was necessary for storytelling, Harris' Uncle Remus tells the little boy that the recognition of objective time was just as important for the White hearer to believe it.

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When the boy asked "Can't you tell the story unless you can find out about the time?" The old slave countered: "Tooby sure I can, honey, but you would believe it much quicker if you knew what time it happened."[32] Even with this Uncle Remus recognized in the face of his rival African American storyteller, Daddy Jack, that "Folks tell tales differently."[33]

It is the contention here that slaves had a different pedagogical and entertainment objective in mind when they told the Brer Rabbit stories among themselves for themselves.

Black Perspectives of Brer Rabbit

Contrary to the above analysis, Brer Rabbit, rather than the storyteller, becomes the living embodiment of subtlety. First, this section of the analysis will draw upon Faulkner's remembered version of the Brer Rabbit stories as told to him by a former slave named Simon Brown. Second, we will examine Blacks' portrait of Brer Rabbit in Edward C. L. Adam's *Nigger to Nigger* animals stories. Let us proceed as we have proposed in the outline.

Faulkner's Simon Brown and Brer Rabbit

Faulkner was a White American who grew up in the state of South Carolina. He remembered being richly entertained in his youth by a former slave, who lived on his mother's land, by the name of Simon Brown. Faulkner recalled that Brown stood out in his childhood mind as an artful teller of the Brer Rabbit stories. Having later become a devout American folklorist in his adult years, Faulkner published a recollected version of Simon Brown's character and Brown's version of the Brer Rabbit stories. The published title of Faulkner's book was *The Days When Animals Talk*. Faulkner tells his readers that he sat at Simon

Brown's feet, beginning when he was a ten year old boy growing up on his widowed mother's farm in Society Hill, South Carolina. Brown had been a former slave in the state of Virginia, but came to know Faulkner while living as a tenant on the latter's widowed mother's farm. In his adult years Faulkner came to see that Simon Brown was more than a great entertainer of children like himself with these animal stories. He saw that "the stories were not just children's entertainment, but were deeply significant allegories created by tortured, subjugated people to sustain and encourage themselves in a hostile world."[34] Faulkner came to see in his adult life the direct correlation between the scars upon Brown's back, caused by one whipping he got during slavery, and the Brer Rabbit stories.[35] Simon Brown took great pride in the fact that he never allowed himself to be whipped after that one beating incident. Faulkner remembered that this fact was a source of great pride for Simon Brown who could be heard to say repeatedly: "I was a mighty man in those days."

In his conversations with the young Faulkner, Simon Brown stressed the value of the slave using his head for self-preservation on the plantation.[36] The last resort was for one to stand up openly like a man against a White authority figure. Faulkner's account of Simon Brown provides insight into how the animal stories functioned pedagogically to create a subtle moral protest community, a social protest body, among slaves. These stories became the slave community's means of making its own way in the world. They signified the community's creative way of responding to the oppressor's slave code. Brown taught Faulkner that slaves, out of the crucibles of their common suffering, were caretakers for each other during seasons of grief and sickness. It was Brown's position that slaves' greatest sense of triumph came in knowing that "no man could own their souls or keep them from loving one another"[37] since these gifts were understood to come from God. It is appropriate at this point to

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give a detailed account of how one of the Brer Rabbit stories signified a communal protest against White political exploitation.

A comparison of Simon Brown's version of animal stories with Joel Chandler Harris' version shows us that slaves told them to each other for different pedagogical reasons. (This was in addition to telling the stories for entertainment purposes.) Slaves told these stories to each other, in addition to entertainment purposes, for instructional reasons. First, tellers and hearers of stories understood that they were communal protest statements against the oppressor's oppressive moral order. This point is made explicitly clear in Simon Brown's narration of Brer Rabbit's "Called Protest Meeting." Faulkner remembers that it was the uproar that was caused by the activities of the KKK and Night Riders in the South Carolina of his boyhood that provoked him to get Simon Brown's opinion on the matter. Simon Brown gave an answer to that sought-after opinion in the Brer Rabbit's protest meeting story. Brown prefaced his story with the observation that "people like the animals of the woods live, too, by the first law of nature rather than the law of God." The unscrupulous attacks of the Night Riders and KKK groups upon African Americans reminded Simon Brown of the time when Brer Rabbit and the smaller creatures "called a big meeting to complain to the Lord about long-tails and short-tails." "Long-tails," in this case, symbolized the possessors of an abundance of political power; short-tails symbolized those who lacked it. The presupposition of Simon Brown's story was that: "at the time of Creation, when the Lord made all the beasts and things, that he didn't give any of them tails."[38] All of these insect-pestered animals asked the Lord for tails and the Lord granted their request. Among the short tails there surfaced great dissatisfaction, however, over the fact that their tails were of inadequate length to defend them against the pesky insects. Brer Rabbit

