THE STRANGE CAREER OF UNCLE REMUS

By

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2004

UMI Number: 3115281

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

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Remus is a key point in Harris scholarship. More specifically, questions center on the level of Harris's awareness in creating Remus, who can be read both as a trickster subverting the old plantation system and white superiority along with it, and as an old man who appears to condone and even love the old slave system. Furthermore, the tales Remus tells are also subversive. Harris clearly presents Remus as a loyal, slave-like family servant, but also as a shaman-like guide to the little white boy, leading him on a journey into a strange world of forbidden knowledge.

Remus tells trickster tales, and in doing so, becomes a trickster himself, i.e., to some listeners or readers, his tales are merely humorous animal stories. To others, they contain important, possibly dangerous information.

To understand Harris and Remus the reader must recognize that they embody opposing possibilities simultaneously. To understand a good deal of Southern literature we must recognize simultaneous opposing meanings. To grasp Southern thought and behavior we must comprehend this. Harris himself did live on a plantation for a time

during his youth, but as an employee, not as a child of privilege, and he never knew first-hand the luxury of plantation wealth. Likewise, to choose only the servile Remus would be to ignore the Remus who is presented as the man with the greatest character and strongest moral grounding in the story, and indeed, the one who is at the center of the plantation in moral and spiritual authority.

Acknowledgements

This project, in essence, began many years ago, when I was a small child in Clio, S.C., and my great-grandmother, Ada Roper Meadors, read Joel Chandler Harris's stories to me. Her love of language, literature and storytelling had a long-lasting effect on my life and work.

I gratefully acknowledge Prof. Bill Kelly and his American literature courses at the CUNY Graduate Center. Under Prof. Kelly's guidance, this project began to take shape. I am also grateful to Prof. Joan Richardson's faith in me and my work.

Prof. Marc Dolan's supervision of the project ensured its completion. His support, suggestions and advice were invaluable.

Dr. Lydia Gerson's friendship sustained me throughout the writing process, and her insight aided me immensely in thinking about Harris's work.

Finally, without the patience and loving support of Cathy Holladay, this dissertation would never have been written. Our daughter Kate Holladay Pamplin provided continuous inspiration. I am thankful.

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Chapter One: The Strange Career of Uncle Remus

A little more than a quarter of a century ago, Robert Bone wrote that Joel Chandler Harris was " in bad odor among the younger generation of literary men." Black critics equated Harris's creation Uncle Remus with Uncle Tom, sometimes without having read either Harris or Harriet Beecher Stowe, Bone said. Sympathetic whites tried to ingratiate themselves with black militants by giving Harris a "kick in the shin" (130)—and by implication, Remus got a kick in the shin, too.

Harris fell out of favor with many literary critics during the Civil Rights era. His depiction of black people angered many who were searching for strong, updated images to serve as role models for children and icons for the movement. Harris and his body of work, because of their complexity, were easy targets. Remus was easily dismissed because at a glance, he looked too much like Uncle Tom.

Bone, like many of Harris's critics, is willing to credit him with saving the animal fables from oblivion, but is loathe to "rehabilitate" Harris on the grounds that "as a journalist... he was an active propagandist in the cause of white supremacy, and as a literary man, a leading proponent of the plantation myth." Remus is dismissed as "principally a figment of the white imagination" (130). However, Bone admits that Harris was "capable of stubborn orthodoxies and equally tenacious heresies where black people were concerned" and that black Americans owe him "a considerable debt for the preservation of their folk heritage" and that he was "a catalytic agent of prime importance in the history of the Afro-American short story" (131).

Twenty-first century readers search in hope of finding a clear, unambiguous position to attribute to Harris; similarly, we continue to ask, "Was Mark Twain a racist or

was he not a racist?" But such singularity of philosophy is not to be found in Harris's works, in Twain's, or likely, any other white writer in the nineteenth century when it comes to questions of racial identity, segregation, and the presence and significance of Africanness in Southern society.

Today, if the Internet is a reliable gauge of interest in any given subject, even a cursory search reveals that militants and others who crusaded against racism in literature were partially successful with Harris's work, for he himself has faded into the background somewhat. However, Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox and the other animals survive and thrive in a folklore and storytelling context, not to mention as the subjects of academic attention. This is fitting; after all, the animal tales existed long before Joel Chandler Harris and Uncle Remus.

Remus, too, is alive and well, despite ongoing arguments against any positive value he might possess as matter for either literary study or informal pleasure reading. Web sites related to Uncle Remus and using the name Uncle Remus rather than Harris exist in surprising abundance, and range from those such as *Out of the Sky*, the Web site of storyteller David Clark of Cochran, Ga., a white man in his forties who has made a career of telling the animal fables in dialect "as" Uncle Remus, to those calling for the re-release of the 1946 Disney film *Song of the South*, which features an Uncle Remus character, and is based on some of Harris's tales. One such site is *Uncle Remus Pages*, which enjoins the visitor: "Celebrate *56* years of Song of the South (sic) by joining thousands of others who are participating in getting this movie re-released (sic)!!!" Another site devoted to the film is *Song of the South.net.*

One site, *Uncle Remus,* maintained by Grainger McKoy, Jr., is devoted to Harris's tales and states that

> *UncleRemus.com* is an attempt to reintroduce Harris' tales, and his legendary narrator, while placing them in a historical context. The primary sources and commentaries we offer hopefully will shed light on Harris' purpose in publishing his stories and the public response to both his Remus tales and his other works. They will make observations about post-Civil War black culture, and Southern society in general, using the stories and the reactions they engendered as points of reference.

Remus's inventor is acknowledged on several sites devoted to American literature and Southern literature, and his home state of Georgia has not forgotten him. When Harris died in Atlanta in 1908, prominent Atlantans began immediately to plan a suitable memorial for the author. Within eight days of his death, a memorial association was founded. It was called the "Uncle Remus Memorial Association" (Kelly 113-114). In death, as in life, Harris's identity was mixed with the identity of his creation. The Uncle Remus Memorial Association eventually purchased the Harris family home, the Wren's Nest, which became a museum and a National Historic Landmark. The Remus persona reached cult-like status after Harris's death: for years the association sponsored May Day festivities that included white children dressed in black performing "The Dance of the Tar-Babies" (Kelly 119, 121, 124). Today the Wren's Nest is a center for storytelling. His hometown of Eatonton, Ga., gives him his due, although the museum there devoted to his life and work is called not the Joel Chandler Harris Museum but, significantly, the Uncle Remus Museum, and is housed in an old slave cabin. (The statue in the Eatonton courthouse square is a likeness of Brer Rabbit, however.)

Remus is a key point of focus in Harris scholarship. More specifically, questions center on the level of Harris's awareness in creating Remus, who can be read both as a trickster subverting the old plantation system and white superiority along with it, and as an old man who appears to condone and even love the old slave system. Furthermore, the tales Remus tells are also subversive. How aware was Harris of the anti-slavery, freedom loving, amoral and often anti-white nature of the animal fables? Remus often mouths pro-segregation, status-quo-supporting statements, as Harris's surrogate. He is notoriously nostalgic for the old days. Harris clearly presents Remus as a loyal, slave-like family servant, but also as a shaman-like guide to the little white boy, leading him on a journey into a strange world of forbidden knowledge.

Several significant details about the Remus stories make their mystery worth solving. In no story in the first collection, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*, do white adults interact directly with Uncle Remus. The white plantation owners exist as sketchily developed characters who remain mostly in the background. In the first tale, the reader is introduced to Uncle Remus, "Miss Sally," the mistress of the plantation, and her seven-year-old son, who is never named. "Miss Sally" (the quotation marks are Harris's, as though somehow, this is not her real name) misses her little boy one evening, and finds him in Remus's cabin listening to the old man tell animal fables.

Within this narrative frame the little boy observes Remus's strange, almost magical behavior: he picks up hot coals with his bare fingers; he sharpens a knife on the palm of his hand. He becomes angry when the boy handles his tools. Remus knows the little boy's activities even when he is not in his presence; he tells tales of a mysterious and distant past when animals met in political assembly, when they could talk. Remus

claims that he is still able to converse with animals. He speaks of the time when everyone had black skin; he tells of witches and of the dead returning to life.

Clearly, just as Remus is a trickster, so is Joel Chandler Harris, but many critics have debated the degree of Harris's "racial awareness" in the tales. Some, such as Daniel G. Hoffman and Lyle Glazier believe that Uncle Remus is in many ways a minstrel portrait of the black slave but that Brer Rabbit's trickery, "which Harris probably did not appreciate fully," represents allegorically the black people's struggle for survival and their indomitable spirit," as Bruce Bickley puts it (*Joel Chandler Harris* 69). Robert Hemenway reads the world Harris created as a "racial utopia in which black and white love one another and share a childhood" (19) and Uncle Remus in particular as an invention made "as Federal troops withdrew from the South, and ... the perfect figure to allay Northern uneasiness about the abandonment of the Negro" (20).

Inarguably, Harris's many meanings include sentimentality and, particularly in works other than the animal tales, a moderate position on Jim Crow and the "Negro Question." This meant that he believed real progress for the Negro socially and economically could come only if the white race patronized blacks while remaining separated from them for much of day-to-day life, and certainly in important areas such as social events. He also believed education was the key to a successful future for black people, but that it would take time (Bickley, *JCH* 36). This moderate stance contrasted with the extreme positions that called for blacks' repatriation to Africa, or for some sort of ongoing form of slavery because blacks were incapable of handling themselves productively in a free society. Some extremists attempted to advance theories that black people were not fully human. And of course at the other extreme would have been an

attitude favoring full legal and social integration and full equality in all aspects of American life, public and private. This position was rare to the point of being almost unheard-of in the late nineteenth century.

Harris uses language that modern readers regard as racist, and if he had schemed to confuse and divide his critics, to inspire both disdain and enthusiastic acceptance for his work, but ultimately to get himself labeled a racist and placed indelibly in the same rank as Thomas Nelson Page and even Thomas Dixon, he probably could not have written a more powerful sentence to do the job than one in his introduction to *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*. Harris asks his readers to imagine Uncle Remus as an old negro "who has nothing but pleasant memories of the discipline of slavery" (47). For many readers, that line immediately and forever explains that Uncle Remus is purely the product of the white author's (and white, Southern society's) fantasy—that of the happy slave, the smiling, gentle, loyal "darky," one who would have never run away or risen up against his master, and in the most treasured part of the white fantasy, the black person who *loved* "his" white people. Robert Bone comments: "There is nothing in his characterization of Uncle Remus that violates the spirit of the plantation myth. On the contrary, it is the author's avowed purpose to create a sympathetic, nostalgic, and untroubled portrait of plantation life before the war" (137).

The fables themselves are a different matter. One of the explanations for the stories offered by Harris himself was published in his introduction to the second collection of stories, *Nights with Uncle Remus*. He had already backed away from any claim to a serious folklorist approach to the tales. He let his membership in a professional folklore society expire. He wrote:

> The thirty-four legends in the first volume were merely selections from the large body of plantation folk-lore familiar to the author from his childhood, and these selections were made less with an eye to their ethnological importance than with a view to presenting certain quaint and curious race characteristics, of which the world at large had had either vague or greatly exaggerated notions. (xi)

Many critics wish Harris had *admitted* awareness, and given concrete evidence of his consciousness of the nature of the tales and of Remus. But the whole point of tricksterism is to profess one thing, and possibly mean another, but never to admit to both. So, as is always the case in tricksterism, we readers can find what we seek in Remus, whether stereotypical " darky" or agent of subversion.

Most critics have attempted to place Harris and Remus firmly in one camp or the other, although some do acknowledge their dual nature. Darwin T. Turner admitted, "The difficulty of analyzing and appraising Negro characters in Harris's work is intensified by the fact that Harris was neither a Negrophobe nor a conventional romancer of antebellum days." He also wrote, "While he introduced American readers to African myths about Brer Rabbit, Brer Wolf, and Brer Bear, simultaneously he developed and popularized an Anglo-Saxon myth about the 'old-time' Negroes and their benevolent masters" (114). Turner is unable to embrace the notion that two opposing forces can continuously coexist in one mind, in one life, in one region. Turner sees the early Remus as simply not-yet-mythic, a realistic characterization, and the later version as a stereotype because Harris perceived that Remus was as popular as the tales themselves and increased his "old-time Negro" characteristics to satisfy a certain, albeit large segment of his audience (117-18).

Rhett S. Jones explicates *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in terms of white double-consciousness, which means "whites have never been able to escape knowledge

of black humanity but, given their hegemony, have been able to create a corpus of racist thought which defines blacks as inferior" (28). Harris's entire body of work is a product of double consciousness. Remus functions as *both* loyal old retainer and fiercely independent teller of subversive stories. He is both an unassailable example of masculine wisdom and the pathetic butt of cruel jokes by his former owner's daughter. He is a befuddled, grinning old "darky" confused by the modern world and a storytelling shaman who knows very well how to read the signs around him and who, intriguingly, introduces a little white boy to his secrets (Harris even calls the first story in *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* "Uncle Remus *Initiates* the Little Boy." [My italics.])

Remus tells trickster tales, and in doing so, becomes a trickster himself, i.e., to some listeners or readers, his tales are merely humorous animal stories. To others, they contain important, possibly dangerous information.

All of the trickster figures, including Hermes in Greek mythology, are divine mediators or messengers, who interpret the will of the gods to the people and carry the desires of the people to the gods. They are divine linguists and interpreters; thus Hermes lends his name to "hermeneutics," the study of interpretation. Tricksters do not impart information; they engage in signifying, i.e., the "'technique of indirect argument'" (Gates 237, 239). By using tricks, by repeating what someone has said behind someone else's back in order to reverse the status of a relationship, by playing word games or saying one thing to mean another, the trickster signifies, and thereby acknowledges that the literal definitions of words are not sufficient for interpreting meanings. The listener can understand the divine message only by attending to—being attuned to—all potential meanings (Gates 240). The trickster plays his tricks and those around him who

understand his discourse get the message. The uninitiated are left standing baffled, or worse, as happens time and again in Uncle Remus's tales.

Harris gives Remus other divine attributes, such as those of medicine man or magician. The shaman metaphor becomes even more useful when we learn about Harris's "other fellow." He believed that he himself wrote his *Atlanta Constitution* editorials, but that his other fellow took over when the time came for writing a story. In a letter to one of his children he wrote the following:

> As for myself—though you could hardly call me a real, sure enough author—I never have anything but the vaguest ideas of what I am going to write; but when I take my pen in my hand, the rust clears away and the "other fellow" takes charge. You know all of us have two entities, or personalities. That is the reason you see and hear persons "talking to themselves." They are talking to the "other fellow." I have often asked my "other fellow" where he gets all his information, and how he can remember, in the nick of time, things that I have forgotten long ago; but he never satisfies my curiosity. He is simply a spectator of my folly until I seize a pen, and then he comes forward and takes charge.
>
> ...it is not my writing at all; it is my "other fellow" doing the work and I am getting all the credit for it. Now, I'll admit that I write the editorials for the paper. The "other fellow" has nothing to do with them, and, so far as I am able to get his views on the subject, he regards them with scorn and contempt; though there are rare occasions when he helps me out on a Sunday editorial. He is a creature hard to understand, but, so far as I can understand him, he's a very sour, surly fellow until I give him an opportunity to guide my pen in subjects congenial to him; whereas, I am, as you know, jolly, good-natured, and entirely harmless.
>
> Now, my "other fellow," I am convinced, would do some damage if I didn't give him an opportunity to work off his energy in the way he

> delights. (qtd. in Julia Collier Harris, *Editor and Essayist* 384-86)

As Rubin puts it: "Just what manner of man Joel Chandler Harris was we shall never know, but one thing seems clear: he was certainly not the simple, gentle, easygoing soul pictured by his earlier biographers" (161). The source for the Uncle Remus tales, the other collections, and the novels was a deep, creative place in Harris, and with the unconscious effort of the highly trained athlete or dancer—or the entranced shaman—the creative writer was able to produce a remarkable body of work.

When the reader can resist forcing latter-day definitions of racism and stereotypes onto Remus and Harris, and accept that both the "old-time Negro" and the black subversive exist at once in Remus, and that similarly, the pro-segregationist, moderate white supremacist exists within a man who also sees superiority in the culture and values of black people and acknowledges the Africanness at the heart of his community and of his own being, then he can read Harris and Remus in a way that makes sense. Such an elevation of blackness is undoubtedly its own form of racism by current standards, but this kind of racism was an unknown and irrelevant concept in Harris's day and is a far cry from the "racism" that was relevant: the kind that took the form of Jim Crow laws, race hatred and lynching.

To understand Harris and Remus the reader must recognize that they embody opposing possibilities simultaneously. To understand a good deal of Southern literature we must recognize simultaneous opposing meanings. To grasp Southern thought and behavior we must comprehend this. What would be the alternative in trying to analyze Joel Chandler Harris? What, in fact, has the alternative been since his death? To stamp him as simply nostalgic for the old days of the antebellum plantation and black slaves?

This in actual fact cannot be, for Harris was born to a poor unwed mother who struggled to support her son. He perhaps indulged in a kind of general white nostalgia—an imagined sharing of a nonexistent past. Harris himself did live on a plantation for a time during his youth, but as an employee, not as a child of privilege, and he never knew first-hand the luxury of plantation wealth. Likewise, to choose only the servile Remus would be to ignore the Remus who is presented as the man with the greatest character and strongest moral grounding in the story, and indeed, the one who is at the center of the plantation in moral and spiritual authority.

Origins of Remus

The character Uncle Remus originated in response to an assignment at *The Atlanta Constitution* in 1876. Uncle Remus began as a character in sketches published in the Atlanta *Daily Constitution* starting in 1876. "Markham's Ball" and "Jeems Rober'son's Last Illness" appeared in the October 26, 1876 issue of the *Constitution*, although Uncle Remus's name did not appear in them. Four years later, when Harris published the first collection of Uncle Remus stories, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings*, "Jeems Rober'son's Last Illness" appeared with Uncle Remus inserted as a principle character.

