

BLACK
CULTURE
AND
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CONSCIOUSNESS

*Afro-American Folk Thought
from Slavery to Freedom*

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*This book has been published with the aid of a
Bicentennial Grant from the Phi Beta Kappa Society*

New York · Oxford University Press · 1977

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Library of Congress Catalogue Card Number: 76-9223

Printed in the United States of America

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trouble he gits out by gittin' somebody else in. Once he fell down a deep well an' did he holler and cry? No siree. He set up a mighty mighty whistling and a singin', an' when de wolf passes by he heard him an' he stuck his head over an' de rabbit say, "Git 'long 'way f'om here. Dere ain't room fur two. Hit's mighty hot up dere and nice an' cool down here. Don' you git in dat bucket an' come down here." Dat made de wolf all de mo' onrestless and he jumped into the bucket an' as he went down de rabbit come up, an' as dey passed de rabbit he laughed an' he say, "Dis am life; some go up and some go down."¹⁴

There could be no mistaking the direction in which Rabbit was determined to head. It was in his inexorable drive upward that Rabbit emerged not only as an incomparable defender but also as a supreme manipulator, a role that complicated the simple contours of the tales already referred to.

In the ubiquitous tales of amoral manipulation, the trickster could still be pictured as much on the defensive as he was in the stories which had him battling for his very life against stronger creatures. The significant difference is that now the panoply of his victims included the weak as well as the powerful. Trapped by Mr. Man and hung from a sweet gum tree until he can be cooked, Rabbit is buffeted to and fro by the wind and left to contemplate his bleak future until Brer Squirrel happens along. "This yer my cool-air swing," Rabbit informs him. "I taking a fine swing this morning." Squirrel begs a turn and finds his friend surprisingly gracious: "Certainly, Brer Squirrel, you do me proud. Come up here, Brer Squirrel, and give me a hand with this knot." Tying the grateful squirrel securely in the tree, Rabbit leaves him to his pleasure—and his fate. When Mr. Man returns, "he take Brer Squirrel home and cook him for dinner."¹⁵

It was primarily advancement not preservation that led to the trickster's manipulations, however. Among a slave population whose daily rations were at best rather stark fare and quite often a barely minimal diet, it is not surprising that food proved to be the most common symbol of enhanced status and power. In his never-ending quest for food the trickster was not content with mere acquisition, which he was perfectly capable of on his own; he needed to procure the food through guile from some stronger animal. Easily the most popular tale of this type pictures Rabbit and Wolf as partners in farming a field. They have laid aside a tub of butter for winter provisions, but Rabbit proves unable to wait or to share. Pretending to hear a voice calling him, he leaves his chores and begins to eat the butter. When he returns to the field he informs his partner that his sister has just had a baby and wanted him to name it. "Well, w'at you

name um?" Wolf asks innocently. "Oh, I name um Buh Start-um," Rabbit replies. Subsequent calls provide the chance for additional assaults on the butter and additional names for the nonexistent babies: "Buh Half-um," "Buh Done-um." After work, Wolf discovers the empty tub and accuses Rabbit, who indignantly denies the theft. Wolf proposes that they both lie in the sun, which will cause the butter to run out of the guilty party. Rabbit agrees readily, and when grease begins to appear on his own face he rubs it onto that of the sleeping wolf. "Look, Buh Wolf," he cries, waking his partner, "de buttah melt out on you. Dat prove you eat um." "I guess you been right," Wolf agrees docilely, "I eat um fo' trute."¹⁶ In some versions the animals propose a more hazardous ordeal by fire to discover the guilty party. Rabbit successfully jumps over the flames but some innocent animal—Possum, Terrapin, Bear—falls in and perishes for Rabbit's crime.¹⁷

In most of these tales the aggrieved animal, realizing he has been tricked, desperately tries to avenge himself by setting careful plans to trap Rabbit, but to no avail. Unable to outwit Rabbit, his adversaries attempt to learn from him, but here too they fail. Seeing Rabbit carrying a string of fish, Fox asks him where they came from. Rabbit confesses that he stole them from Man by pretending to be ill and begging Man to take him home in his cart which was filled with fish. While riding along, Rabbit explains, he threw the load of fish into the woods and then jumped off to retrieve them. He encourages Fox to try the same tactic, and Fox is beaten to death, as Rabbit knew he would be, since Man is too shrewd to be taken in the same way twice.¹⁸