called a meeting of all short-tail creatures to discuss their problems. Simon Brown said that "Brer Elephant, Brer Deer, Brer Billy Goat, Brer Groundhog, Brer Wild Hog, and others all met in Brer Rabbit's front yard, and there they decided to call a convention in the Big House.[39] It was Brer Rabbit's opinion that they could register their complaint to the Good Lord about the inadequacy of their short-tails. All agreed with Brer Rabbit that it was a matter of injustice that they were given short-tails by the creator.

"Long-tail" animals such as Brer Tiger and Brer Lion were upset when they heard of the plans of the "short-tail" creatures. Brer Lion raised the political question that imaged the fear of all of the long-tail animals: "Who knows what might happen to us?" He went on to note that: "We're in a favorable situation and very comfortable. If the Lord hears from those short-tail varmints, He might decide to chop off pieces of our long tails and give them to other creatures and that would never do."[40] Brer Tiger, in agreement with Brer Lion's assessment, proposed that the long tail creatures organize and break up the planned convention of the short-tail creatures. It was a matter of "keeping the short-tail creatures in their place." At the twelve o'clock Saturday meeting at the Big House there was hardly standing room for the short-tail creatures. Brer Rabbit stepped forth up to the platform to sit in the ruling chair. Beating him to it, Brer Lion grabbed up the gavel, and hit on the table, bam! And then he called the meeting to order. He made everybody sit down, including Brer Rabbit who protested that this "is our meeting—the short-tail creatures." Brer Lion refused to recognize Brer Rabbit on the grounds that he was the moderator and whatever he said was law. He decreed that only the long-tail creatures would be able to vote in the meeting. All of Brer Rabbit's protest was to no avail since "might had overruled right." Brer Lion ordered Brer Tiger and Brer Panther to clear all of the short-tail creatures from the

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Big House. Brer Rabbit and the short-tail creatures met in the front yard of the Big House to plan the strategy for their next course of action. In the yard of the Big House Brer Rabbit said:

> There isn't any justice in the land. The big long-tail creatures are the most and they run over us who are the least. They don't want us to even tell our troubles to the Lord. But this time they have gone too far, for no creature can stop another creature from talking to the Good Lord. We'll just keep on working and praying for him to deliver us from our misery, and one day, by and by, He will answer our prayer, and that's for sure.[41]

This version of Simon Brown's story has many fascinating aspects. First, we note that the variable of color is never mentioned in the story. This undoubtedly suggests that slave storytellers, even among themselves, left some things to the imagination of their hearers. It was not safe even among other slaves to make everything explicitly clear. In this situation color was obviously viewed as being a natural, given by God.

Second, the "long-tail" and "short-tail" descriptive language here symbolized the imbalance of political power that absolutely favored Whites of the South. It symbolized the natural injustice of slavery. This issue was most dramatic for former slaves during the Reconstruction and the post-Reconstruction era of the South. Brown's version of the story obviously has its origin in the great political transition that took place in the South when African Americans were forced out of political offices by White mobs. At stake here in the story about the "long-tail and short-tail" animals is the issue of whether African Americans have natural political rights. What the "short-tail" animals found out was that the very place where laws were

legislated became for them the symbol of unfairness.