Paul Cousins observes that Uncle Remus's subdued humor, grave countenance and the authentic dialect with which he spoke gave the impression he was speaking his own thoughts rather than serving as a mouthpiece for his author. Remus seemed genuine, and not simply a character created for humorous effect, as were many Negro characters in dialect pieces by other authors at the time (96-97).

Joel Chandler Harris, a young editorial page assistant, was asked by his editor, Evan P. Howell, to continue the work of Sam W. Small, who had resigned from the newspaper when it changed hands. Small had been writing a column of anecdotes and sketches in Negro dialect featuring a black character, Uncle Si. On January 18, 1877 Harris had published "Uncle Remus's Revival Hymn," the first composition that directly connects Uncle Remus with plantation life. Harris's daughter-in-law reported in his biography the song "was a hit and was copied far and wide":

> Oh, whar shill we go w'en de great day comes,
> Wid de blowin' 'er de trumpits en de bangin' er de drums?
> How many po' sinners 'll be kotched out late
> En fine no latch ter de golden gate?
> (Harris, *Life and Letters*, 143-45)

Harris was not interested in Uncle Si, but offered instead to write something else, and the result was Uncle Remus, his songs, sayings and the animal fables.

Early versions of the stories included a character named Remus, a resident of Atlanta who visited the newspaper offices to chat with the editors about current affairs, particularly the tribulations of Reconstruction. The character frequenting the offices is often described simply as old, but with little other detail about his presence. Harris experimented with several black characters in the pages of the *Constitution*, eventually eliminating them in favor of Remus as the principle figure in his stories and sketches. His experiments resulted in two Remuses (which he never bothered to reconcile). One was a poor, indigent old man who haunted Atlanta's streets and the editorial rooms of the newspaper. The other one was dignified, clever and resourceful, and who foreshadowed the Uncle Remus of the folklore stories (Cousins 97-98).

Sam Small returned to the *Constitution* and resumed his Uncle Si stories. Uncle Remus disappeared for nine months. He reappeared in October 1877 in a story called "Uncle Remus as a Rebel." The nine-month gap in publication was explained as the time when Remus returned to the countryside to try farming. He failed and came back to Atlanta, the story went. Many of the sketches that ensued feature Remus talking to the newspaper staff about how much he preferred rural life and his old home on the plantation (Brasch 45-49). This fabrication helped form the ultimate identity of Remus, who became firmly ensconced on the plantation of his former owners in the stories that would bring Harris immediate and long-lasting fame and status during his lifetime as a leading American author.

The first collection, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*, was published in book form in November 1880 by Appleton Co. of New York in time for the Christmas gift-book trade, although its publication date is given as 1881 (Bickley, *JCH* 38). Mark Twain recognized Remus's significance and acknowledged it quickly. He wrote a letter to Harris in the summer of 1881:

> Uncle Remus is most deftly drawn, & is a lovable & delightful creation; he, & the little boy, & their relations with each other, are bright fine literature, & worthy to live, for their own sakes. (Qtd. in R. Bruce Bickley, Jr., *Joel Chandler Harris,* 41)

Twain went on to say the stories themselves "are only alligator pears [avocados]—one merely eats them for the sake of the salad-dressing" (Qtd. in Bickley, *JCH*, 41).

The second collection, *Nights with Uncle Remus*, was released in 1883 by Houghton Mifflin Co. of Boston. The success of these collections was widespread, and "projected their author before readers of every part of the country as an interpreter of Negro life and character of the first rank and, from this time onward, he was solicited by

editors of newspapers and periodicals for articles related to the Negro problem" (Harris, *Joel Chandler Harris: Editor and Essayist*, 107).

Over the next 25 years, Harris wrote numerous stories that were published in popular magazines such as *Scribner's*, *Century*, *Harper's Monthly*, and *The Saturday Evening Post*. The stories were subsequently gathered and published in volumes. The Uncle Remus tales were best sellers around the world, translated into nearly every language, and quoted in Parliament, Congress and from church pulpits and politicians' stumps (Harris, *The Life and Letters of Joel Chandler Harris,* 145). Remus himself eventually evolved beyond the pages of the collections of stories when Harris's son Julian launched *Uncle Remus's Magazine* in 1906, with himself in the position of publisher and business manager and Joel Chandler Harris as editor. The elder Harris lived only two years into the venture.

Remaking the Old Plantation

Credited with launching the plantation revival of the 1880s, Harris in fact violates the conventions of plantation fiction by refashioning the three essential elements of plantation literature: first, he replaces the estate's great house with the slave cabin as center stage for the story's action. This differentiates him from Thomas Nelson Page, a popular plantation revivalist with whom Harris is often compared, who published *In Ole Virginia* in 1887, and John Pendleton Kennedy, whose *Swallow Barn* (1832) is generally acknowledged as the "fountainhead" of plantation literature. Kennedy's novel both satirizes and pays homage to the Southern plantation and also establishes the big house's status in the opening sentence: "Swallow Barn is an aristocratical old edifice which sits,

like a brooding hen, on the southern bank of the James River" (27). The house is the heart of the plantation, and in Old South myth, the plantation is the symbol of and model for Southern society. There is no such description of the big house in the Remus tales. In his second violation of the conventions of plantation fiction, Harris diminishes if not eliminates the image of the white Southern gentleman. The remaining requisite is the "old time" black slave or servant, and Harris provides Remus. But Remus functions differently from his counterparts in conventional plantation fiction. Remus is the tool with which Harris deconstructs the notion of black people and the black presence as always the "other." Furthermore, the part of the innocent goes to a white person, a child, rather than to a "happy" black slave. In the Uncle Remus stories, it is this white person who needs and receives instruction and protection. Remus allows Harris to replace the white "self" at the center of plantation society with a black self.

The original story, as it appeared in the *Atlanta Constitution*, was titled "The Story of Mr. Rabbit and Mr. Fox." For publication in book form, Harris changed the title to "Uncle Remus Initiates the Little Boy," moved the setting from the piazza of the big house to the interior of Remus's cabin, and changed the age of the boy from six to seven. With each of the revisions, Harris added a degree of ritual and exclusion to the tales, which strengthened his inversion of plantation power—the scene moves from the white world to the black world, and the boy's age becomes the age of reason, at which a child is ready for apprenticeship, or *initiation*. Harris sets the scene as one of teacher and apprentice. Raymond Hedin explores this idea: "In the sanctuary of Remus's cabin, Remus becomes a shaman, and the tales become instruments of initiation into a world the boy can learn from only to the extent that he leaves his own world behind" (85).

The first few lines of the opening story of the first collection, "Uncle Remus Initiates the Little Boy," establish Remus as kind, trustworthy and emotionally nurturing: the boy who serves as Remus's listening audience rests his head against the old man's arm, and gazes intently into "the rough, weather-beaten face, that beamed so kindly upon him" (4). In other stories Remus strokes the child's hair "thoughtfully and caressingly" (8) and regards the child with admiration.

In "The Night Before Christmas," published in the second collection, Remus's physical superiority and the implication of his moral superiority over the other Negroes is clear:

> The figure of the old man, as he stood smiling upon the crowd of Negroes, was picturesque in the extreme. He seemed to be taller than all the rest; and, not withstanding his venerable appearance, he moved and spoke with all the vigor of youth. He had always exercised authority over his fellow-servants. He had been the captain of the corn-pile, the stoutest at log-rolling, the swiftest with the hoe, the neatest with the plough, and the plantation hands still looked upon him as their leader. (400)

Remus is not only "captain of the corn-pile" and he is not superior only to other blacks; he is also superior to white people in the areas of wisdom, character and story-telling ability. He is invariably the most interesting, sincere, trustworthy and consistent character in the narratives that frame the animal tales. Whereas other characters, particularly whites, fret and fuss over business deals, personal relationships and childrearing, Remus is sure of himself, knows who he is, knows right and wrong, understands children and how to treat them. His presence is so comforting the little boy cannot stay away from him, and the stories have a similar effect on real readers and listeners.

Julius Lester has retold the Uncle Remus tales in plainer English than Harris uses, publishing them in several volumes in recent years, and explains that they have allowed him to meet many people who grew up listening to the stories, and the expressions of awe and wonder indicate that the memories include much more than the stories themselves. He further explains the their effect:

> The memories are of a total experience, encompassing the tale, the setting in which the tale was heard, and the storyteller, the one in the flesh—parent, relative, teacher—and the one on the page, Uncle Remus. The experience evoked by the memories is of a relationship, a relationship for which the adult still yearns. (Introduction, *The Last Tales of Uncle Remus,* x)

Other black characters written in Harris's time have nowhere near the staying power of Remus, nor did they have the same effect on their first readers. In contrast to Remus is Thomas Nelson Page's main character in his most popular story, "Marse Chan," first published in 1884 in *Century Magazine* and collected in *In Ole Virginia* (1887). The story features a black storyteller, but his tale is told to a white adult visitor and it is about the speaker's former owner. In "Unc' Edinburg's Drowndin'," Page weaves an image which is at the foundation of true plantation literature: the story of the white owner and black slave, both nursed at the same black breast, inseparable friends as youths, and devoted master and servant as adults, bound together by an almost mythic loyalty.

Page's "Marse Chan" clearly lays out the order of importance of things. Told from the first-person point of view of a white visitor in eastern Virginia, the reader is presented first with the disembodied voice of a black man addressing a dog, who subsequently refers to the dog as "white," placing the animal above himself in the social

hierarchy: "'Jes' like white folks—think 'cuz you's white and I's black, I got to wait on yo' all de time. Ne'm mine, I ain' gwi' do it!'" (3)

This is in sharp contrast to Remus, whose stories are entirely devoted to animals whose adventures clearly represent black life. The stories are also a kind of currency that Remus controls and uses as reward and punishment. He often leaves part of a story untold, unexplained. For example, in "The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story," the little boy asks, "Did the fox eat the rabbit?"

Remus replies, "Dat's all de fur de tale goes. He mout, en den agin he moutent. Some say Jedge B'ar come 'long en loosed 'im—some say he didn't. I hear Miss Sally callin'. You better run along" (8).

With every transaction like this one, Uncle Remus's mystery and power grow. He becomes elevated not only above his black cohorts, but also above whites. Harris thus idealizes blackness, seemingly foreshadowing the "projection of yearnings" and the daydreams of whites in the Civil Rights era of the 1950s and 60s described by C. Vann Woodward in *The Burden of Southern History*. They regarded the Negro as " the spiritual salvation for a bankrupt white civilization that had lost its vital juices and was destined for the dumpheap of history (180-81). Harris on some levels probably regarded Africanness as his spiritual salvation, although he never articulated such a thought.

Paradoxically, Remus also served as Harris's puppet, allowing him to give vent to his views on what was called the "Negro Problem," sometimes through brief comments in the stories, but more often in the sketches portraying Remus as a visitor to the newspaper offices. In other stories, Harris used a white character, Billy Sanders, in much the same way. Sanders, like Remus, could say things that Harris could not allow himself

to say. For example, in a sketch written late in Harris's life Sanders visits the offices of *The Atlanta Constitution* to discuss the injustice of lynching (Brasch 246).

Harris used Remus in a straightforward fashion to express ideas that we call racist today, but Remus also clearly served Harris as a signifying device. He was without a doubt well schooled in signifying after spending countless hours among slaves, listening to their stories as a youth on Turnwold Plantation. Michael Cooke's explanation of signifying fits Harris's situation perfectly:

> The one form of Afro-American expression that most white people would have commonly encountered is known as "signifying." And one of the house traits of signifying was that it did not confess itself, but kept an innocuous air; it was a way of using words that mean one acceptable thing to resonate or *signify* another of a dangerous or insubordinate or forbidden character. (Qtd. In Fishkin, 61)

Imagine young "Joe," as Harris was known, an awkward, ugly 14-year-old boy, insecure and ashamed of his illegitimate birth in tiny, proper Eatonton, Ga. Pathologically shy, but bright, curious and talented, Joe took a job as a printer's devil at *The Countryman*, published on Turnwold Plantation, nine miles outside Eatonton, in the Civil War years. There, he often spent his free hours not with the white owner's family, but in the kitchen and the slave quarters listening to stories told by the slaves.

Harris's experiences at Turnwold undeniably left him with an understanding of and sympathies with the planter class. After all, he liked and admired his employer, Joseph Addison Turner, and was given free run of Turner's enormous library, where he read widely. But a far deeper cut into Joe's psyche was made by his friendships with the slaves. Those friendships became the raw material of his stories. He melded several

storytellers into one to make Remus, and put in his own place a younger white boy. Critic Jesse Bier, citing Kenneth Lynn, compares Remus and the little white boy to other interracial literary pairs who unite in common alienation, " in which the white hero joins the colored in voluntary rejection of prevailing injustices or absurdities." He continues,

> Quite operative, then, is a democratic inclination toward a broader human solidarity of the oppressed and disaffected, a comic and rebellious companionship. It is no accident that most of these relationships have something of an extravagant minstrel unity and revelry as their basis." (101)

As in Huck and Jim, Leatherstocking and Chingachgook and others, the pairing of the races, Bier states, "is a renunciation of the culture's artificial separation of them and is comic reduction of arbitrary superiority." Remus and the boy " conspire in an insulated free fantasy" to relate tales of comic amorality that arise from "the deepest wishes of the New South and the author himself" (102).

One of the deepest wishes of the New South was to be able to glance back to its antebellum heritage and see something of value – anything – since the values, history and culture of the region and its past were under attack from all sides. Yet at the same time, also from all sides was a clamoring for the moonlight and magnolias myths. A large part of the Southern mystique was the life of black people – their enslavement, their music, their language, religion, history, and especially their relationships with whites.

Remus answered all these needs.

In addition, northern readers in particular wanted to see a situation in the post-Reconstruction South that gave them cause for optimism. Northern guilt over abandoning Reconstruction required images of contented black people and peaceful black-white

relationships, which would indicate bright prospects for the future of the " Negro Question."

Remus helped answer this need, too.

"Not an invention of my own"

The New York Times reviewed *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* on December 1, 1880, and focused on the " strange myths" rather than " the happy little bits of by-play"—the framing stories in which Uncle Remus and the little boy interact. The reviewer expresses an insecurity common at the time, that America did not have a strong enough body of literature of its own, and cites Harris's new book as an example of the "quaint and peculiar" material that was indeed available to be discovered and used as material for an authentic American canon. But rather than comment on Remus, the *Times* reviewer focuses on the story of Brer Rabbit, the possible origins of the stories, the dialect and interesting colloquialisms (Bickley, *JCH* 3-4).

Other reviews at the time similarly take Remus completely for granted, although some do recognize the subversive nature of the tales. For example, a review in *The Spectator* in 1881 states:

> ...Mr. Harris obviously regards this book as a defence of the slave-system. Because it depicts the slave of the old plantations as often warmly attached to the family in which he was domesticated, as full of sympathetic qualities, full of humour an fancy, and full, too, of a certain kind of social independence, Mr. Harris appears to suppose that it is an apology for the system. In reality, this book illustrates the habits of cunning, deceit, dishonesty, and the delight in them, in which even these highly favourable specimens of the slave were steeped, quite as much as it illustrates their

> attachment to the house to which they belonged,
> and their fascinating qualities of head and heart."
> (Bickley, *JCH* 6)

At the same time, reviewers in 1883 were referring to the author as Uncle Remus, so the intermingling of identities between Harris and Remus began almost immediately. Samuel L. Clemens published *Life on the Mississippi* in 1883 and included a short chapter titled, "Uncle Remus and Mr. Cable," an anecdote about Harris's shyness that reveals how real Uncle Remus was to his readers.

Clemens and George Washington Cable received Harris at Cable's home in New Orleans. Clemens writes:

> He deeply disappointed a number of children who had flocked eagerly to Mr. Cable's house to get a glimpse of the illustrious sage and oracle of the nation's nurseries. They said:—
>
> " Why, he's white!"
>
> They were grieved about it. So, to console them, the book was brought out, that they might hear Uncle Remus's Tar-Baby story from the lips of Uncle Remus himself—or what, in their outraged eyes, was left of him. (503)

But Harris refused to read.

He claimed his success was "a matter of strange surprise" and that the whole thing was "just an accident." He said, " All I did was to write out and put into print the stories I had heard all my life! (Harris, *Life and Letters* 145 -46)

This is the great paradox of Joel Chandler Harris: he refused to acknowledge any real awareness of what he had created. This paradox is the conflict between recognition of the humanity of blacks, and being drawn powerfully to black people, whether because of unstated feelings of inadequacy, spiritual deprivation, societal oppression, simple selfishness and material need, or even real love, and what Wolfe called " beleaguered

racial emotions," i.e., racism, white society's demand for domination, emotional and social distance, even biological superiority. Bruce Bickley called it the " paradox of insight" ("Joel Chandler Harris and the Old and New South" 9).

In his introduction to *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings,* Harris attempts disingenuously to pass off Brer Rabbit's cruel behavior as mischief:

> The story of the Rabbit and the Fox, as told by the Southern Negroes ... seems to me to be to a certain extent allegorical, albeit such an interpretation may be unreasonable. At least it is a fable thoroughly characteristic of the Negro; and it needs no scientific investigation to show why he selects as his hero the weakest and most harmless of all animals, and brings him out victorious in contests with the bear, the wolf, and the fox. It is not virtue that triumphs, but helplessness; it is not malice, but mischievousness. (44)

Remus plays the role of parent and disciplinarian to the boy from time to time, and sometimes reinforces the adult whites' values overtly, but through the tales he tells the child, he in fact undermines those values.

While some critics doubt Harris's awareness, Eric Sundquist believes that Harris had to know that it would be plain to every reader that the rabbit's victories over the other animals are motivated by " the most transparent aggression and obsequious mocking contempt of the slave for his master, or the black man for his white boss" (340-341).