And so it goes in story after story. Rabbit cheats Brer Wolf out of his rightful portion of a cow and a hog they kill together. He tricks Brer Fox out of his part of their joint crop year after year "until he starved the fox to death. Then he had all the crop, and all the land too." He leisurely watches all the other animals build a house in which they store their winter provisions and then sneaks in, eats the food, and scares the others, including Lion, away by pretending to be a spirit and calling through a horn in a ghostly voice that he is a "better man den ebber bin yuh befo." He convinces Wolf that they ought to sell their own grandparents for a tub of butter, arranges for his grandparents to escape so that only Wolf's remain to be sold, and once they are bartered for the butter he steals that as well.¹⁹

The many tales of which these are typical make it clear that what Rabbit craves is not possession but power, and this he acquires not simply by

tions to semi-mythical actors, Negroes were able to overcome the external and internal censorship that their hostile surroundings imposed upon them. The white master could believe that the rabbit stories his slaves told were mere figments of a childish imagination, that they were primarily humorous anecdotes depicting the "roaring comedy of animal life." Blacks knew better. The trickster's exploits, which overturned the neat hierarchy of the world in which he was forced to live, became their exploits; the justice he achieved, their justice; the strategies he employed, their strategies. From his adventures they obtained relief; from his triumphs they learned hope.

To deny this interpretation of slave tales would be to ignore much of their central essence. The problem with the notion that slaves completely identified with their animal trickster hero whose exploits were really protest tales in disguise is that it ignores much of the complexity and ambiguity inherent in these tales. This in turn flows from the propensity of scholars to view slavery as basically a relatively simple phenomenon which produced human products conforming to some unitary behavioral pattern. Too frequently slaves emerge from the pages of historians' studies either as docile, accepting beings or as alienated prisoners on the edge of rebellion. But if historians have managed to escape much of the anarchic confusion so endemic in the Peculiar Institution, slaves did not. Slaveholders who considered Afro-Americans to be little more than subhuman chattels converted them to a religion which stressed their humanity and even their divinity. Masters who desired and expected their slaves to act like dependent children also enjoined them to behave like mature, responsible adults, since a work force consisting only of servile infants who can make no decisions on their own and can produce only under the impetus of a significant other is a dubious economic resource, and on one level or another both masters and slaves understood this. Whites who considered their black servants to be little more than barbarians, bereft of any culture worth the name, paid a fascinated and flattering attention to their song, their dance, their tales, and their forms of religious exercise. The life of every slave could be altered by the most arbitrary and amoral acts. They could be whipped, sexually assaulted, ripped out of societies in which they had deep roots, and bartered away for pecuniary profit by men and women who were also capable of treating them with kindness and consideration and who professed belief in a moral code which they held up for emulation not only by their children but often by their slaves as well.

It would be surprising if these dualities which marked the slaves' world were not reflected in both the forms and the content of their folk culture. In their religious songs and sermons slaves sought certainty in a world filled with confusion and anarchy; in their supernatural folk beliefs they sought power and control in a world filled with arbitrary forces greater than themselves; and in their tales they sought understanding of a world in which, for better or worse, they were forced to live. All the forms of slave folk culture afforded their creators ~~psychic relief and a sense of mastery~~. Tales differed from the other forms in that they were more directly didactic in intent and therefore more compellingly and realistically reflective of the irrational and amoral side of the slaves' universe. It is precisely this aspect of the animal trickster tales that has been most grossly neglected.

Although the vicarious nature of slave tales was undeniably one of their salient features, too much stress has been laid on it. These were not merely clever tales of wish-fulfillment through which slaves could escape from the imperatives of their world. They could also be painfully realistic stories which taught the art of surviving and even triumphing in the face of a hostile environment. They underlined the dangers of acting rashly and striking out blindly, as Brer Rabbit did when he assaulted the tar-baby. They pointed out the futility of believing in the sincerity of the strong, as Brer Pig did when he allowed Fox to enter his house. They emphasized the necessity of comprehending the ways of the powerful, for only through such understanding could the weak endure. This lesson especially was repeated endlessly. In the popular tales featuring a race between a slow animal and a swifter opponent, the former triumphs not through persistence, as does his counterpart in the Aesopian fable of the Tortoise and the Hare, but by outwitting his opponent and capitalizing on his weaknesses and short-sightedness. Terrapin defeats Deer by placing relatives along the route with Terrapin himself stationed by the finish line. The deception is never discovered, since to the arrogant Deer all terrapins "am so much like anurrer you cant tell one from turrer." "I still t'ink Ise de fas'est runner in de worl'," the bewildered Deer complains after the race. "Maybe you air," Terrapin responds, "but I kin head you off wid sense."³⁴ Rabbit too understands the myopia of the powerful and benefits from Mr. Man's inability to distinguish between the animals by manipulating Fox into taking the punishment for a crime that Rabbit himself commits. "De Ole Man yent bin know de diffunce tween Buh Rabbit an Buh Fox," the storyteller pointed out. "Eh tink all two bin de same animal."³⁵ For black slaves, whose individuality was so frequently denied by