Third, the symbolism of the "Big House" has political ramifications for understanding how African Americans lost political power following the Reconstruction period. The "Big House" of the state symbolized the same kind of political hegemony that the "Big House" of the plantation did. It is a cultural symbol rather than a political one. While African Americans during slavery had no political voice in the "Big House" of the plantation, those during the period of Reconstruction had a political voice only temporarily. Just as slaves were not allowed to meet on the plantation without the master's permission, African Americans were forbidden to caucus at the "Big House" of the state for political purposes. Brer Rabbit and his cohorts had to learn that it was not the objective of those who built the "Big House" of either the state or the plantation to do what was fair. The "Big House" of the state, like that of the plantation, was built on the law of the survival of the fittest.

Fourth, the story delineates the way that African Americans learned to use religious power for the accomplishment of political purposes. This is one of the few stories where Brer Rabbit is credited with leading his people in a prayer protest against social evil. Narrators have commonly portrayed Brer Rabbit as being the personification of vanity and self-centeredness. Even here, of course, Simon Brown's Brer Rabbit was not addicted to a pie-in-the-sky version of religion. Brer Rabbit suggested that prayer be used as the means, not the substitute, for achieving political power. His words merit our attention: "We'll just go on working and praying for him to deliver us from our misery, and one day, bye and bye, He will answer our prayer, and that's for sure." Brer Rabbit, according to Simon Brown, understands himself to be a co-partner with God in the liberation process. God liberates those who "work and pray."

Ironically, in most of the stories that were recorded by

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Harris, Brer Rabbit symbolized one who saved himself by learning to work his mind cleverly and quickly. Simon Brown presents a version of Brer Rabbit who understands that he is saved both by his "works and faith" in God. What we might have here, in this difference of perspective in the telling of the story, is that when slaves told the Brer Rabbit stories mainly for each other they recognized that even the trickster had a streak of piety in him.

Congaree River Blacks and Brer Rabbit

In the nineteen twenties Edward C.L. Adams, a White physician, from the area around the Congaree River of South Carolina made a remarkable record of African American life. Adams called one collection of stories from African Americans of this part of South Carolina, "Nigger to Nigger." A number of the Brer Rabbit stories appear in this particular collection. The portrait of Brer Rabbit in these stories is of a paradoxical nature. On the one hand Adam's community characterizes Brer Rabbit as being "vain," "low down," and "without a conscience." He is disliked by the members of the community for being what they termed "stuckup." Given his conceited nature, Brer Rabbit of Adam's account mainly uses all of his talents and power for himself. He lived to entertain the women and play the fiddle. It was said that without his fiddle, with which slaves associated magical powers, Brer Rabbit would not exist.

Such a portrait of Brer Rabbit, undoubtedly, was a literary technique that the Black community, since slavery, had used to critique its own members as well as Whites of the power structure. There were obviously individual slaves on the plantations who were merely concerned about their own welfare. Individual's of this type used their talents and influences to promote themselves in the eyes of the master. Ironically the

community, however, was attracted to Brer Rabbit for his entertainment genius. Although lacking moral scruples, Brer Rabbit was such a charismatic entertainer that he could transform a graveyard setting into a party. It was Brer Rabbit's conjuring powers that enabled him to bring the living community and the spirit world together for celebration. He was acknowledged by the slave community as a supernaturally gifted entertainer.

One of Adam's characters tells of having "seen a rabbit setting on top of the grave playin' a fiddle, for God's sakes." By virtue of his charisma as a supernaturally gifted entertainer, Rabbit was able to create community among all of the animals of the field. Adam's character proceeds to say:

> "All kinder little beast been runnin' 'round, dancin' an' callin' numbers. An' dere was wood rats an' squirrels cuttin' capers wid dey fancy self, an' diff'ent kind er birds an' owl. Even dem ole owl was sachayin' round-look like dey was enjoyin' dey self." In the midst of such a festive Brer Rabbit was seen exalting himself: "An' dat ole rabit was puttin' on more airs dan a poor buckra wid a jug of liquor an' a new suit er clothes on."[42]

It was when Brer Rabbit used his conjuring power to unite the world of the living and that of the dead that Adam's character reports in the end:

> While I been watch all dese strange guines on, I see de snow on de grave crack an' rise up. An' grave open an' I see Simon rise up out of er dat grave. I see him an' he look jest as natu'al as he done 'fore dey bury him. An' he look satisfy, an' he look like he taken a great interest in Bur