"A Blackface Will Rogers"

Joel Chandler Harris's literary work received a goodly share of critical attention in the twentieth century, but the fact seems to be that a lot of what many people love, and others find objectionable is actually the 1946 Walt Disney film, *Song of the South.*

Disney characterized Brer Rabbit not as malevolent, or even mischievous, and certainly not as a trickster, but as "'the naïve, happy-go-lucky little hero of the Tales—protagonist of the human race, actually—who stumbles into one kind of trouble after another, always managing through belated thought, courage and a bit of 'fottswork' to squeak through'" (Brasch 275-76). But it wasn't the film's portrayal of Rabbit, Brer Bear or Brer Fox that evoked the greatest response; it was Remus.

The depiction of Remus as the primary representative of American black people "made the film one of the most criticized in history" (Brasch 278). Interestingly, much criticism centered on slavery, when in fact the film was set in the post-Reconstruction period. Even Disney's publicity referred to Remus as a slave. Critics such as Bosley Crowther of *The New York Times* and writers for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and *Ebony* magazine decried the movie's " idyllic master-slave relationship" and Uncle Remus's characterization as an Uncle Tom/Aunt Jemima type (Brasch 280). The confusion is understandable, considering that even in the stories, while most details allow the reader to understand that Remus is a *former* slave who has remained on "his" plantation, the language, situations and images are ambiguous and blur the boundary between slave and free. For example, *Nights with Uncle Remus* opens with "Mr. Fox and Miss Goose," which contains the phrase, "The lady to whom Uncle Remus belonged had been thoughtful of the old man" (111).

Negative responses to the film continued through the decades; theater releases were routinely protested through the 1950s. Disney withdrew the film from distribution in 1958, but reversed its position several times in the years that followed, releasing it, then withdrawing it. Then something interesting happened to the public response to the

film. It was re-released in 1980 and again in 1986 to little protest, although to some negative reviews. However, *People Weekly*'s review noted a trait in the film that also appears in the stories. "'No white character in the film is possessed of anything like this former slaver's principles or sense of self-worth. Uncle Remus does more than just sing and tell tales; he listens and understands. There's a child in all of us who should not be deprived of the pleasure of his company'" (Brasch 282). Again, a sense of longing and need is connected with Remus.

Bernard Wolfe, in a 1949 essay, attributes some of the longing to Remus's status as the "prototype of the Negro grinner-giver. Nothing ever clouds the 'beaming countenance' of the venerable old darky," he wrote. When Remus grins, Harris is pulling the strings; when he 'gives' his folk stories, he is the ventriloquist's dummy on Harris's knee" (71).

No doubt many white readers crave or craved Remus for the same reasons Harris craved him, because Remus was, according to Wolfe, "the walking image of Harris's ego ideal, "the un-selfconscious, 'natural,' freeflowing, richly giving creator that Harris could never become" (82). He continues:

> Indeed for Harris, as for many another white American, the Negro *seemed* in every respect to be the negative print of his own uneasy self: " happy-go-lucky," socializing, orally expressive, muscularly relaxed, never bored or passive, unashamedly exhibitionistic, free from self-pity even in his situation of concentrated pain, emotionally fluid. And every time Remus opened his mouth, every time he flashed a grin, he wrote effortlessly another novel that was strangled a-borning in Harris. (82)

Remus is Harris's "natural" self, a fantasy of a freeflowing spirit, "emotionally fluid." But as Wolfe shows, he is an instrument of subversion, even "covert assault" on white power, in Robert Bones's words, for his stories also assault Christian values, in a powerful subversion of the white supremacist theory that slavery and bondage were ultimately good for black people because it introduced them to Christianity. In Wolfe's analysis, a key dramatic tension in the stories is the question of whether "the communal meal will ever take place in the 'animal kingdom'" (72). Of course, the " animal kingdom" is the human world, and as Wolfe points out, Remus's theme throughout the tales is neighborliness and the communal meal is the symbol for it (73). Thus the tales take on two of the most important ideas in Christianity: the command to love one's neighbor, and the image of eating together, as in the Last Supper.

The stories also possibly assault the symbol of the rabbit itself. "In Christian symbolism...the rabbit is the essence of meekness and innocence." Storytelling slaves took the rabbit and turned him into the hero, the belligerent and malicious character who, rather than fall victim to the fox or the wolf, badgers them. Black storytellers could have taken the Reynard fables from white people, Wolfe theorizes, and turned them inside out in a further act of subversion (78).

Harris steadfastly refused to acknowledge this subversive quality, always claiming he was merely the compiler of the stories, that Remus was simply a composite character based on several men he knew when he was young, and that the stories were of pure African origin – therefore could have little direct implication regarding slavery or the black-white situation in America.

Lifting the Veil

For readers who observe carefully, Harris shows us plainly what white curiosity about black life and black spiritual life looks like. He sets Remus up as shaman, and his cabin as sanctuary, and then demonstrates how a little white boy can attempt to expose the mystery of the magic. Sundquist cites two examples in *Nights with Uncle Remus,* in which the boy's questions probe deeper, lifting the veil of allegory. In those examples, Brer Rabbit pits himself against Mr. Man rather than another animal, "representing a more marked intrusion of the world of the masters into the dream world of the animal tales" (346). Brer Rabbit tricks Mr. Man and steals his money, and on another occasion, takes his meat. The boy questions Remus about the theft and he replies, "In dem days de creeturs bleedz ter look out fer deyse'f, mo' speshually dem w'at ain't got hawn en huff." Later, Remus comments, " Dat little chap gittin' too much fer ole Remus – dat he is!" ("Mr. Man Has Some Meat" 195) Sundquist observes that the old man is spelling out the allegory of slavery in the stories, and the boy is getting " too close" to recognizing the underlying truth of the tales. " Paradoxically, of course, this is just what he is supposed to do – or what Harris's readers are supposed to do" (Sundquist 346). In the secret language of folktales in dialect, Harris warned his readers to read the signs carefully.

Remus warns of the danger of living life as one who cannot interpret the signs. He tells the little boy a story about witches. Remus recognizes the signs: two strands of a horse's mane tied together is a witch's stirrup, he says, and just as easily as he can recognize the tracks of the raccoon, he recognizes evidence of witches. Remus never says that he is a conjurer, but he implies it when he says,

> "Conjun fokes kin tell a witch de minnit dey lays
> der eyes on it, but dem w'at ain't cunjun, hit's

> mighty hard ter tell w'en dey see one, kase dey
> might come in de 'pearunce un a cow en all kinder
> beas's." ("A Plantation Witch" 95)

Remus explains to the little boy that a witch can change appearance because he has a slit in the back of the neck, and can pull his " hide" over the head the way most people pull a shirt off. Those who can read the signs know that they can lie in wait, and when the witch pulls off his skin and flies away in the form of a bat or flees into the night as a black cat, the " hide" can be salted so that the witch will give up his evil practice. Things are not as they appear to be; beware the seeming totality of presence.

Remus portrays the witch according to his listener's expectations: the witch is evil and must be caught. But Remus knows that every black person out of necessity must be a "witch;" every Negro must be able to slip in and out of disguise. The Negro's full intelligence and power cannot be revealed to the white world, because whites will become threatened and try to take away that power. And Harris himself developed the capacity to slip in and out of his white skin.

Another paradox in Harris's work, though, is the poor treatment Remus receives at the hand of his inventor in some of the *non*-fable stories. Harris's published numerous sketches in *The Atlanta Constitution* and elsewhere, and many were collected along with the animal tales and published in book volumes. In *Uncle Remus and His Friends*, a story called "Uncle Remus at the Telephone" makes fun of the old man in typical minstrel fashion, portraying him as believing Mars John is inside the device (219). In keeping with a minstrel performer, Harris does not refrain from making Remus himself the butt of crude humor in stories other than the animal fables.

Ironically, perhaps, one of the important reasons to read, study and teach Joel Chandler Harris today is his disingenuousness. He claimed simple motives for recording and retelling the stories, and presented himself overtly as nostalgic for the stereotypical old plantation days. He discussed black people in terms that had them unresentful of their enslavement. Eric Lott describes this phenomenon:

> While [minstrelsy] was organized around the quite explicit 'borrowing' of black cultural materials for white dissemination, a borrowing that ultimately depended on the material relations of slavery, the minstrel show obscured these relations by pretending that slavery was amusing, right, and natural. (3)

Like a minstrel performer, Harris asks his audience to imagine Uncle Remus as an old negro "who has nothing but pleasant memories of the discipline of slavery" (xxvii). For many readers, especially in the latter part of the twentieth century, that line immediately and forever explains that Uncle Remus is purely the product of the white author's (and white, Southern society's) fantasy—that of the happy slave, the smiling, gentle, loyal "darky," one who would have never run away or risen up against his master, and in the most treasured part of the white fantasy, the black person who *loved* "his" white people.

Furthermore, Harris curiously presents Miss Sally, of whom Remus is exceedingly fond and protective, as outwardly condescending toward him: "...her attitude toward Remus was one of bustling criticism and depreciation" (219-20). Miss Sally's contradictory attitude toward Remus in the following, typical exchange almost suggests that she distrusts her own strong affectionate feelings toward him, and covers her distrust with a bitter, superior air. The tone here and elsewhere in the story, and in

other stories, is almost of a husband and wife, with Sally concerning herself with whether Remus should be in bed, and Remus not allowing Sally the satisfaction of hurting his feelings:

> "I should think it was time for you to be in bed," she exclaimed.
>
> "No'm, 't ain't," responded Uncle Remus. "I year tell dat w'en ole folks git ter bed soon, dey feelin's bin hurted; en goodness knows dey ain't nobody hurted my feelings dis day."
>
> "Well, there isn't anything in there that you can pick up. I've had everything put under lock and key." (220)

Throughout the story, the language has the ring of a vaudeville—or perhaps minstrel show—sketch. Other examples of Sally's odd teasing of Remus are found in "Uncle Remus Receives a Valentine."

> 'Miss Sally' opened the envelope, and drew forth a highly colored cartoon of a negro cramming a huge pie in his mouth. She read:—
>
> 'He eats, he sleeps, he steals on the sly,
> Nigger, big nigger with a mouthful of pie.'

Uncle Remus examines the card: "Contrary to expectations, he did not make any demonstration of anger" (229). Remus refuses to acknowledge the racist slap in the face, and instead treats the card very seriously for another reason, telling Miss Sally that his woman will think he's been carrying on with another woman. "Man w'at gits volyumtines, dat man ain't ter have no peace er mine less'n he git out er de country" (230).

But then the narrator makes a curious remark: "It is unnecessary to remark that the old man is still digging around in his Miss Sally's garden and quarreling with the other negroes." The possible double meaning in the sentence is given additional support

throughout the tales and sketches where Remus and Miss Sally encounter each other. They have an odd, old-married-couple-quarreling quality about them, as we shall see.

This curious passage acknowledges the derogatory nature of the humor on the card, yet it sidesteps the issue, replacing the question of Remus's anger over the insult with an odd bit of business about the misunderstandings that getting a Valentine could create. Following this is Harris's "unnecessary remark" that, essentially, Remus forgave Miss Sally, or never allowed himself to feel any anger to start with, and that he is still around, " quarreling with the other negroes." This story is an odd reassurance piece: whites can make black people angry, at little risk of retribution or even ill feeling.

No wonder, then, that Uncle Remus is confused with Uncle Tom, or, more accurately, with the misunderstood Uncle Tom.

Louis D. Rubin Jr. analyzes the similarities and finds the characterizations, published less than thirty years apart, very much alike, but the public reception of them very different because of their relationship with whites. The rude treatment in the above example notwithstanding, Uncle Tom is mocked, beaten, starved, his humanity denied, his virtue unrewarded, and Uncle Remus is honored, pampered and respected by his white patrons.

> "Thus, if the northern reading public could feel it was not Mrs. Stowe's version of black-white relationships, but Joel Chandler Harris', that typified life in the South, then the proper response was not to send armies southward to trample out the vintage where the grapes of wrath were stored, but to let the amicability and mutual trust of the black-white relationships down there exist free of the meddling of northern politicians and the blunders of misguided reformers." (160)

The amicability and trust between Remus and white characters could and did soothe the fears of Northerners, and Southerners for that matter, with regard to the direction the New South was headed where race relations – *the* question of the day – was concerned. But a whole other meaning is attached to the surface meaning of Remus's good cheer and the fact that much lies beneath it.

Michael Flusche theorizes that Harris tried to come to grips with the unpleasant aspects of life, primarily his own illegitimate birth and poor childhood. He did so by idealizing his past "beyond recognition," although all his life he harbored fears and suspicions concerning society and deep pessimism. So although he wrote mostly optimistic and uplifting tales, "just beneath the surface is a world in which every man is an island with few bonds to the other members of society" (174-75).

The animal fables certainly reflect this attitude, "a humorous recognition that beneath all the graceful amenities the world was a hostile place. Every man was a possible enemy in spite of his smiles," Flusche writes. Old, philosophic Uncle Remus, in Flusche's opinion, mutes the real meaning of the stories (177). Other works by Harris involving human characters also reflect Harris's dark view of society. Flusche tallied the marriages in Harris's later works, other than the Remus tales, and found that in two-third of them, one spouse is already dead. In one-third of the marriages with two living partners, one is maimed or crippled. In stories in which a wedding takes place, almost one-third involve a partner who is handicapped in some way.

More than two out of three children in Harris's fiction have lost one or both parents, and there are numerous characters who are "feeble-minded or thought to be insane." More often than not, a healthy family, where it exists, is not central to the plot.

Families who are central often have a father who is displaced as the authority, Flusche found. Interestingly, the "sad and grotesque" details have nothing to do with the plot, but are presented by the author matter-of-factly (181). The stories tend toward typical romantic plots. Also interestingly, Harris's best story along these lines is one in which he did make isolation central to the plot. As Flusche observes, Joe, in "Free Joe and Rest of the World," becomes the ultimate symbol of rootlessness for Harris (181). Joe, a free Negro in Georgia in the 1850s, waits months at the base of a tree in a swamp for the return of his wife and dog who have been sold away. In the end, he dies alone.

Remus provides the boy with a spiritual and psychological coping device to counter the world's hostility: the laughing place. In "Brother Rabbit's Laughing-Place," in the 1905 collection of stories *Told by Uncle Remus*, the little boy is described by the narrator as "intensely practical. He had imagination, but it was unaccompanied by any of the ancient illusions that make the memory of childhood so delightful" (564). Remus tells the boy that he needs his own laughing place, "what you kin go an' tickle yo'se'f an' laugh whedder you wanter laugh er no" (565). The laughing place is a state of mind, a source of strength, spiritual nourishment and also an item in Rabbit's bag of tricks.

When the other animals tell Brer Rabbit they are going to hold a contest to see who can out-laugh the other, "he shake his head an' wiggle his mustache, an' say dat when he wanter laugh, he got a laughin'-place fer ter go ter, whar he won't be pestered by the balance er creation. He say he kin go dar an' laugh his fill, an'den go on 'bout his business, ef he got any business, and ef he ain't got none, he kin go ter play" (568). Remus tells the child that if he had a laughing place, he'd "gain flesh" and when his

father returned from Atlanta, he'd hardly know him, "an' he'd be all de gladder ter ter see you lookin' like somebody" (565).

"Do I look like nobody?" asked the little boy. Here Harris spells out clearly what he sees as the key to health and strength for the child – close contact with the tales and with black culture in the form of the old black man. Remus replies, "When you fust come down here, you look like nothin' 'tal, but sence you been ramblin' roun' wid me, you done 'gun ter look like somebody – mos' like um." The child explains that he has begun to look like somebody because he, too, has a laughing-place, and "It is right here where you are.... Why, you are my laughing-place" (565-66).

Uncle Remus's presence and the stories he tells have begun to breathe new life into the little boy.

The Free Body

Investing a body with legal freedom without social freedom might create, like the Tar Baby did, a sticky situation indeed. "Free Joe" is a moving, sad story involving no tricksterism. It is the flip side of the animal tales, in which the message is: Those that seem small, weak, powerless—a rabbit, a crawfish—have secret abilities destroy or to persevere in the most adverse circumstances. And though the messenger seems benign, his message may be dire. In "Free Joe," the weak and unempowered suffer and die.

The reader is tempted to compare Remus and Joe, and to conclude that because Remus is happy, loving and beloved, and because he chooses to stay in his old cabin and working at his old tasks long after he is legally emancipated, and because Joe finds nothing but pain and difficulty in freedom, that Harris must believe that slavery is good

and freedom is bad for black people. But drill beneath the surface of the stories and beneath the surface of Harris's psyche, as Flusche does, and one finds the issue is really not about slavery versus freedom, but about having a place in the world, and being sure and certain of that place.

Chapter Two: Uncle Remus's Cabin

Critical discourse on Harris's Uncle Remus stories centers on two points. One is the way Harris characterized Remus. The old man is a shaman, a shrewd, wise, loving, and mature man. Yet he is also a "caricature of servile obedience and loyalty to his former master, something of a wiser Steppin Fetchit who ridiculed uppity blacks and longed for a return to the Zip-a-dee-doo-dah days of the pre-war plantation," as Frank Stephenson puts it. The other point is the nature of the stories that Remus tells and how that nature contradicts what we know about Harris through his editorials in *The Atlanta Constitution* and other sources.

Harris's editorials supported progress in the South through economic development and education and generally echoed the attitude of *Constitution* owner Henry W. Grady, who advocated Southern industrialization and reconciliation with the North, and favored supporting blacks in their efforts to improve their situation as long as they did not threaten white domination (Frederickson 205). Grady famously expressed his views in his "New South" speech, delivered in 1886 to the New England Society at a meeting in New York City. Notably, Harris *generally* reflected this support of progress in the South. A truer characterization of his wishes for the South would have been a slow, gentle progress that allowed for Negro self-improvement with support or at least tolerance by whites in a South that preserved some of its rural, agrarian heritage. Ever the reconciliationist, Harris attempted to satisfy moderate segregationist readers while at the same time expressing something that might be regarded as progressive. In an essay published in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1904, he wrote: "The negro is of a different

race, it is true, and his mind may fail to respond to the different processes of civilization and enlightenment; but this remains to be seen. It has not failed to respond thus far" (Harris, *Editor and Essayist,* 142).