He know if dey finds him what dey do. So Pappy he gets down in de ditch and throw sand and grunts like a hog. Sure 'nough, dey thinks he a hog and dey pass on, 'cept one who was behind de others. He say, "Dat am de gruntin'est old hog I ever hear. I think I go see him." But de others dey say: "Just let dat old hog alone and mind you own business." So dey pass on. Pappy he laugh about dat for long time.¹⁸

Many years after emancipation, Henry Johnson still remembered his craving for one of his master's turkeys which the slaves were forbidden to eat. Succumbing to temptation, he lured a turkey to his cabin, twisted its neck until it was dead and then ran to inform his mistress that one of the birds had died: "She said, 'Stop crying, Henry, and throw him under de hill.' I was satisfied. I run back, picked dat old bird, taken all his feathers to de river and throwed dem in. Dat night we cooked him. And didn't we eat somethin' good! I had to tell her about dat missin' bird cause when dey check up it all had to tally, so dat fixed dat."¹⁹ A fellow ex-slave remembered an old slave on his plantation who became so angry at one of the steers he was plowing with that he took a rock and knocked it on the head. "He dragged him a little way off and told me to run to the house and tell the boss that one of his steers was awful sick. They never did know why that steer died. My mistress tried in every way to make me tell her what happened to cause the steer to die but the old man had warned me not to tell."²⁰ Another former slave recounted the way she acted when asked to brush the flies away from her elderly, sick mistress: "I would hit her all in the face; sometimes I would make out I was sleep and beat her in the face. She was so sick she couldn't sleep much, and couldn't talk, and when old master come in the house she would try to tell him on me, but he thought she meant I would just go to sleep. Then he would tell me to go out in the yard and wake up. She couldn't tell him that I had been hitting her all in the face. I done that woman bad. She was so mean to me."²¹ West Turner spoke of Gabe, a fellow slave whose job it was to mete out punishment on the plantation: "Ole Gabe didn't like dat whip-pin' bus'ness, but he couldn't he'p hisself. When Marsa was dere, he would lay it on 'cause he had to. But when ole Marsa warn't lookin', he never would beat dem slaves. Would tie de slave up to one post an' lash another one. 'Cose de slave would scream an' yell to satisfy Marsa, but he wasn't gettin' no lashin'."²²

It did not take much for such relatively common events to become embroidered into more elaborate and fanciful tales. Josie Jordan, born a slave in Tennessee, recalled a story her mother told her about a stingy master

who fed his slaves so poorly that "they ribs would kinda rustle against each other like corn stalks a-drying in the hot winds. But they gets even one hog-killing time, and it was funny, too, Mammy said." The day before seven fat hogs were to be killed, one of the field hands ran to the master and told him, "The hogs is all died, now they won't be any meats for the winter." When the master arrived on the scene he found a group of sorrowful-looking slaves who informed him that the hogs had died of "malitis" and acted as if they were afraid to touch the dead animals. The master ordered them to dress the meat anyway and to keep it for the slave families. "Don't you all know what is malitis?" Mrs. Jordan's mother would ask while she rocked with laughter. "One of the strongest Negroes got up early in the morning, long 'fore the rising horn called the slaves from their cabins. He skitted to the hog pen with a heavy mallet in his hand. When he tapped Mister Hog 'tween the eyes with that mallet, 'malitis' set in mighty quick. . . ."²³

The cycle of stories featuring the relations of a slave trickster, often named John, and his master were based upon the kinds of incidents related in these factual and pseudo-factual tales, but by removing them from the realm of the immediately personal it allowed storytellers even more scope for their imaginations and their psychic needs.²⁴ The most widely diffused tale of this type, found in a variety of cultures, captured the essence of the entire slave trickster cycle. By eavesdropping outside his master's window, learning his plans for the next day and then anticipating them, and by hiding things and then "discovering" them when his master was looking for them, John convinced his master that he was omniscient and won a privileged position on the plantation. One day the master boasted to a group of his fellow slaveowners of John's powers. The other whites were dubious and wagered a large sum that they could prove John's fallibility. On the day of the contest they hid something in a barrel and called upon John to reveal the barrel's contents. The reluctant slave, fearing that at last his careful deceptions were to be discovered, desperately walked around and around the barrel, tapped it, put his ear to it, and then in despair confessed, "Marstah, you got dis here coon at las'!" His choice of language saved him for when the barrel was removed to reveal a raccoon inside, John's master won the bet, and John was amply rewarded, sometimes by freedom itself.²⁵ In John, slaves created a figure who epitomized the rewards, the limits, and the hazards of the trickster. He could improve his situation through careful deception, but at no time was he really in complete control; the rewards he could win were limited