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> Rabbit an' de little beast an' birds.And he set down on de top er he grave, an' carry on a long compersation wid all dem animals. An' dem owl look like dey never was guh git through. You know dem ole owl—de ole folks always is say dey is dead folks. But dat ain' all. Atter dey done worked dey self out wid compersation, I see Bur Rabbit take he fiddle an'put it under he chin an' start to playin'. An' I watch, I see Bur Rabbit step back on de grave an' Simon were gone.[43]

On the other hand, the other image presented of Brer Rabbit was that he occasionally used his trickster powers to warn the other animals of impending danger. This truth was illustrated in the story of "The Dance of the Little Animals." The party takes place in the graveyard on Christmas night under the luminous moon-lit sky. Brer Rabbit was seen standing on both of his hind legs playing his fiddle: "he th'owed dat fiddle up under his arm an' started playin' reels." It was believed that Brer Rabbit had unusual power over all of the small animals: "An' it look like he call all kind er animals to him—all kind er little animals. An' dey all went to dancin."

One of the great mysteries that even the storyteller had a difficult time understanding is that Brer Rabbit hangs around graveyards, although he seems to love life. During the graveyard gathering, Brer Rabbit warned all of the animals who had come to his party to flee in the nick of time from Brer Fox. Although they knew that he was not "a Christian," the community reveled in the idea that "Brer Rabbit is got a heap er sense an' er heap er scheme, an' er he love to sport around an' enjoy he self."[44] Blacks, since the days of slavery seemingly, took great pride in the idea that Brer Rabbit was a free spirit who defied conventional logic. This was the case despite the fact that Brer Rabbit

lived purely by the law of self-preservation.[45] It is for this reason that slaves could celebrate him as being the very personification of a "dark symbol and an obscure figure." In actuality slaves saw themselves as "dark symbols and obscure figures."

NOTES

[1]Quote from the Rev. L. S. Burkhead cited in Leon F. Litwack's, *Been in the Storm So Long:The Aftermath of Slavery*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1979), p.465-6.
[2] Sterling Stuckey, *SLAVE CULTURE Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*, (New York: Oxford University, 1987), p1-97.
[3]Zora Neale Hurston, "Sometimes in the Mind" in Langston Hughes' *Negro Folklore*, p.93.
[4]*Ibid.*, p.94.
[5] *Ibid.*, p.95.
[6]*Ibid.*, p.95.
[7]*Ibid.*, p.96.
[8]William Faulkner, *The Days When Animals Talked*, p.6.
[9]Joel Chandler Harris, *Nights With Uncle Remus*, p.547.
[10]*Ibid.*, p.584.
[11]*Ibid.*, pp.551-552.
[12]*Ibid.*, p.552.
[13]*Ibid.*, p.552.
[14]*Plato's Republic*, p.47.
[15]Harris, *Nights with Uncle Remus*, p.48.
[16]*Ibid.*, p.560.
[17]*Ibid.*, p.560.
[18]*Ibid.*, p.561.
[19]*Ibid.*, p.563.
[20]*Ibid.*, p.607.
[21]*Ibid.*, p.186.

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[22]*Ibid.*, p.186.
[23]*Ibid.*, p.6.
[24]*Ibid.*, p.8.
[25]*Ibid.*, p.18.
[26]*Ibid.*, p.488.
[27]*Ibid.*, p.273.
[28]*Ibid.*, p.271.
[29]*Ibid.*, p.274.
[30]*Ibid.*, pp.468-469.
[31]*Ibid.*, p.679.
[32]*Ibid.*, p.665.
[33]*Ibid.*, p.252.
[34]Faulkner, *The Days When Animals Talked*, p.3.
[35]*Ibid.*, p.15.
[36]*Ibid.*, p.19.
[37]*Ibid.*, p.39.
[38]*Ibid.*, p.116.
[39]*Ibid.*, p.117.
[40]*Ibid.*, p.118.
[41]*Ibid.*, p.121.
[42]Edward Adams,ed. *Tales of the Congaree*,(Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 1987), p.235.
[43]*Ibid.*, p.240.
[44]*Ibid.*, p.240.
[45]*Ibid.*, p.240.