The debate regarding black potential began long before Harris was born and spanned many years, continuing well into the twentieth century. In Harris's lifetime, it flared up to become the question of the day after the Civil War and Reconstruction. The presence of black people and of "Africanness" had never been a simple one. Innumerable pamphlets, books, essays, and sermons had been produced arguing that Negroes were another, inferior species and were naturally suited to be the slaves of white masters. George M. Frederickson cites one example: Sidney George Fisher's pamphlet *The Laws of Race, as Connected with Slavery*, published in 1860 (Harris was 12 years old). But belief in white superiority did not necessarily mean support of black slavery. Fisher argued in the pamphlet against extending slavery into newly open Western territories on the grounds that blacks would consume everything produced in the West (142). And as Louis Menand amply demonstrated in *The Metaphysical Club*, America's leading thinkers who supported the abolition of slavery in all states did not necessarily believe in racial equality. Once abolition of slavery was achieved, the debate over the meaning of racial differences continued full force. Menand cites Edward A. Ross as "one of the best-known public intellectuals of his day" who was a eugenicist and opponent of immigration on the grounds that racial inequality was a fact of nature. He published an article in the *American Journal of Sociology* in 1907 explaining his views (Menand 383).

The *Southern Review* published an article in 1874 arguing blacks were destined to extinction unless they put themselves under the domination of Southern whites.

Darwinism had been used as a rationale for white superiority since the publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. However, the writer in the *Southern Review* believed Negro assertiveness and a long race war would lead to the extinction of black people, rather than "natural" causes (Frederickson 239). Edward W. Gilliam, a Baltimore physician and novelist published two widely read articles on the future of the Negro. In one, published in 1884, he argued that while blacks were inferior to whites, they were improving, and that there were dangers inherent in their aspirations. He believed individual blacks would make great advances toward equality, but would be stopped by resistant whites motivated by fear of miscegenation. The result would be black solidarity and a collective demand for equal rights. "The advancement of blacks ...becomes a menace to whites," Gilliam said. His solution was to remove the entire black population (Frederickson 229).

An ideology of extreme racism gained enormous prominence late in the nineteenth century that far surpassed in vitriol and hatred many of the arguments for white superiority previously posited. Lynching reached its peak in 1890. The United States Supreme Court legalized segregation in 1896 in its *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision. In *The Negro a Beast,* published in 1900, author Charles Carroll argued that the Negro was literally an ape rather than a human being.

This was the public conversation on race that Harris was born into, grew up in, and in which he gained his greatest accomplishments. The debate over the Negro Question was still going on when he died in 1908. It was in this context that Harris published his own views on the Negro Question. Harris's moderate, optimistic voice no

doubt was drowned out to some extent by the sensationalist practitioners of race hatred. In the *Saturday Evening Post* article, published in 1904, he wrote:

> I am bound to conclude from what I see all about me, and from what I know of the race elsewhere, that the negro, notwithstanding the late start he has made in civilization and enlightenment, is capable of making himself a useful member in the communities in which he lives and moves, and that he is becoming more and more desirous of conforming to all the laws that have been enacted for the protection of society. (qtd. in Harris, *Editor and Essayist* 145)

Harris frequently has a way of seeming to concede to some of the positions of extreme racists, then pulling his punch, and turning in the other direction. In another *Saturday Evening Post* article published in 1904, he discusses the proposition that whites and blacks be separated geographically:

> ... I have never understood or felt that the presence of the negroes in the South constitutes a menace to whites. There was, indeed, a time ... when there were fears of excesses on the part of the newly-freed negroes, led by the unscrupulous persons who, first and last, have done them so much harm; but the fear, or the dread, passed away as a fog passes, and now there are very few who feel that the presence of the negro in the South is a menace to whites. (qtd. in Harris, *Editor and Essayist* 152-53)

In truth, Harris felt strongly the opposite. For him personally, the "presence of the Negro in the South" was highly desirable, for black people were the center of morality and spirituality in Southern society, in Harris's view. His editorials spell out a moderate, compassionate segregationist's view of Southern life. The animal tales suggest something entirely different.

Harris did not create the tales themselves; he rendered them in his own version of Negro dialect, and framed them in narratives involving Uncle Remus and a little white boy. This enormous collection of animal stories clearly depicts Southern society, particularly black Southerners, in various situations, and expresses a view of life and morals that is dark, venomous and bitter. At the same time they are filled with laughter, exuberance, and joy in living. That joy often follows in the wake of the triumph of the weak over the strong. Brer Rabbit is sassy and high-spirited, but he gains his attitude from a lifetime of one victory after another in which he burns, scalds or otherwise harms or kills his neighbors, or at the very least humiliates them, makes off with their food or their sexual partners. Brer Rabbit gets along through amoral or immoral acts, and Remus knows it. The animals' antics are not strictly confined to the fables: Remus quite often comments on them or answers the little boys questions about them. "Right in the parlor of a completely unsuspecting white America," writes Frank Stephenson, "Harris rolled out what amounted to a literary Trojan horse filled with assorted symbols and subtexts that struck at the very heart of white Americans' most cherished institutions." Stephenson quotes Harris scholar Hugh Keenan: "Remus, of course, identifies with the old plantation system, no doubt about that. But he also works against it at the same time. He's presenting a counter view of society and religion in those tales. The fact is he was very subversive" (Stephenson 16).

But was he aware of the subversion? Was Harris aware that he was promulgating "a thinly veiled code for out-foxing old massa," as Stephenson puts it?

Harris scholars differ widely on this question. Some believe that Harris's non-animal tales are proof that "Harris was of his time and place and that, however

benevolent his attitude, he did not transcend his circumstance," (Rubin 171) While the animal fables are full of subversiveness, the nonanimal stories involving black people in the South offer very little to validate that Harris had subversive motives.

For example, one of Harris's best-known non-animal stories is "Free Joe." While the story clearly demonstrates Harris's sensitivity to the lives of Southern black people, and is full of simple pathos, it also clearly allows the reader to conclude that freedom for black people could be a curse, and that slavery could be justified because it prevented the rootlessness suffered by Joe.

Whether Harris intended a literary undermining of the white power system, "his audience surely did not read the stories as subversive," write Louis D. Rubin, Jr. The stories "told readers that the black man was happy. They seemed to glorify life on the old plantation" (171).

Harris can be forgiven for being unable to transcend his circumstances, some critics say. Darwin T. Turner argues that Harris displayed a "wanton disregard of facts" that irritate "any reader who wishes to give Harris the benefit of the doubt, to suppose that clouded memory or compulsive fancy caused him to misconstrue the characters of Negroes." Yet Turner believes ultimately he should be judged favorably, that he could not escape the attitudes instilled by his culture. "Believing in the black man and wanting to help him, Harris, like Kipling, felt superior to the black man," Turner wrote in 1968 (127).

Turner explains Harris's characterization of blacks this way:

> He saw their humility in their relationship to whites; and, ignoring the fact that the humility had been enforced through three hundred years of custom and physical abuse, he attached dignity to it. The alternatives – that the Negro

> was servile, or was merely feigning respect—did not conform to his ideal. Undoubtedly, Harris also knew hostile Negroes and educated, independent Negroes, but he preferred to write about those who fit into his myth of the devoted servant who, regardless of circumstance, instinctively dedicates his life to nursing, amusing, consoling and worshiping his master. (127-28)

Uncle Remus is "principally a figment of the white imagination" and Harris, as a journalist, was "an active propagandist in the cause of white supremacy," Robert Bone asserts. Equivocating not in the least, Bone holds that "as a literary man, [Harris was] a leading proponent of the plantation myth." Furthermore, Harris is redeemed entirely by the Brer Rabbit tales. Bone states, "A product of the Afro-American oral tradition, these magnificent folktales must not be allowed to languish simply on the grounds that a white Georgian was the first to write them down" (130).

However, Bone acknowledges, as any sensible reader must, that "Joel Chandler Harris was a complicated man, full of neurotic conflicts and self-deceiving ways; a Southern maverick, capable of stubborn orthodoxies and equally tenacious heresies where black people were concerned; an admirer of black folklore, and an ethnologist of strict integrity, to whom black Americans owe a considerable debt for the preservation of their folk heritage; and a catalytic agent of prime importance in the history of the Afro-American short story."

And then, after placing Harris firmly in the white supremacist, plantation myth-propagating school, Bone ends up where it seems critics must inevitably go, to the place where Harris is neither/nor, both/and. Bone, however, credits Harris the man and author with racism, but the stories he collected and preserved the critic acknowledges contained antiracism and anti-slavery meanings and messages.

Bone concluded that Harris's greatest virtue as a writer was as a kind of transcriptionist:

> Our final judgment of this man and his work cannot be a simple one. If the Uncle Remus books perpetuate the pro-slavery myths of the plantation tradition, they also contain one of the sharpest indictments of the institution in American literature. Perhaps we cannot improve on the formulation of William Stanley Braithwaite, who wrote in 1925, "...in the Uncle Remus stories the race was its own artist, lacking only in its illiteracy the power to record its speech. In the perspectives of time and fair judgment the credit will be divided, and Joel Chandler Harris regarded as a sort of providentially provided amanuensis for preserving the folk tales and legends of a race. (131)

Clearly Harris wrapped the stories he preserved, the subversive, countercultural and often downright hostile stories, within the Uncle Remus cover, which was familiar, acceptable and comforting to the readers of his time. And he knew what he was doing—not that he ever openly admitted it. An author does not collect and transmit dozens and dozens of animal fables that clearly subvert white power not to mention invert common human values without knowing something of what he is doing. His position in society as a white middle-class journalist with a conventional family meant he could not put himself in an unbearable position. Uncle Remus allowed him to avoid that position while still achieving his aims.

Rubin compares Harris and his relationship to the black slaves he knew at Turnwold to Huckleberry Finn and Jim, citing *On the Plantation*, in which Harris's fictional stand-in is a child of uncertain parentage who also befriended a runaway slave and helped throw hunters off his trail.

> There was a sympathy, amounting to an identification of interests, that is unmistakable. As Jay B. Hubbell notes in *The South in American Literature*, "It is almost as though he were one of them.... His illegitimate birth seemed not to matter. It would have been different if he had been the son of a great slaveholder like Turner or perhaps if he had lived in Turner's house." This instinctive identification, so different from anything else in southern local-color fiction except for Clemens', was to be of absolute importance to the dynamics of the Uncle Remus stories Harris would later write and would remain valid in spite of Harris' conscious adherence to the official southern position on the subject. (163)

He is therefore neither iconoclastic champion of the black cause, nor an unequivocal segregationist. He is both a plantation mythmaker and an honest observer of black life and the plight of slaves, former slaves, freed blacks and their children. This double-consciousness does not mean that Harris is duplicitous or hypocritical. Harris knew the truth, but simply could not survive in his world and in his own life if he openly lived by that truth.

Rubin sees Harris similarly: "Joel Chandler Harris is a complex, reticent man, who must secretly have pondered the contradictions and compromises in his own life, but if ever he revealed them to anyone, there is no record of it" (160).

There is no explicit record, although Harris wrote of his "other fellow," the side of himself who took up pen and paper after work hours to create Uncle Remus and to record the animal fables. While it may be true Harris left no record of pondering his life's contradictions, he certainly left a very clear record of a strong sense of two selves dwelling within him.

About the Negro as a Man

Fred Hobson observed during his research for *Tell About the South* that a number of white Southerners in the 1940s through the 1970s wrote autobiographies or very personal social commentaries in which they attempted to come to terms with racial guilt – "their own and their region's." He later examined a number of these "racial conversion narratives" closely and published his findings in *But Now I See: The White Southern Racial Conversion Narrative* (1999), comparing the writings in spirit with New England religious conversion narratives of the seventeenth century (the language of the Southern racial converts is remarkably similar to that of the Puritan converts: they speak of their sins, guilt, blindness, "seeing the light," repentance and redemption, Hobson observes [2]). He points out that racial conversion narratives as a form of Southern non-fiction self-expression were not seen until the 1940s. He defines them as "works in which the authors, all products of and willing participants in a harsh, segregated society, confess racial wrongdoings and are 'converted,' in varying degrees, from racism to something approaching racial enlightenment" (1-2). Hobson admits that Southern racial conversion narratives could include fiction, and cites Faulkner's "The Bear" and "that first and most eloquent of white racial conversion narratives, the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*" (6).

The difference between Hobson's racial converts and Huck Finn is that Huck never realized he was converted: "The difference in these southerners is that they, unlike Huck, *are* able to distinguish racial right from wrong at the point they tell their stories," Hobson says (6). Another difference of course is that Hobson's converts are real people, and the authors of their stories. Huck is a fictional character. Samuel Clemens created Huckleberry Finn, and Clemens certainly knew "racial right from wrong."

In Hobson's examination of late-nineteenth century Southern writing for "anything resembling guilt over white racial sins," he cites George W. Cable as one of the few who filled the bill, and concludes: "In the final years of the century, as Jim Crow laws became entrenched and Dixie moved deeper into its dark age of segregation, public expressions of white racial guilt because rarer still" (12).

In no way can Joel Chandler Harris's work be interpreted as racial conversion narratives or racial "confessions," yet Uncle Remus, the animal tales, and a few other compositions echo the *acknowledgement* found in the conversion narratives. And Harris's explanation of his "other fellow" is nothing if not a confession. Readers and critics can argue endlessly that Uncle Remus is a stereotype, a throwback to slavery, a white man's fantasy of a happy old ex-slave content with his past, present and future. Yet the very fact of Remus's invention, and the nuances of his character, the subtle shades in his personality, all point to a depth of understanding and a kind of masked confession by Harris. The tales are further evidence. True, Harris as a white man could simply have written them down as he heard them, with no deeper relationship with them or understanding of them. But the feeling one gets reading them tells that this simply is not true.

During Harris's lifetime, Albion Tourgee wrote, "About the Negro as a man, with hopes, fears, and aspirations like other men, our literature is very nearly silent" (qtd. in David W. Blight, 220). But about an animal standing in for a Negro man, with all his hopes, fears and aspirations – Harris's literature anything but silent.

The animal fables are allegorical stories of black life in the South. Nearly all deal with the struggle for power, although some are simply about one-upmanship, and others

are about power within a racial context, or a sexual context. Some are about power at its most basic level: survival. Others, in addition to portraying power plays, address religion and morality or social mores.

Clearly Brer Rabbit can be read as a black hero, with Brer Fox, Brer Bear, Brer Wolf and Brer Buzzard frequently playing whites, usually white masters. Rabbit must use his wits to survive, and he demonstrates again and again that the smallest, weakest creature can come out on top if he is smart enough, willing to violate any moral code and stop at nothing.

"Brer Fox ain't never cotch 'im yit"

A story that addresses the fine art of outsmarting someone who believes himself to be superior—literally outfoxing a fox—is the animal tale in "Uncle Remus Initiates the Little Boy." Harris had already published many stories in *The Atlanta Constitution* and other periodicals, and therefore much of his reading audience was familiar with the tales. For anyone who had not read Harris's stories, or had not heard the tales through oral storytelling, he was careful to introduce Brer Rabbit as a character who was determined, brave and impudent:

> Bimeby, one day, after Brer Rox bin doin' all dat he could fer ter ketch Brer Rabbit, en Brer Rabbit bin doin' all he could fer to keep 'im fum it, Brer Fox say to hisse'f dat he'd put up a game on Brer Rabbit, en ain't mo'n got de wuds out'n his mouf twel Brer Rabbit come a lopin' up de big road, lookin' des ez plump, en ez fat, en ez sassy ez a Moggin hoss in a barley-patch. (3)

From the start, therefore, the reader knows Rabbit as someone who always attempts to keep the upper hand. Reading the story closely, the reader can also see that

Rabbit is constantly watching Fox, always trying to discern his whereabouts and intentions.

On the road, Brer Fox tells Rabbit to stop, that he wants to have a word with him. Rabbit says no, he doesn't have time. But Fox presses him, and he gives in, but Rabbit tells Fox that he must keep his distance because "I'm monstus full er fleas dis mawnin." In just a few seconds, Rabbit is in control of the interchange between the two, even though Fox initiated it. Rabbit's telling Fox he is "monstus full er fleas" functions as a type of disguise or mask. This is part of his tricksterism. The "fleas," whether real or not, put distance between Fox and Rabbit, allowing Rabbit time to stay ahead of the other animal, and to formulate his plans.

Brer Fox tells Rabbit that Brer B'ar had raked him over coals because Fox and Rabbit had not made friends with one another. Rabbit then takes further control of the situation by immediately asking Fox to dinner at his house the next day. So the ostensibly stronger and craftier animal, whose intentions are not good, is invited right into the home of his prey, in a subtle reversal and foreshadowing of the famous "please don't throw me into the brier-patch" that Rabbit will soon utter. Brer Rabbit begs to be thrown into the brier patch; of course, ironically, it turns out that the prickly place is his home, where he is most comfortable. Fox is invited right in to Rabbit's home when logically, we would expect Rabbit to try and keep him out. Ironically, Fox does not succeed in catching his prey, even though he accepts the invitation and goes to the house. The Rabbit family fixes a "smashin' dinner," and wait for Fox: "Bimeby one er de little Rabbits, playin' out in de backyard, come runnin' in hollerin', 'Oh, ma! oh, ma!" I seed Mr. Fox a comin'!'" (4)

They wait, but Fox does not come. In an odd interplay between the two animals, Rabbit creeps out later and sees the tip of Fox's tail around the corner, so he knows he is nearby. He goes back inside and shuts the door, but Fox does not attempt to harm him on this particular visit. He later sends word to Rabbit, lying, saying that he had been unable to make it because was sick. He asks Rabbit to come to his place for dinner the next day instead, and Rabbit agrees.