eye with only a single bullet. When his friends prove to be incredulous, he turns to his slave and commands him to tell how he did it. Thinking fast, the slave explains that the deer was brushing a fly out of his eye with his hind foot when the white man fired his shot. After the others have departed, the slave tells his master: "Mossa, me willin fuh back anyting you say bout hunt an kill deer, but lemme bague you nex time you tell bout how you shoot um, you pit de hole closer. Dis time you mek um so fur apart, me hab big trouble fur git um togerruh." "Tell yo' lies a li'l' closer togedder f'om now on," the slave instructs his master in another version.³³ In a Georgia tale a newly purchased slave asks his master why he spends so much time sitting and doing nothing while the slaves have to work. The master assures him that he is not loafing but working with his head making plans and studying about things. One day the master comes upon his slave in the field sitting in the cotton and resting. When he inquires why the slave is not working, the latter informs him that he too is working with his head. Pointing to three pigeons on a tree limb, he asks the white man how many would be left if he shot and killed one. Any fool can answer that, the master replies indignantly, "two." "No mossa, you miss," the slave tells him. "Ef you shoot an kill one er dem pigeon, de odder two boun fuh fly way, an none gwine leff." "De buckra man bleege fuh laugh," the storyteller concluded, "an eh yent do nuttne ter de New Nigger case en glec eh wuk."³⁴

In many of these tales the slaves prove to be superb thieves and frequently win their freedom by betting their masters they can steal the very clothes off their backs and then through elaborate maneuvers accomplish the task.³⁵ Slaves received not only vicarious triumph from their human trickster stories but also quite frequently explicit instruction, as in the tale of the slave who asked his master: "How much Christmas kin I have?" and was informed that he could celebrate until the back log in the fireplace burned out. Cutting a black gum log, the slave rolled it in the ditch and let it remain for several days until it was well soaked. Then he rolled it out so that it would dry on the outside. Christmas morning he put the log in the fire, where it burned for seven days, giving the slave an entire week of leisure.³⁶

In some stories slave tricksters would occasionally try out their wiles on their fellow slaves. One would boast to another that he had put his hand under his mistress' dress or cursed his master with impunity. The other would try the same thing and be beaten severely, only to be told by the trickster that he had not said anything about the mistress being in the dress

when he put his hand under it or the master being present when he cursed him.³⁷ Only rarely do these stories picture slaves stealing from one another. In a story sharing many elements with the animal tales, a slave puts a possum on to cook and goes to sleep. Just when the possum is done, a friend visits the cabin, eats the possum, scatters its bones around the hearth, and greases the sleeping slave's mouth and hands. When the latter arises, he finds his possum gone and concludes it was stolen until he notices the bones on the floor and the grease on his hands and mouth. "I mus' 'a' done it! I mus' 'a' done it!" he exclaims. "Well, all I got to say is dis: ef I did git up an' eat dat 'possum while I was 'sleep, he sets lighter on my stomach an' he gibs me less consolation dan any 'possum I ebber eat sence I was born!"³⁸

For the most part, however, the trickster's art as depicted in these tales was saved for the benefit of the whites and was seldom practiced upon members of his own group. Slave tales document the distinction many slaves made between "stealing" which meant appropriating something that belonged to another slave and was not condoned, and "taking" which meant appropriating part of the master's property for the benefit of another part. In a commonly told story, an old slave, Uncle Abraham, invites his black preacher, Brother Gabriel, to eat with him on Christmas Eve. The preacher is uneasy about the roast pig and potatoes on the table since he knows they must have been stolen and refuses to eat until his host says grace and makes a confession before him. With little hesitation, Abraham prays: "A Lord, dou . . . taught dy sarvents dat it want no harm fur ter take de corn out er de barril and put it into de kag. De barril 'longs to de marster and de kag 'longs ter de marster, dar-forth it aint no diffunce when de darkie take de marster's pig out er de pen an put it into de darkie, case de darkie 'longs ter de marster, an de pig pen 'longs ter de marster." "All right, Brer Abe, dat all right," Brother Gabriel announces. "Less be gwine ter dese yere good nugs."³⁹

The slaves' animal and human trickster tales shared a number of common elements: They placed the same emphasis upon the tactics of trickery and indirection, took the same delight in seeing the weak outwit and humiliate the strong, manifested the same lack of idealization, and served the same dual function which included the expression of repressed feelings and the inculcation of the tactics of survival. Their greatest point of departure was that human trickster stories were more restricted by the realities of the slaves' situation. It was in their animal trickster tales that slaves expressed their wildest hopes and fears. The human trickster might win his