The story is oddly non-violent in a collection filled with violence and cruelty, and is also perhaps a gentle mockery of Southern mores, with its invitations to sit together at the table and dine, all in the name of rectifying a failure to "make fr'en's and live neighborly," but with bad intentions on the part of one party and utter suspicion and disbelief on the part of the other.

The next day Rabbit goes to visit Fox, who attempts a disguise of his own: he pretends to be sick, sitting in a rocking chair "all wrop up wid flannil, en he look mighty weak" until Rabbit tries to leave. He tries to catch him, but "Brer Fox ain't never cotch 'im yit, en w'at's mo', honey, he ain't gwine' ter." (5).

In the published collection, this story sets up "The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story," which follows it, and begins, "'Didn't the fox *never* catch the rabbit, Uncle Remus?' asked the little boy the next evening.'" Remus answers, "He come mighty nigh it, honey, sho's you born—Brer Fox did." And then he launches into the Tar-Baby story (6).

"The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story" is often regarded as the most important of Harris's tales. Robert Bone calls it the most profound. It is without doubt the most famous. Bone observes that Brer Rabbit for once plays the role of the white man to the "tarry representative of blackness," the Tar-Baby. Brer Rabbit attempts to exchange

polite conversation with the Tar-Baby, which Fox has made and set beside the road as a trap for Rabbit. As Bone points out, Rabbit is infuriated by the Tar-Baby's silence:

> "Mawnin'!" sez Brer Rabbit, sezee – "nice wedder dis mawnin," sezee.
>
> Tar-Baby ain't sayin' nothing', en Brer Fox, he lay low.
>
> "How duz yo' sym'tums seem ter segashuate?" sez Brer Rabbit, sezee.
>
> Brer Fox, he wink his eye slow, en lay low, en de Tar-Baby, she ain't sayin' nothing'. (6-7)

Hugh Keenan reads the Tar-Baby story as a parable of North-South relations. The rabbit is a white Southerner who gets caught by the Negro Question, the tar-baby, and who distracts the north, the fox, by asking to be left alone in his own brier patch of local political matters. He finally frees himself, in Keenan's view, by a partial disfranchisement of the Negro (60-61). Bone reads it as a morality tale about hubris. Rabbit is a bully in this story, and Bone writes: "To bully is to be cruel and overbearing to others weaker than oneself, and for this psychological indulgence Brer Rabbit pays with one of his few abject defeats" (143).

But ultimately, Rabbit is *not* defeated. The story concludes in "How Mr. Rabbit Was Too Sharp for Mr. Fox," when Brer Rabbit famously tricks Brer Fox into pulling him loose of the tar:

> W'en Brer Fox in' Brer Rabbit mixt up wid de Tar-Baby, he feel mighty good, en he roll on de groun' en laugh. Bimeby he up'n say, sezee:
>
> "Well, I speck I got you dis time, Brer Rabbit," sezee; "maybe I ai't , but I speck I us. You bin runnin' roun' here sassin' atter me a mighty long time, but I speck you done come ter de een' er de row." (12)

Rabbit, in the best-known lines Harris wrote, begs Fox: "Skin me, Brer Fox, snatch out my eyeballs, t'ar out my years by de roots, en cut off my legs, but do please Brer Fox, don't fling me in dat brier-patch" (12).

Naturally, Brer Fox grabs the rabbit by the legs and pulls him loose and flings him directly into the brier patch. Brer Rabbit is nearly rendered powerless by the Tar-Baby, a situation that readily lends itself analogous to black-white relations, north-south relations, or a combination of both. The Negro Question, or race relations, nearly incapacitates Brer Rabbit, the stand-in for the white establishment, in other words. But the story remains one about power, and the key is that Rabbit is *not* rendered powerless. His power is in his finely tuned ability to trick the fox. When his physical power fails him, his verbal ability saves him. It almost goes without saying that this is a standard theme in the story of black survival.

A large number of the animal tales in *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* repeat this theme, from "Mr. Rabbit Finds His Match at Last," which is a telling of the tortoise and the hare story, to "Mr. Terrapin Shows His Strength," in which the terrapin gets a turn at the underdog-as-victor role. Iin *Nights with Uncle Remus*, in "Brother Fox Catches Mr. Horse," Rabbit tricks Fox into tying himself to a horse's tail. The horse nearly kicks Fox to death. In "The Story of the Pigs," the runt piglet triumphs in the end. The list could go on.

Rabbit's trickster method is echoed in "Mr. Fox Tackles Old Man Tarrypin." Brer Fox catches the terrapin and threatens to do away with him because Brer Tarrypin is "in wid Brer Rabbit." The tale, which is in the first collection, goes:

> Brer Tarrypin beg en beg, but 'twa'n't no use. Brer Fox done been fool so much dat he look like he 'termin' fer ter have Brer Tarrypin haslett. Den Brer Tarrypin beg Brer Fox not fer ter drown 'im, but Brer Fox ain't makin' no prommus, en den he beg Brer fox ger ter bu'n' 'im, kaze he done useter fier....

(The terrapin had just survived a fire. Rather than escape, Brer Tarrypin "sot en tuck it.") Naturally, the fox drags the terrapin by the tail directly to water, because he has begged not to be drowned. Brer Tarrypin cleverly tells the fox to "tu'n loose dat stump root and ketch holt er me" (37).

The fox seems wise to the terrapin's ruse: "I ain't got holt er no stump root, en I is got holt er you" he says. But the terrapin keeps hollering: "Ketch holt er me – I'm a drownin' – I'm a drownin' – tu'n loose de stump root en ketch holt er me."

Sure enough, Uncle Remus tells the boy, the fox lets go of the tail, and the terrapin sinks right to the bottom of the spring. "Was he drowned, Uncle Remus?" the boy asks.

"Who? Ole man Tarrypin? Is you drowndid w'en yo' ma tucks you in de bed?" (38)

"Miss Meadows en de gals"

Many of the Brer Rabbit stories are about the struggle for power, sometimes as a means to an end such as to obtain food, other times for simple one-upmanship. In addition, several stories are about power in sexual relationships. Bernard Wolfe interprets the stories as having essentially two themes. One is neighborliness. A continuing thread of tension is the constant pressure to behave civilly toward one's neighbors, and the

countering knowledge that, as Wolfe puts it, "There are no good neighbors in the world, neither equality nor fraternity. But [this] moral has an underside: the Rabbit can never be trapped."

The other tension is the question "who gets the women?" Wolfe writes: "Throughout he is engaged in murderous competition with the Fox and other animals for the favors of 'Miss Meadows en de gals'" (73). In Wolfe's reading, Rabbit's encounters with Miss Meadows is all about breaking Southern sexual taboos, including and especially the one that prohibits black men from taking white women as sexual partners, although Miss Meadows and the girls' racial identity seems to be fluid most of the time.

In letters to Frederick S. Church, the illustrator in some of the collections, Harris discusses the meaning of "Miss Meadows and the gals" and how he should portray them. Church suggested, absurdly, that "perhaps they mean just *Nature*, in which case I should depict them as pretty girls in simple costumes, making a charming contrast to the ludicrous position of the animals." Julia Collier Harris writes that her father in law was "greatly taken with this suggestion" and adopted it with "characteristic deference, again emphasizing his role as mere 'compiler' of the stories" (149-150).

Once again, Harris dons a mask. He pretends ignorance. He claims no responsibility for Miss Meadows, admits only cluelessness as to her meaning, and stresses that nothing of the stories is his:

> My dear Mr. Church:—
>
> My relations toward the sketches you are illustrating are those of a compiler merely; consequently I cannot pretend to know what is meant by Miss Meadows. ... By all means let Miss Meadows figure as Nature in the shape of a beautiful girl in a simple but not unpicturesque costume. ... I feel sure that no one else would have

> ever dreamed of investing [these queer relics] with poetical interest. (qtd. in Julia Collier Harris, *Editor and Essayist* 150)

Yet the meaning of "Miss Meadows and the gals" and of Brer Rabbit's relationship with them is clear. It is sex.

The Tar-Baby story hints at sexuality and violence. When Brer Rabbit comes upon the Tar-Baby, which Fox has just fashioned and set out as a trap, he speaks to it, and "it" is a "she." When the Tar-Baby does not answer, Rabbit takes on the role of an abusive white man: "'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."

More threateningly, and with strong sexual innuendo, Rabbit says, "Ef you don't take off dat hat and tell me howdy, I'm gwine ter bus' you wide open" (7). The rest of the story is easily interpreted in terms of racial and sexual allegory: The fox, also playing a white man, catches the rabbit "mixed up" with the Tar-Baby and chastises him soundly, and threatens to punish him (and the Tar-Baby) by burning the Tar-Baby and therefore "barbecuing" Brer Rabbit, in a humorous, sadistic twist on lynching. Brer Rabbit is a black man playing a white man, and in this lynching, the white man is punished for messing around with a black woman, instead of the usual "crime" of a black man making sexual advances toward a white woman. The "white man" threatens to cure the black woman of her silence and her refusal to speak to him or socialize with him, much less cooperate with him. "The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story" is many things, but it is certainly a tale of multiple signifiers, of signifying, of satirizing white attitudes toward black people. Finally, it is a tale of black joy and success as Brer Rabbit in the end makes off through

the brier patch. He of course saves himself by uttering his famous words: "I don't keer w'at you do wid me, Brer Fox, so you don't fling me in dat brier-patch."

In a later story, Miss Meadows and the girls laugh at Brer Rabbit for getting tangled up with the Tar-Baby, and Rabbit counters with the revelation that "Brer Fox wuz my daddy's ridin'-hoss fer thirty year" and later tricks Fox into allowing him to ride him, saddle and all. In this posture of sexual dominance over Fox, he wins the approval of the women. Rabbit rides Fox right up to the house of Miss Meadows and the girls, and "den he sa'nter inter de house, he did, en shake han's wid de gals, end set dar, smokin' his seegyar same ez a town man" (18).

Joel Chandler Harris might have written that he was satisfied to treat the female characters as figures of nature, but the story "How Mr. Rabbit Succeeded in Raising a Dust" makes clear that the women are potential sexual partners, even wives, for Fox and Rabbit, and continues to hint that they might be prostitutes as well. Harris creates an intriguing scene, and breaks with African-American tradition, by having Remus tell these stories to a child. Traditionally, adult black story-tellers would tell these tales to other adults. They were not really intended for children.

Uncle Remus explains to the little boy that Brer Fox and Brer Rabbit would call on the girls constantly:

> "Dey wuz dat flirtashus," continued the old man, closing one eye at his image in the glass, "dat Miss Meadows en de gals don't see no peace from one week een' ter de udder. Chuseday wuz same as Sunday, en Friday wuz same as Chuseday, en hit come down ter dat pass dat w'en Miss Meadows 'ud have chicken-fixin's fer dinner, in 'ud drap Brer Fox en Brer Possum..." (91)

Finally, Miss Meadows told her girls she'd "be dad-blame if she gwine ter keep no tavvum." The story also states that neither Miss Meadows nor any of the girls wanted to marry any of the animals, and so they set up a game to keep them occupied: the lot of them would go down the road where there was a big piece of flint rock. The one that could "knock the dus' out'n dat rock, he wuz de man w'at 'ud git de pick er de gals" (91). Brer Rabbit devises an illusion so that it appears he is the only one to make the dust fly, and he gets his pick of the girls.

Race and Slavery

Many of the animal stories parody or satirize race relations and master-slave relationships. The meaning of these stories seems so clear now, that it is nearly impossible to imagine that Harris was completely unaware of it when he was "compiling" the stories.

In "The Awful Fate of Mr. Wolf," Brer Rabbit is up against Brer Wolf, who plays the metaphorical role of cruel slave owner. Rabbit tolerates Wolf's offenses for a period of time, and then takes justice into his own hands. Rabbit's version of justice makes this tale one of the most violent and cruel of all the 180-odd animal stories that Harris wrote. In the story, Brer Rabbit "ain't see no peace w'atsumever" from Brer Wolf. Perhaps echoing the practice in slave trading of separating families, Wolf repeatedly raids Rabbit's house and often "tote[s] off some er de fambly." Rabbit builds a straw house; the wolf tears it down. He builds a house from pine-tops, then one from bark; the wolf tears them down. Finally Brer Rabbit builds a plank house on a rock foundation, which withstands the wolf's assaults (39). One day the rabbit hears a commotion outside, and before he knows it, the wolf runs into his house. But this time, the wolf is pleading to the

rabbit for help. "...de dogs is atter me, en dey'll t'ar me up. ...Oh, do please save me, Brer Rabbit! Hide me some'rs whar de dogs won't git me."

In a chilling twist on every story ever told about black slaves saving their white masters' lives, Brer Rabbit gets Brer Wolf to jump into a large chest. At this point, Rabbit knows that he has reversed the situation between himself and Brer Wolf. Harris/Remus emphasizes the reversal with a mirror: Rabbit walks over to the looking glass "en wink[s] at hisse'f." Rabbit puts a kettle of water on the fire and begins to bore little holes in the lid of the chest, so that, he tells the wolf inside, "you kin get bref." Then Brer Rabbit calls all his children around to watch as he pours boiling water on the chest lid. When the water starts to go through, Wolf says, "W'at dat I feel, Brer Rabbit?"

"You feels de fleas a bitin', Brer Wolf," Brer Rabbit answers, and tells the wolf to turn over.

"Dey er eatin' me up, Brer Rabbit," Wolf says. But those are his last words; as Uncle Remus tells the boy, "de scaldin' water done de bizness" (40-41).

The tales expose black-white, slave-master enmity, but they also demonstrate class differences among whites. Interestingly, Remus is portrayed as loyal to his former master's social class, and disparaging of the poor white neighbors, his feelings aligned with those of his former owner. "Why Mr. Possum Has No Hair on His Tail" opens with Remus chastising the young boy:

> "Hit look like ter me," said Uncle Remus, frowning, as the little boy came hopping and skipping into the old man's cabin, "dat I see a young un 'bout yo' size playin' en makin' free wid dem ar chilluns er ole Miss Favers's yistiddy, en w'en I seed dat, I drap my axe, en I come in yer en sot flat down right what you er settin' now, en I say ter myse'f dat it's

'bout time fer ole Remus fer ter hang up en quit.
Dat's des zackly what I say." (81)

The little boy protests that the children irresistibly called him over to see a pistol and powder. Remus replies that the boy's mother has laid down the law about the Favers children, and calls up the memory of his original mistress, long dead: "Hit's nuff fer ter fetch ole Miss right up out'n dat berryin' groun' fum down dar in Putmon County, en w'at yo' gran'ma wouldn't er stood me en yo' ma ain't gwine ter stan' nudder" (81). Harris gives a nod to the War Between the States as the demarcation line in race relations and attitudes when he has Remus say, "Dem Favers's wa'n't no 'count 'fo' de war, en dey wa'n't no 'count endurin' er de war, en dey ain't no 'count atterwards 'en w'iles my head's hot you ain't gwine ter go mixin' up yo'se'f wid de riff-raff er creashun" (81-81).

In another story, "How Brother Fox Was Too Smart," in *Nights with Uncle Remus,* Remus acknowledges the animosity between poor whites and blacks, but what he says sounds like a bad, racist joke: "[The Faverses] allers did hate niggers kaze dey ain't had none, en dey hates um down ter dis day" (122). Remus on one level is mouthing white racist attitudes here, but the significance of the passages regarding the Faverses is his adherence to the white family's code of standards, and the rich-poor alliance that he plays a part in. Remus steadfastly supports the values of the family that once owned him as a piece of property. He never seems to identify with the Faverses in any way, even though in social and economic status he probably would have had much more in common with them than the white family on whose property he lived.

Harris uses Remus in this situation in a way that would have been very familiar to many white Southern readers. Remus is the loyal family retainer, firmly upholding the values and social standing of the white family. Yet the passages on the Favers family also

work in another way. Harris has Remus say: "Ole Cajy Favers, he went ter the po'house, en ez ter dat Jim Favers, I boun' you he know de inside er all de jails in dish yer State er Jawjy" (122). The Faverses were *morally inferior* to Uncle Remus himself. Uncle Remus throughout the stories is presented as a paragon of honesty and morality. He is spiritually superior to his own former owners, not to mention every other character in the stories. His superior attitude toward the poor white neighbors, in addition to the meaning it carries regarding race and social class dynamics in the nineteenth century South, serves to reinforce Harris's placement of Remus in the primary position in plantation life.

Nights with Uncle Remus departs from its predecessor in the quality of its structure and the development of both Uncle Remus and the little boy. The collection also differs from *Uncle Remus* in that the boy hears a series of stories at each visit to Uncle Remus's cabin, rather than one story at a time, which lends the collection a cohesiveness and narrative weight absent in the first book.

In addition, Harris uses imagery and mood-building in the framing stories which give the collection "a richness and reality of presentation that are often lacking in the more perfunctory frames in the first collection (Bickley, *JCH* 80). "How Mr. Rooster Lost His Dinner" contains a brief but significant passage in the frame that sets the mood for storytelling and paints a detailed picture of the material facts of Remus's life and home:

> The old man fumbled around under his bed, and presently dragged forth a large bag filled with lightwood knots, which, with an instinctive economy in this particular direction, he had stored away for an emergency. A bright but flickering flame was the result of this timely discovery, and the effect it produced was quite in keeping with all the surroundings. The rain, and wind, and darkness

> held sway without, while within, the unsteady lightwood blaze seemed to rhyme with the *drip-drip-drip* [of leaking rain] in the pan. Sometimes the shadow of Uncle Remus, as he leaned over the hearth, would tower and fill the cabin, and again it would fade and disappear among the swaying and swinging cobwebs that curtained the rafters. (148)

Uncle Remus's shadow in the last sentence seems to symbolize Remus himself. He fills the boy's life, his heart and imagination, yet at times he fades away and disappears, as he is never entirely accessible; the mystery of Uncle Remus is never fully revealed to the boy and he seems to merge with the spirit world of the stories.

In "A Dream and a Story," "Spirits, Seen and Unseen," "A Ghost Story," and "Brother Rabbit and His Famous Foot," the power of memory, and of the imagination and their blurry boundaries with the spirit world figure significantly. "A Dream and a Story" opens with the little boy telling Uncle Remus that he dreamed Brother Fox "had wings and tried to catch Brother Rabbit by flying after him."

> "I don't 'spute it, honey, dat I don't!" replied the old man, in a tone which implied that he was quite prepared to believe the dream itself was true. "Many's en many's de time, deze long nights en deze rainy spells, dat I sets down dar in my house over ag'in' de chimbley-jam' – I sets dar en I dozes, en it seem lak dat ole Brer Rabbit, he'll stick he head in de crack er de do' en see my eye 'periently shot, en den he'll beckon back at de yuther creeturs, en den dey'll all come slippin' in on der tip-toes, en dey'll set dar en run over de ole times wid one er n'er, en crack der jokes same ez dey useter." (173)

The story unfolds to explain to both the reader and the little boy the importance of the inner life, which includes the memory of both real events and of imagined ones. Remus tells the little boy how, when he closes his eyes, he sees and hears the animals playing

> "dem kind chunes w'at moves you fum 'way back yander; en many's de time w'en I gits lonesome kaze dey ain't nobody year um ceppin' it's me. Dey ain't no tellin' de chunes dey is in dat trivet, en in dat griddle, en in dat fryin'-pan er mine; dat dey ain't....
>
> "Do they play on them just like a band, Uncle Remus?" inquired the little boy, who was secretly in hopes that the illusion would not be destroyed.
>
> "Dey comes des lak I tell you, honey. W'en I shets my eyes en dozes, dey comes en dey plays, but w'en I opens my eyes dey ain't dar." (174)

This passage is a powerful expression of several values black and white Southerners held dear: the past, the importance of stories and story-telling, the importance of memory. The tunes from 'way back yander,' the stories and the memories are more real and more valuable than life in the present, which is why the boy hopes the "illusion would not be destroyed." It admittedly verges on the stereotype of the Southerner who pines for days gone by, but it also conveys how powerful Harris's imagination was, and what it meant to him.

An earlier story, "Mr. Bear Catches Old Mr. Bullfrog," contains one of numerous illustrations of the notion of loss – lost knowledge, lost values. Harris/Remus disguises the commentary on loss in an animal fable that includes a nonsense song:

> "Ingle-go-jang, my joy, my joy –
> Ingle-go-jang, my joy, my joy!
> I'm right at home, my joy, my joy –
> Ingle-go-jang, my joy!"
>
> 'That's a mighty funny song,' said the little boy.

> 'Funny now, I speck,' said the old man, 'but 'tweren't funny in dem days, en 'twouldn't be funny now ef folks know'd much 'bout de Bull-frog langwidge ez dey useter. Dat's what.' (74)

When *were* "dem days"? What was Bull-frog language and how did people know more about it in the old days than they do in the present? Remus says this kind of thing so often throughout the stories that questions about what the past stands for cannot be avoided. The past is the realm of wisdom, of spirituality, of unity between animals and people and among animals. For Harris, the past, when animals and people could talk, when "we were all niggers together" – is a time and place of unity and perfection. It never actually existed, although Harris almost succeeds in imagining some version of it did in fact exist.

A Genuine African

African Jack, or "Daddy Jack" is introduced in *Nights with Uncle Remus*, and he is one of several factors that gives this collection a tone very distinct from the first. Jack was brought from Africa, according to the narrator, and lived on one of Georgia's Sea Islands, and therefore speaks the distinct and curious Sea Island, or Gullah dialect. This character is treated with awe and wonder, and reinforces the notion that the presence of Africanness was something of value to Harris. This example of Africanness in the Remus tales is literally an African:

> Daddy Jack was an object of curiosity to older people than the little boy. He was a genuine African, and for that reason he was known as African Jack, though the child had been taught to call him Daddy Jack....
>
> Daddy Jack appeared to be quite a hundred years old, but he was probably not more than eighty. He was a little, dried-up old man, whose weazened (sic), dwarfish appearance, while it was calculated to inspire awe in the minds of the

> superstitious, was not without its pathetic suggestions. The child had been told that the old African was a wizard, a conjurer, and a snake-charmer.... (200)

Daddy Jack, like Remus, focuses on the past, and also shares with Remus a deep regard for "Ole Miss," the boy's grandmother. This reverence for Ole Miss is fascinating considering she had been Remus's owner from birth. Like others in the stories, Daddy Jack believes the boy strongly resembles his grandmother:

> Daddy Jack took the plump, rosy hands of the little boy in his black, withered ones, and gazed into his face so long and steadily, and with such curious earnestness, that the child didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Presently the old African flung his hands to his head, and rocked his body from side to side, moaning and mumbling, and talking to himself, while the tears ran down his face like rain.
>
> "Ole Missy! Ole Missy! 'E come back! I bin shum dey-dey, I bin shum de night! I bin yeddy 'e v'ice, I bin yeddy de sign!" (201)

In the presence of Daddy Jack, past and present, memory and current reality merge. He does not simply take a look at the child and remark on how much he resembles his grandmother. For Daddy Jack, Ole Miss actually returns: She came back. He sees her there, he sees her tonight. He hears her voice, he hears the sign, he says. Daddy Jack, perhaps even more so than Remus, is a vortex of energy in the stories. Everything revolves around him. He is constantly in touch with some other force, some other reality: "After a while Daddy Jack ceased his rocking, and his moaning, and his crying, and sat gazing wistfully in to the fireplace." No one can stop watching Daddy Jack. "Whatever he saw there fixed his attention, for Uncle Remus spoke to him several times without receiving a response" (201).

Nights with Uncle Remus opens with an introduction by Harris that compares the folktales with stories from Africa and South America. The volume would seem to confirm Harris's sincere interest in the study of folklore. But Harris's discussion of folklore is contradicted by the "thematic implications of a portion of the text," as Kathleen Light observes (149). She explains:

> Some folklorists, [John Wesley] Powell among them, believed the Negroes had borrowed their stories from other peoples. Harris could not accept this explanation because for him the allegorical interpretation of the stories depended upon their being original with the Negroes. His desire to prove the African origins of this stories leads to a confused attempt to determine which versions of the stories are more authentic by deciding which more aptly depict the "peculiarities and characteristics" of the Negro race. This approach in turn leads him to adopt the attitude of the ethnologist and to suggest at one point that the type of folklore told by a people will afford an index to their mental and cultural development. (149-150)

While Daddy Jack is often the center of attention when he is around, Uncle Remus is without doubt the moral and spiritual center of the stories and of the plantation setting. In the last story in the second collection, *Nights with Uncle Remus*, the old man's position is plain. He is the best singer on the plantation, and the emotion he invokes reveals him to be deeply powerful as a spiritual force:

> The he raised his right hand to his ear and stood perfectly still. The little boy thought he was listening for something, but presently Uncle Remus began to slap himself gently with his left hand, first upon the leg and then upon the breast. The other Negroes kept time to this by a gentle motion of their feet, and finally, when the thump – thump – thump of this movement had regulated itself to suit the old

> man's fancy, he broke out with what may be called a Christmas dance song.
>
> His voice was strong, and powerful, and sweet, and its range was as astonishing as its volume. More than this, the melody to which he tuned it, and which was caught up by a hundred voices almost as sweet and as powerful as his own, was charged with a mysterious and pathetic tenderness.
>
> The fine company of men and women at the big house – men and women who had made the tour of all the capitals of Europe – listened with swelling hearts and with tears in their eyes as the song rose and fell upon the air – at one moment a tempest of melody, at another a heart-breaking strain breathed softly and sweetly to the gentle winds. The song ...was ...ridiculous enough when put in cold type, but powerful and thrilling when joined to the melody.... (379)

The story ends with Remus carrying the sleeping child in his arms to the big house, singing softly in his ear the whole way. The child begins to dream that he is floating on air, landing on a bank of clouds, hearing Uncle Remus's voice all the while.

This story, with Uncle Remus's incredibly moving performance, his tenderness toward the boy, and the boy's dream, is more than a tale overloaded with sentimentality. The power of Remus's presence and his voice represent his spiritual place among the black people as well as the white, and the boy's dream, induced by Remus's voice, is just one example of the particular spiritual power Remus has in his life. In a larger sense, this episode is one of several passages in the collection about the importance of mystery, spirituality and the spirit world.

The spirit world is enormously important in the tales, but conventional Western religion, i.e., Christianity, undergoes some serious revisions. "The Story of the Deluge and How It Came About" revises the Biblical story of the flood. In this tale, some

crawfishes, in retribution for being trampled upon by some elephants, bore holes in the earth and "kep' on bo'in' twel dey onloost de fountains er de yeth," Uncle Remus tells the little boy, "en de waters squirt out, en riz higher en higher twel de hills wuz kivvered, en de creeturs wuz all drowned: en all bekaze dey let on 'mong deyselves dat dey wuz bigger dan de Crawfishes" (15).

The child recognizes the story and asks about the ark.

"'W'ich ark's dat?' asked the old man, in a tone of well-feigned curiosity." Remus dismisses Noah and the ark, saying that there might have been two deluges. Remus has retold a Bible story. In his tale, the flood does not come because man has sinned against God. The flood comes because larger animals have harmed smaller, seemingly helpless ones, and have grossly underestimated the power of the creature that seems the weakest.

Playing on conventional religious tenets is a part of the trickster's persona, an aspect of the jester's act. The stories also challenge secular mores and moral conventions, and question the notion that people generally get what they deserve, that the good are rewarded and the bad defeated. In Remus's world, innocent people sometimes suffer because of the sins of others.

But the creatures in Remus's tales are animals, not really people, and for them, the tricks, games and even the cruelty they create is all in the game, as Remus makes clear in *Uncle Remus and His Friends* (1892). In "Brother Mud Turtle's Trickery," he tells his listener:

> "I don't like deze yer tales 'bout folks, no how you kin fix um," said Uncle Remus, after an unusually long pause.... "No, suh, I don't like um, kaze folks can't play no tricks, ner git even wid der neighbors widout hurtin' somebody's feelin's, er breakin'

> some law er nudder, er gwine 'g'inst what de preacher say." (527)

Years later, Harris grew increasingly disenchanted with Southern society and race relations, as segregation grew more entrenched. He seemed to regard some of the changes he disapproved of – the industrialization of the South, excessive commercialization, etc. – as perhaps the cause of the emasculation of people such as the new young boy who was now his listener, the son of the original boy. He writes in *Told by Uncle Remus*, which was published in 1905:

> This new little boy was intensely practical. He had imagination, but it was unaccompanied by any of the ancient illusions that make the memory of childhood so delightful. Young as he was he had a contempt for those who believed in Santa Claus. He believed only in things that his mother considered valid and vital, and his training had been of such a character as to leave out all the beautiful romances of childhood.
>
> Thus when Uncle Remus mentioned something about Brother Rabbit's laughing-place, he pictured it forth in his mind as a sure-enough place that the four-footed creatures had found necessary for their comfort and convenience. (564)

Uncle Remus finally explains to the child that he needs a laughing place, too, "whar you kin go an' tickle yo'se'f an' laugh whedder you wanter laugh er no. I boun' ef you had a laughin' place, you'd gain flesh, an' when yo' pa comes down fum 'Lantamatantarum, he wouldn't skacely know you" (565)

The child protests that he *does* have a laughing place. "'It's right here where you are!' said the little boy with a winning smile.... 'Why, you are my laughing-place,' cried the little lad with an extraordinary burst of enthusiasm" (566). Remus has succeeded in helping the child embrace the joy and the raw fun of the stories, and more important, the

boy now understands the importance of imagination and the inner life. He is beginning to grasp some of the mystery of the tales and all that they represent.

Some of the tales directly address mystery and the elusiveness of meaning and facts. This is the heart of the tales and the key to Harris's personality, as well as Remus's, because it reflects the relationship between story and teller when the stories are animal fables. The meaning is always whatever the imagination of listener chooses to make it.

. In "Brother Rabbit Secures a Mansion," in *Nights with Uncle Remus,* the old man refers to "willis-whistlers": "Many en many's de time is I gone atter deze yer willis-whistlers, en no diffunce wher I goes, deyer allers off yonder" (128). The "willis-whisters" defy capture. Their location is always just out of reach. In "A Plantation Witch," Harris describes the setting as Remus prepares to tell a tale:

> The moon, just at its full, cast long, vague, wavering shadows in front of the cabin. A colony of tree-frogs somewhere in the distance were treating their neighbors to a serenade, but to the little boy it sounded like a chorus of lost and long-forgotten whistlers. The sound was wherever the imagination chose to locate it – to the right, to the left, in the air, on the ground, far away or near at hand, but always dim and always indistinct. (94)

The same holds true for the animal tales: the meaning is wherever the imagination chooses to locate it, whatever the heart needs it to be.

Chapter Three: The White Writer and the American Experience

It is almost a truism for black people, that in order to survive white society, whether in slavery or freedom, in the nineteenth century or the twenty-first, one must adopt a double-consciousness. It requires two consciousnesses to live and breathe in a world where most people believe you to be inferior in mental and social capabilities. W. E. B. Du Bois did not invent the concept of black double-consciousness, but he gave it such urgency, according to Eric Sundquist, the idea remains ingrained in just the way he formulated it (97). Du Bois wrote in 1903 in *The Souls of Black Folk:*

> From the double life every American Negro must live, as a Negro and as an American, as swept on by the current of the nineteenth century while yet struggling in the eddies of the fifteenth century,—from this must arise a painful self-consciousness, an almost morbid sense of personality and a moral hesistancy [sic] which is fatal to self-confidence. The worlds within and without the Veil of Color are changing, and changing rapidly, but not at the same rate, not in the same way; and this must produce a wrenching of the soul, a peculiar sense of doubt and bewilderment. Such a double life, with double thoughts, double duties, and double social classes, must give rise to double words and double ideals, and tempt the mind to pretence or to revolt, to hypocrisy or to radicalism. (205)

Whites also have double-consciousness as a survival mechanism in matters of race. Black people must think double thoughts as Americans and as black people. For whites, the consciousness splits along the line of racial identity and the "inescapable knowledge of black humanity" as Rhett S. Jones puts it (28), versus fantasies of white superiority. Harris's work, taking his editorials, essays, fiction and folklore, is a study in white double-consciousness.

Harris entered the period following Emancipation and war as a young man just starting his career in journalism in Georgia. He had been born into a world that lived and breathed states' rights and the threat of secession. Public discourse focused on the dangers of northern interference, white supremacy, and the justification of slavery, but he came to manhood when the topics of the day were the repair of the Union, the future of the New South and the place of the black person in American society.

The earth-shattering transition from slave society to free alone was enough to fragment the minds and personalities of Southerners, both black and white. To make matters worse, segregation of the races and legal and social oppression of blacks grew more intense with the passage of time, after a very brief period during Reconstruction of something that resembled freedom and equality. After Reconstruction ended in 1877, the debate over "the Negro Question" increasingly centered on race, and not simply on the legal and social status of blacks. Not only did Harris see his dream-like images of life before the war recede further into a past that never really existed, he also saw increasing separation and animosity between white and black as the twentieth century drew nearer, and an increase in violence, lynchings and other violations of law. A current of fear ran through all levels of white society regarding the mixing of the races. Not since slavery had blacks been subjected to the stringent segregation and race discrimination that they were in the 1890s and early 1900s. Important to keep in mind while reading Harris is that race relations were changing over the course of his life. He was born during slave times in a town where blacks outnumbered whites. He reached adulthood during Reconstruction, but by the time he "became" Uncle Remus, the two races were pulling further and further apart. In the 1880s, when he published his best work, the idea of a

"completely circumscribed world of white and black had hot yet become entrenched; the use of the word 'segregation' to describe systematic racial separation did not begin until the early twentieth century" (Ayers 92). C. Vann Woodward observes in *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* that the immediate post-Reconstruction period was a transitional period in Southern race policy and social practice, a time in which blacks were free to go to the theatre and were served at bars and soda fountains with whites (37). But by 1900 rigid laws and segregation practices were firmly in place.

The South was changing in other profound and unsettling ways, with large-scale industry taking hold in the last quarter of the nineteenth century; the transformation to a society centered more on small town life rather than rural life, and the growing dominance of the railroad. Southern culture changed as early blues, jazz, gospel and country music exerted their influence (Ayers vii).

The result of these riotous transformations: Harris was a divided man. Harris implicitly laments throughout his creative work the increasing separation of white lives and black lives. However, when he spells out his lament, it comes out as nostalgia for the days of slavery, and the casual reader can hardly be blamed for assuming Harris looks back wishing for slave ownership, although neither he nor his immediate family did own slaves. Such an assumption naturally occurs after reading the following passage, which closes the introduction to the first collection of stories:

> If the reader not familiar with plantation life will imagine that the myth-stories of Uncle Remus are told night after night to a little boy by an old negro who appears to be venerable enough to have lived during the period which he describes – who has nothing but pleasant memories of the discipline of slavery – and who has all the prejudices of caste and pride of family that were the natural results of the

> system; if the reader can imagine all this, he will find little difficulty in appreciating and sympathizing with the air of affectionate superiority which Uncle Remus assumes as he proceeds to unfold the mysteries of plantation lore to a little child who is a product of that practical reconstruction which has been going on to some extent since the war in spite of the politicians. (46-47)

In order to bridge the gap between the man who could write a passage like this, who could so facilely describe an ex-slave as someone who had "nothing but pleasant memories of slavery" with the man who could write not only one story in the vein of "Miss Cow Falls A Victim to Mr. Rabbit" and "The Sad Fate of Mr. Fox" but *dozens of them*, many critics have tried to dismiss one Harris or the other. Because Harris never wrote an editorial condemning Jim Crow or racism or slavery, then he cannot be read as anything but a Negro-hater, some have said. Bernard Wolfe cites an editorial written early in Harris's career in which he ridicules blacks as evidence that "Harris virulently *hated* the Negro," although Wolfe admits, at least that his hate was a defense against love (83).

His editorials and magazine essays placed him firmly in the moderate, segregationist, New South camp of his boss at *The Atlanta Constitution,* Henry W. Grady. But Uncle Remus and some other characters Harris imbued with a deep humanity and he uses Remus, particularly, to convey complex ideas about black people and black life, even while he sprinkled Remus's dialogue with mild segregationist, white-point-of-view rhetoric. He responded to his place and time by developing a double-consciousness with regard to matters of race. He is correctly accused of exhibiting a deep longing and nostalgia for the Old South plantation days, but a close examination of his work reveals that his longing is not so much nostalgia as a reinvention of plantation society and the

placing of a black man and a slave cabin at its center, in the most important spot. He invented Remus to express what he could not directly express himself, and also to state the fact that there was something, felt by both black and white Southerners, that could not be put into words. He invented Remus to stand for what he feared most about the New South – not the loss of slavery, and not particularly the burgeoning industrialization and urbanization of the South, although he disapproved of those trends. Harris deeply respected and loved certain aspects of black culture and black life, and he saw the New South eroding and destroying that culture and making what survived of it much more difficult for a white person to access. Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark* writes about white authors' fabrication of an African presence—"It is an astonishing revelation of longing, of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity" (17). In Harris the reader finds that longing, and it is far more than nostalgia and the desire for a mythical, dreamy past. Harris recognized the defining presence in Southern life as black, and when he regarded that presence, remarkably, he imagined he saw himself.

In no way could Harris truly know what it was to be a black person in America in the late nineteenth century. No amount of sensitivity or depth and breadth in consciousness can obliterate the color line. Harris believed he knew the world through Remus's eyes, and he probably could see more of the world through the old man's eyes than most whites, but ultimately, the color line in consciousness remains.

Yet without a doubt, Remus was a comfort to Harris, a strong, loving man, affectionate toward a little boy, fulfilling a deep need in Harris that was never met in real life. He pulled together different aspects of Harris's personality. If he represented the kindly paternal love that Harris never knew firsthand, he also stood in for Harris himself,

who was born outside mainstream society. Just as Remus was marginalized by his slave status and his race, Harris felt marginalized by his illegitimate birth and impoverished background. This marginalization was probably even more acute because his mother was from a respected family, and her having a child outside of marriage went against all expectations and class mores. Harris clearly identified with black people and poor whites, as several critics have noted. This is his split nature. He was a man who by day upheld the moderate white viewpoint, i.e., one characterized by at least surface tolerance, not virulent race hatred, and a willingness to allow black people some rights and freedoms within a generally segregated society. Moderates usually demanded that blacks demonstrate respectability and self-reliance and abide by the law. Literally by night, when he did his creative writing, he expressed a very different view of the world through Remus, the little boy, and the animals. In this world, characters representing black people did whatever they had to do to survive, or even simply to win at one-upmanship. The animals lie, cheat, steal and even kill as necessary. "Black" characters wooed "white women."

Kathleen Light finds in Harris's later stories that he emphasized the theme of trickery and mischievousness while at the same time undercutting the theme of victory and triumph. Harris had admitted that he feared the stories in *Told by Uncle Remus* were not up to his usual standards, and since he had grown suspicious of his own materials and the "spurious interpretations that could be attached to them, Harris responded by stripping the stories of all possible meaning" (155). However, this is not quite true in *Told by Uncle Remus*. In it, there are instances of the old subversiveness of conventional values. The little boy even points out to Remus that the animals are "very cruel, and they

told stories," and were not just full of mischief. Remus replies that ultimately, the animals will have an advantage over people in this regard, for, despite the fact that the creatures don't know the difference between right and wrong, "Dey got ter live 'cordin' ter der natur', kaze dey ain't know no better" ("Brother Rabbit and the Chickens" 573).

Harris was eager, as Edward L. Ayers believes, to show the white public that slaves "had kept alive their own traditions and views of the world" and to contradict opinions that held that black Southerners had no culture whites should respect, by collecting and conveying the stories (205). But by the logic of tricksterism, Harris is also a trickster, and the trickster tales themselves are tales of rage, frustration and liberation, with the message that the last shall be first. And by the logic of tricksterism, a white man telling "black" tales, can, on some level, claim those tales as belonging to him.

Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings (1880) was enormously successful, going through four editions in a matter of months, and was quickly followed by *Nights with Uncle Remus* in 1883. Remus reassured white readers that free black people would love whites, not demand retribution for current and recent wrongs or reparation for slavery. Remus's very existence "promised the North that Southerners could see the Negro's virtues and could even celebrate them" (Hemenway 20).

The narrator establishes from the first lines of the first collected story what sort of qualities the reader can expect of Remus. The little white boy obviously loves and trusts Remus; the narrator tells us "his head rested against the old man's arm" and he "was gazing with an expression of the most intense interest" into Remus's face, which "beamed so kindly upon him" (3). He takes Miss Sally's little boy on his knee and strokes "the child's hair thoughtfully and caressingly" (8). Harris's use of physical

proximity and contact between black and white conjures images of blacks caring for whites. The scene was nostalgic in the 1880s, reminiscent of slavery times when white children were nursed and tended by black nannies and "uncles," but also ironically one that had not, by a long shot, become a thing of the past. This scene of a black man's tenderness toward a white child clearly positions Remus for white reading audiences as a respectable, gentle old man, if also "less human being than Southern myth," as Robert Hemenway sees him (18). This Remus, according to Hemenway, is exactly what Harris described when he called him, in another context, an "old-fashioned, unadulterated negro who is still dear to the heart of the South." White readers could enjoy the stories as nostalgic reveries, ignoring the subtexts of black rage and the struggle for empowerment in the animal tales. And just as it is possible for some readers to read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and miss the author's antislavery and antiracist meanings completely, as Shelley Fisher Fishkin observes in *Lighting Out for the Territory*, readers could read the Uncle Remus tales without ever noticing Remus's subversiveness, seeing only the humorous antics of the animals and the dialect. The tales, particularly in the first two collections, reflect what Michael Flusche describes as "a humorous recognition that beneath all the graceful amenities the world was a hostile place" (177).

A common trick is that Remus often leaves many of the boy's questions about the stories unanswered until he is ready to answer them. The end of "Brother Bear and the Honey Orchard," which appears in *Uncle Remus and His Friends*, is one of many examples. When Brer B'ar ends up tied to a tree, the little boy wants to know, "who unfastened Brother Bear?"

"'Eh-eh, honey!' exclaimed Uncle Remus. 'You pushes yo' inquirements too fur. Dat what's in de tale I kin tell you; dat what ain't you'll hatter figger out fer yo'se'f'" (457). The tales themselves, with their tricks, disguises, and deceitful acts, and Remus's strategic omissions in the narrative frame, indicate Harris's awareness of the false value of the obvious and the present, a remarkable insight considering the emphasis placed on racial presence in turn-of-the-century society, with its Jim Crow laws and de facto segregation.

Harris as Remus, the trickster and shaman, wrote at night after returning home from the newspaper offices. By day, he was inclined to take on an optimistic and reassuring tone with regard to the future of black people. He responded to Booker T. Washington's Atlanta Exposition address in 1895 in an editorial the following day. In it, he agreed with Washington on a point regarding the advancement of blacks:

> The negro can only be advanced as he deserves to be advanced. While he may have temporary success as a politician in an abnormal period, he must surely find his proper level. And his proper level is that which he has won, and must win, through the work of his hand and his brains.
>
> This is the test, after all, and Professor Washington is wise to recognize it. This is the solution of the negro problem. The colored man must be judged as the white race judges itself—by what he accomplishes. (*Editor and Essayist* 109)

This passage is typical of Harris's point of view as a white, moderate journalist. He expressed compassion toward blacks and their plight; he showed faith that through hard work and self-reliance they could succeed as productive members of society, but he never in his journalism seriously challenged Jim Crow laws directly, or the predominant racist thinking of his day.

Lillian Smith, in the mid-twentieth century, wrote a haunting explanation of a source of white double-consciousness. Her passage on geographical distance and darkness echoes Harris's description of the "willis-whistlers," whose sounds were "to the right, to the left... far away or near at hand, but always dim and always indistinct" ("A Plantation Witch," 94):

> Only a man or woman who has traveled in childhood the old sand or clay roads of the South in buggy or wagon, who has stayed in the country after nightfall, can know what distance and darkness meant in the making of the rural mind of the South.
>
> Distance was not a word but a force pushing a man hard against his memories and fears, isolating him from a world to which he had never felt securely tied. When the sun set, the night began. There were no lights; only a kerosene lamp or a pine knot burning. And always the swamp back of you or the dark hills, or empty fields stretching on, on.... Far off, the Negroes singing in dim lantern-lit churches, moaning their misery and shouting their joy. Sudden sharp laughter from nowhere.
>
> City people, townspeople, have little idea what this meant and still means in parts of the lonely South. During the war they felt the wear on nerves of the blackout, but country folks have lived in a blackout since time began."
>
> ...Out in the country, animals do not seem so different from men. Sometimes they seem closer to you than human beings.... But animals are killed to be eaten, or when they get in the way...." (159-160)

Interestingly, the period to which Harris turns in his memory when he longs for the past is his time on a plantation nine miles from his birthplace of Eatonton, Ga. As a young teenager, he worked as a printer's devil for *The Countryman*, a literary newspaper that at its height had a subscription list of 2,000, published by Joseph Addison Turner at his plantation, Turnwold, near Eatonton. Nine miles in the 1860s was at least a half-day's

journey from town, and it could easily be nine miles without passing many, if any, other people. The isolation worked to Harris's advantage: Turner was an educated, kind man with a large private library and the plantation was home to slaves with whom Harris became friends as well as white workers with whom he got on. In such a setting, the members of the community must rely on each other for company as well as sharing the work. Harris spent countless hours with black people at Turnwold, growing to respect them and be respected by them.

Rhett S. Jones believes that whites have long viewed blacks in two different ways. They had to view them as either animals or as something less than human in order to be able to barter and sell them without pangs of conscience, but this viewpoint was of the public realm, according to Jones, and "dominated the public arena and was supported by theologians, scientists, politicians, and philosophers." But it never fully convinced "the mass of Americans." He writes, "The stereotype of the 'Mammy' itself contradicted the idea that black people were incapable of thought and caring. After all, only a fool would turn her children over the to care of an animal, and white people did not count themselves fools" (28).

The essence of white double-consciousness is found in the contradictory viewpoints whites hold of blacks. Jones asserts,

> Whites have never been able to escape knowledge of black humanity but, given their hegemony, have been able to create a corpus of racist thought which defines blacks as inferior. Euro-Americans have moved back and forth between their two perspectives on Africanity, now seeing blacks as less than human, now recognizing their membership in the family of man. (28)

Jones gives a persuasive analysis of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as an expression of white double-consciousness. To read Uncle Remus this way is to understand something not only about Harris and his period in Georgia but also about the South, and probably the country, today. To grasp either white or black double-consciousness is to understand a very important aspect of much creative work dealing with matters of race in America: the contradictions. Signifying, irony, reversals, plays on visibility and meaning all constitute the core, the power and the beauty of certain creative expressions. Take Brer Rabbit's contradictory nature. He wouldn't be half as funny or as important if he didn't use irony, lie and signify.

Double-consciousness in "Free Joe"

"Free Joe and the Rest of the World," published in a collection called *Free Joe and Other Georgian Sketches in* 1887, is one of the only works besides the animal stories to have "importantly survived its day," as Louis D. Rubin observed (170). But "Free Joe" is important for another reason: it clearly expresses both black and white double-consciousness.

The story was praised by contemporary critics for its "simple pathos." Michael Flusche cited it in 1975 in his essay exploring the "underlying despair" in Harris's fiction. Joe "becomes the ultimate symbol of rootlessness for Harris, whose name he shares, as he waits months, at the base of a poplar tree in the swamp for the return of his wife and small dog" (181). Joseph M. Griska, Jr. sees hints of Harris's sense of rejection by his father scattered throughout his publishing writings, and cites "Free Joe" as "Harris's most accomplished story of separation" (212).

The story, set in 1850, tells of a freed slave who can find neither security, nor stability nor happiness in freedom. Joe gains his freedom when his master loses all his possessions, including other slaves, in a card game, except for his body servant, Joe. The owner, having reached this limit, sets Joe free then commits suicide. Joe's freedom brings some joy to his life for a period of time. He is compelled by law, even though he is free, to chose a white guardian, and he selects the owner of his wife, Lucinda. But when the owner dies, Joe's miseries begin, for his wife is passed to the old owner's half-brother, "Spite" Calderwood, who lives up to his name by cruelly forbidding Joe and Lucinda to visit each other. Joe finds a way to visit Lucinda in secret for a while, waiting under a poplar tree in the woods near Lucinda's cabin while his dog, Little Dan, would go and scratch at Lucinda's door, signaling her that her husband was nearby. But then she disappears. As the narrator explains, Lucinda had been discovered by Calderwood, who, again living up to his nickname, sells her.

Joe does not know Lucinda has been sold, and goes to "Miss Becky," a white fortuneteller to see if he can find out where she is. The conversation between Miss Becky, her brother Micajah Staley, and Joe illustrates white double-consciousness. Joe says he hasn't seen his wife in nearly a month.

> "Well, it hain't a-gwine to hurt you," said Miss Becky, somewhat sharply. "In my day an' time it wuz allers took to be a bad sign when niggers got to honeyin' 'roun' an' gwine on."
>
> "Yessum," said Free Joe, cheerfully assenting to the proposition – "yessum, dat's so, but me an' my ole 'oman, we 'uz raise terg'er...." (18)

Micajah Staley interjects, "Maybe she's up an' took up wi' some un else. You know what the sayin'is: 'New master, new nigger.'" Again, Joe responds mildly, "Dat's so, dat's de

sayin'" and goes on to say his wife is not like other blacks. Harris clearly understands that blacks must put on a cheerful and mild front in the face of white insults, ignorance and insensitivity, as this passage shows.

Miss Becky reads her cards, and sees Lucinda in the queen of spades. "Here's a bundle an' a journey, and here's Lucinda. An' here's ole Spite Calderwood," Becky says as she reads the deck (21).

Micajah confesses he saw Spite Calderwood driving by in his buggy with Lucinda beside him a few days previously.

> "Ef it's my beliefs you want," continued the old man, "I'll pitch 'em at you fair and free. My beliefs is that Spite Calderwood is gone an' took Lucindy outen the county. Bless your heart and soul! When Spite Calderwood meets the Old Boy in the road they'll be a terrible scuffle. You mark what I tell you."
>
> Free Joe, still fumbling with his hat, rose and leaned against the door-facing. He seemed to be embarrassed. Presently he said:
>
> "I speck I better be gittin' 'long. Nex' time I see Lucindy, I'm gwine tell 'er w'at Miss Becky say 'bout de queen er spades—dat I is. Ef dat don't tickle 'er, dey ain't no nigger 'oman never bin tickle." (25)

Joe returns to the poplar tree with Dan, who promptly trots off toward the Calderwood place and Lucinda's cabin. Later, Joe hears Calderwood's fox hounds in full cry. Little Dan falls victim to the hounds and never returns. Joe returns again and again to the tree,

> "convinced that little Dan had found Lucinda, and that some night when the moon was shining brightly through the trees, the dog would rouse him from his dreams as he sat sleeping at the foot of the poplar tree,and he would open his eyes and behold Lucinda standing over him, laughing merrily as of old; and then he thought what fun they would have about the queen of spades." (25-26)

An example of white double-consciousness follows this passage. Joe stops by the cabin of Miss Becky and Micajah, who comments that Joe is still hoping to be reunited with Lucinda and the dog. Joe replies, "'Oh, dey er comin', Mars Cajy, dey er comin', sho. I boun' you dey'll come...'" (26-27).

After Joe leaves, Micajah says:

> "Look at that nigger; look at 'im. He's pine-blank as happy now as a killdee by a mill-race. You can't faze 'em. I'd in-about give up my t'other hand ef I could stan' flat-footed, an' grin at trouble like that there nigger."
>
> "Niggers is niggers," said Miss Becky, smiling grimly, "an' you can't rub it out; yit I lay I've seed a heap of white people lots meaner'n Free Joe. He grins—an' that's nigger—but I've ketched his under jaw a tremblin' when Lucindy's name uz brung up. An' I tell you," she went on, bridling up a little, and speaking with almost fierce emphasis, 'the Old Boy's done sharpened his claws for Spite Calderwood. You'll see it." (27-28)

The next day, Micajah finds Joe in his usual spot, lying against the poplar tree, dead.

Joe's death at the end of the story allowed readers who needed to do so to interpret the story as challenging whether blacks should be free at all. The fact that it was set in 1850 allowed readers to be nostalgic for the days of slavery, and to read the story as a justification for slavery and to receive it as reinforcing the idea that freedom for blacks was a curse, a commentary on the conditions current in the mid-1880s. After all, if Joe had remained under the ownership and care of a master, he would not have been "a black atom, drifting hither and thither without an owner, blown about by all the winds of circumstance" (3) and he would not have always been regarded with fear and suspicion.

> "He realized the fact that though he was free he was more helpless than any slave. Having no owner, every man was his master. He knew that he was the object of suspicion, and therefore all his slender

> resources (ah! how pitifully slender they were!) were devoted to winning, not kindness and appreciation, but toleration; all his efforts were in the direction of mitigating the circumstances that tended to make his condition so much worse than that of the negroes around him—negroes who had friends because they had masters." (12-13)

Yet Miss Becky, even Miss Becky, who is described by the narrator as "poor white trash," is sensitive to Joe's grief and believes Spite Calderwood will pay for his sins.

But does Becky understand Joe's grin? Her brother Micajah sees Joe as a simpleton, grinning stupidly in the face of trouble. Becky, however, says something very curious about Joe's continuously smiling: "Niggers is niggers an' you can't rub it out.... He grins—an' that's nigger...." If Becky can see beneath the grin the trembling chin, and sense the tears that Joe holds back, can she also see the grin covers a host of other feelings and thoughts?

Bernard Wolfe wrote in 1949, "We like to picture the Negro as grinning at us. In Jack de Capitator, the bottle opener that looks like a gaping minstrel face, the grin is a kitchen utensil. At Mammy's shack, the Seattle roadside inn built in the shape of a minstrel's head, you walk into the neon grin to get your hamburger.... And always the image of the Negro – as we create it – signifies some bounty – for us. Eternally the Negro gives but (as they say in the theater) *really gives*—grinning from ear to ear" (70).

Joe is presented as a "grinner-giver" in the extreme. He grins even in death. The narrator says, "It was as if he bowed and smiled when death stood before him, humble to the last" (28).

Discovery of the Old South

Joel Chandler Harris grew up poor, the child of an unmarried woman. His early childhood was spent with his mother in a setting that ironically reflected the way slaves lived: in a small cottage on the property of a well-to-do white owner. Julia Collier Harris, his daughter-in-law and biographer, recorded that his mother was so poor her landlord paid Harris's tuition at the village school when he was a young child, and that she had to make her living by taking in sewing (*Life and Letters* 8, 10). Life in Eatonton for Joe Harris was a life with women and children. By contrast, his teenage years, at Turnwold plantation during the Civil War, comprised a life with men. Planter Joseph Addison Turner was the first mature man young Joe had ever deeply known and he received a sustained period of warmth and guidance for the first time in his life, from the other grown men at Turnwold—black slaves, storytellers in whose company Harris spent hours absorbing the dialect and folktales that he would later make famous around the world.

The Old South that Harris visits, mythologizes and reorganizes in his fiction, then, is a place and an idea that on one level, at least, he *discovered* rather than knew from birth. He wrote an autobiographical novel, *On the Plantation: A Story of a Georgia Boy's Adventures During the War* (1892), recounting his experiences at Turnwold. The novel opens in a post office. Young Joe Maxwell, Harris's fictional persona, spends a lot of time in this public place, curled up on a rickety old sofa reading newspapers and "watching the people come and go" (1). The boy wanders around the small town of Hillsborough, visiting the offices of a friendly lawyer and playing pranks with his friends. Harris thus establishes Maxwell from the first page of *On the Plantation* as an outsider to the plantation elite of Middle Georgia.

Maxwell gains access to plantation life as an employee, and so the center of "plantation life" for him is not the big house, but the print shop. Harris clearly and unambiguously establishes Joe Maxwell's place in the social order of the plantation when the owner tells Maxwell that he will board with the itinerant print shop foreman, the Irish Mr. Snelson. Harris does not even mention the plantation house itself as he describes Maxwell's arrival:

> To the lonely lad it seemed a long journey to Mr. Snelson's—through wide plantation gates, down narrow lanes, along a bit of public road, and then a plunge into the depths of a great wood, where presently a light gleamed through. (19)

After four years at Turnwold, Harris began building a career as a newspaperman in Forsyth, Ga., Savannah, Ga. and New Orleans before moving to Atlanta. The period in which Harris began writing Uncle Remus sketches for *The Atlanta Constitution,* the 1870s, was one of tremendous social, political and physical upheaval in the South. Southerners, black and white, were on the move, seeking jobs and a better life in the Mississippi Delta, the Louisiana rice and sugar cane fields, on the railroads, and in the western states. Huge crowds of black people gathered at local railroad stations to board trains heading west, an image recorded in many writings from the period, but whites left the region in even greater numbers (Ayers 17). White owners left the country for a new life in towns, abandoning large old farmhouses and plantation houses to tenant farmers. Village and town populations expanded rapidly, and new towns came into existence (Ayers 37).

Harris used the phenomenon of black migration in an Uncle Remus sketch called "The Emigrants." In it, Uncle Remus sees a black family waiting for the train at the passenger depot: "One of the children was very young, and the quartet was altogether

ragged and forlorn-looking" (204). Harris uses the sketch to express his anxiety over the widespread movement of blacks and the risks involved in lighting out for the unknown. Remus asks the patriarch of the sad little group where he is headed, and the man replies, "We er gwine down in de naberhoods er Tallypoosy, an' we aint' makin' no fuss 'bout it, nudder" (205) He continues that once the family makes it to Tallapoosa, Alabama, they might just keep going until they get to Mississippi.

The story, while ultimately played for humor of a sort, sketches the dangers and pitfalls faced by dirt-poor, naïve country folk desperately seeking a new life:

> "Is you got enny folks out dar?" inquired Uncle Remus.
>
> "None dat I knows un."
>
> "An' youer takin' dis 'oman an' deze chillun out dar whar dey dunno nobody? Whar's yo' perwisions?" eying a chest with a rope around it.
>
> "Dem's our bed-cloze," the old negro explained, noticing the glance of Uncle Remus. "All de vittles what we got we e't 'fo' we started."
>
> "An' you speck ter retch dar safe an' soun'? Whar's yo' ticket?"
>
> Ain't got none. De man say ez how dey'd pass us thoo. I gin a man a fi'-dollar bill 'fo' I lef' Jonesboro, an' he sed dat settled it." (Songs and Sayings 205)

Remus advises the man in stringent terms to "go an' rob somebody an' git on de chain-gang." In short, he tells the man he and his family have a better chance for survival if the man "makes his living" on the chain gang and leaves his wife to "scratch around" on her own. "I done seed deze yer Arkinsaw emmygrants come lopin' back, an' some un 'em didn't have rags nuff on 'em fer ter hide dere nakidness" (205).

Yet Harris also published Remus sketches that seem to be straight off the boards of a mintrel show. The first story in the section titled "Sayings" in the first collection,

"Jeems Rober'son's Last Illness," depicts the black characters as naïve and very literal-minded. A black person meets up with Uncle Remus at a train station and exchange pleasantries. Then the man asks Remus about Jeems Rober'son. "'I ain't hear talk er Jem sence he cut loose fum de chain-gang. Dat w'at make I ax. He ain't down wid de biliousness, is he?'" (189)

Remus finishes the set up by replying, "He ain't sick, an' he ain't been sick." Remus then proceeds to tell a humorous tale about Jeems Rober'son getting into an accident with a mule, after which, when the dust had settled, "dar lay de nigger on de groun', an' de mule she stood eatin' at the troff wid wunner Jim's gallusses wrop 'roun her behime-leg. Den atterwuds, de ker'ner, he come 'roun' an' he tuck'n gin it out dat Jim died sorter accidental like." Then Remus delivers the punch line: "Hit's like I tell you: de nigger weren't sick a minnit" (189-190).

Harris apparently moved easily from minstrel humor to sensitively and seriously addressing matters of race in current events. For example, the difficult conditions many black people found themselves in after Emancipation gave rise to a theory that the Negro race would die out in a way similar to that of the American Indian. However, a Georgia planter collected statistics on more than 1,000 of his tenant employees, comparing birth and death rates among black and white tenants from Emancipation through 1876, and discovered the data contradicted the theory (*Editor and Essayist* 99).

Harris responded to the theory and the planter's statistics with an editorial, published in 1877, titled, "The Future of the Negro." He expressed faith that black people would rise to the occasion and assure their own secure future once the question of jobs was resolved and once their "restlessness" came to its natural end. He also includes a

line meant to reassure northerners anxious about race relations in the South, and at the same time meant to point an accusing finger at northern agitators: "The suspicions they have been taught to entertain as to the intentions of the Southern people have been removed and their fears allayed. They have become more contented" (*Editor and Essayist* 101). Harris as an editorial writer for *The Atlanta Constitution* represented the point of view of its owner, Evan P. Howell, and Henry W. Grady, the editor and part owner. Harris's words often were similar in content and tone to Grady's famous "New South" speech, delivered in 1886 to the New England Society at a meeting in New York City:

> But what of the negro? Have we solved the problem he presents or progressed in honor and equity toward solution? Let the record speak to the point. No section shows a more prosperous laboring population than the negroes of the South, none in fuller sympathy with the employing and land-owning class. (Bryan 103)

The future of the South was a dominant subject of public discourse in the post war years, and both Harris's "The Future of the Negro" and Grady's "New South Speech" are examples of such discourse. Henry Grady preached a buoyant, optimistic but essentially false image of the South's future: "'There was a South of slavery and secession—that South is dead. There is a South of union and freedom - that South, thank God, is living, breathing, growing every hour.' These words, delivered from the immortal lips of Benjamin H. Hill, at Tammany Hall in 1866, true then, and truer now...." And "The new South is enamored of her new work. ...She is thrilling with the consciousness of growing power and prosperity" (Bryan 99, 105). Harris wrote editorials in the same vein, and New South rhetoric finds its way into his fiction in spots throughout. However, as

Thomas H. English asserts, Harris's true personal philosophy was one of "rural simplicity" and the "homley virtures – honesty, industry, neighborliness" (62).

Mark Twain deconstructs ideas about race in *Pudd'nhead Wilson,* in which he mocks the complacent fantasy that racial identities are pure. Echoing the reversals common in trickster tales, the novel's plot turns on the switching of babies in their cradles and the confusion that ensues. Whereas Harris uses a folktale to mock race complacency, and tears at convention with the folk wisdom that everybody was black once upon a time, Twain introduces Roxy, a beautiful Negro slave who is "as white as anybody." She is one-sixteenth black, but that one-sixteenth "did not show." Twain plays with race conventions through dialect and manner in his character Roxy: her dialect, her style of dress, and her behavior identify her as a Negro slave (925).

Joel Chandler Harris mocked the same conventions through his own role-playing. What, in fact, made Harris white when he regaled Andrew Carnegie with stories in black dialect? Harris was "as white as anybody," like Roxy, yet he spoke "black."

Harris is sometimes credited with laying a foundation block for African-American literature by bringing prominence and popularity to the Brer Rabbit tales. The novelist David Bradley assigns similar significance to Mark Twain and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.* During his address to a convention of the New England American Studies Association and the Mark Twain House in 1985 in which Bradley shocked his audience by calling *Huckleberry Finn* the first "nigger" novel:

> Bradley stared out into the crowd of mainly white American Studies scholars and Hartford patrons of the arts and said, "You folks know a lot about Sam Clemens. Sam Clemens was white. But who here among you has ever seen Mark Twain? Mark Twain was black." (Fishkin 110)

Shelley Fisher Fishkin's response to Bradley's talk was "It made perfect sense to view *Huckleberry Finn* as a key precursor to a great deal of fiction by black writers that came after it (110). But Fishkin admitted that she would probably have to look at twentieth-century writers such as Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison for Twain's influence on black authors (110-111). Fishkin, and Bradley before her make a convincing case for Mark Twain as a maker of African-American literature, but a similar case can be made for Joel Chandler Harris. Not only did Harris's "black" literature precede Twain's by several years, but, unlike Twain, he had an influence on black writers in his own time: Uncle Julius in *The Goophered Grapevine* (1899) was Charles Waddell Chesnutt's answer to Uncle Remus.

Harris is as clever as the trickster Brer Rabbit and as complex as his alter ego, Uncle Remus, layering his depiction of plantation life with multiple meanings, all of which are "correct." In his introduction to *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings,* Harris attempt disingenuously to pass off Brer Rabbit's cruel behavior as mischief:

> The story of the Rabbit and the Fox, as told by the Southern Negroes ... seems to me to be to a certain extent allegorical, albeit such an interpretation may be unreasonable. At least it is a fable thoroughly characteristic of the Negro; and it needs no scientific investigation to show why he selects as his hero the weakest and most harmless of all animals, and brings him out victorious in contests with the bear, the wolf, and the fox. It is not virtue that triumphs, but helplessness; it is not malice, but mischievousness. (44)

Eric Sundquist rightly observes that Harris had to know that it would be plain to every reader that the rabbit's victories over the other animals are motivated by "the most transparent aggression and obsequious mocking contempt of the slave for his master, or

the black man for his white boss" (340-341). Here Harris wears a mild, moderate, white mask to disguise his radical message. Turning the pages from the introduction to the stories, however, the reader finds the message. It is built into a reorganized Southern plantation culture that the author made while appearing only to sentimentalize it. A primary agent of the reorganization is Remus himself, and Remus's relationship with the little white boy.

In "Miss Cow Falls A Victim to Mr. Rabbit," in *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings,* Rabbit's behavior falls just inside the realm of mischievous, rather than cruel. Brer Rabbit finds a way to trick Miss Cow into giving him some milk. Through Rabbit's malevolent cleverness, Miss Cow ends up with her horns stuck in a persimmon tree so she can't get away, and Rabbit and his family "milk her dry" (28). The stories are filled with this sort of mischief, but a few stories contain extreme cruelty that reads as an expression of rage. In "The Sad Fate of Mr. Fox," Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox leap inside a cow's mouth and into her belly, where "dey cut en day kyarved, en dey kyarved en dey cut" and kill her from the inside. When the cow's owner finds her dead, he cuts her open. Brer Rabbit blames Brer Fox for killing her (105). The man kills Fox with a stick. Rabbit asks for and receives Fox's head. He takes the head to Fox's wife's house, and offers it to her as "some nice beef" for her to feed her children. He manages to get the head in the cook pot without Mrs. Fox's seeing it, but one of the children lifts the pot lid and sees his father's head, and "sot up a howl en tole his mammy" (105).

This story is hideous, but is a superb example of tricksterism – not only of Rabbit's but also that of Remus and Harris. Rabbit, according to the tale, not only escaped punishment from Mrs. Fox, but also by some accounts later married her, Uncle

Remus tells the little boy. Remus is a trickster in his reply when the boy, upon learning that Rabbit escaped Mrs. Fox's wrath, asks, "And was that the last of the Rabbit, too, Uncle Remus?" and Remus replies,

> Don't push me too close, honey; don't shove me up in no comder. I don't wanter tell you no stories. Some say dat Brer Rabbit's ole' 'oman died fum eatin' some pizen-weed, en dat Brer Rabbit married ole Miss Fox, en some say not. Some tells one tale en some tells nudder. (107)

Harris is a trickster because he is white, telling a story that can be read as a tale of black deceit, murder, and survival. Remus and the mythical world of the animals take center stage, and the white ruling class recedes into the background. White power fades in the world Remus creates for the little boy.

"I see it, but I can't say it"

Harris published his opinions on the future of the South and the "Negro Question" throughout his career, in the *Atlanta Constitution* and in popular magazines. He was suspicious of the effects of urbanization and industrialization on the South in general, and he often cited farm life and rural values as solutions to the problems of the day. For example, in an essay published in *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1904, Harris condemns lynching. He states that in his home county in Middle Georgia, "lynching is unknown because the particular crime that incites to lynching is unknown. Such a crime has never been committed in the county" he writes, and adds "the overwhelming majority of the negroes in all parts of the South, especially in the agricultural regions, are leading sober and industrious lives" (*Editor and Essayist* 144-145).

He goes on to discuss temperance, and again asserts the value of living in the country: "A temperate race is bound to be industrious, and the negroes are temperate, as compared with the whites. I am speaking, of course, of the negroes on the farms..." (*Editor and Essayist* 145).

Harris created early in his career another voice in addition to his own and Remus's to sound his opinions, Uncle Billy Sanders, a white man, "the Philosopher of Shady Dale." Late in his life, Harris launched *Uncle Remus's Magazine,* and Billy reappeared, and, like Remus, would "stop by the magazine office" to discuss politics. The September 1907 number contained this passage:

> "Ef the honest voters stuck together an' put honest men in office, we wouldn't have but one thing to bother us in our dreams, an' that'd be this nigger business."
>
> "Well, what about the negro business?" he was asked.
>
> "I can tell you this much," Mr. Sanders replied. "I ain't a-losin' no sleep over it. What pesters me the most is the white man's end of the problem. My word for it, we ain't a-handlin' it as neatly as it mought be handled—an' when I say 'we' I'm thinkin' mostly about you poor creaturs in the big cities...." (*Editor and Essayist* 211)

Billy goes on to observe that trouble is easily aroused in cities – Harris is again citing, through Billy, the stability of life in the country. He continues, "you editor fellers may up an' say that you don't keer what other folks think about you; but you do keer, an' all our people keer..." (*Editor and Essayist* 211). Harris's rebuke of the "editor fellers" and their attitude signifies his rejection on some level of his own journalism career. He had spent his life writing editorials supporting his newspaper's progressive viewpoint,

supporting the idea of the New South. Through Billy, Harris condemns whites' treatment of blacks:

> "The way things have been gwine lately, we aint givin' the niggers a fa'r showin'; we aint a-treatin' of 'em right. Time was, an' that not so might'ly long ago, when all our editors, big an' little, an' all our public men, both great and small, was a-kickin' as high as my ol' speckled steer bekaze the papers an' the politicians of the North was a-callin' all on us barbarians ever' time anything happened down here. We show'd how onjest sech treatment was, an' we worried about it no little. Well, we oughter do as we'd be done by." (*Editor and Essayist* 212)

Billy continues, stating that white southerners tend to condemn "the whole nigger race" for the crimes of individuals and that "what thar's one of these sons of Satan, thar's ten thousand decent, industrious, well-behaved niggers."

Harris's discontent with Southern policies and practice comes through more clearly in his later Uncle Remus fiction, too. He swore off writing and publishing Uncle Remus tales for a decade, but public pressure influenced him to bring Uncle Remus back, and in 1905, 25 years after the first collection, he released *Told by Uncle Remus: New Stories of the Old Plantation,* a collection of tales published in magazines from 1903 to 1905. In it, his discontent is clear. As Darwin T. Turner observes,

> "Remus voices the aging Harris's yearning for the past and his displeasure with the urbanized South. Above all else, Remus disapproves of the new standards for rearing children: the excessive emphasis upon discipline and cleanliness, the insistence upon early maturity and practicality, and the restriction or elimination of imagination and fantasizing." (119)

Uncle Remus's audience is now a new little boy, the son of the original child. But things have changed:

> This latest little boy was frailer and quieter than his father had been; indeed, he was fragile, and had hardly any color in his face. But he was a beautiful child, too beautiful for a boy. He had large, dreamy eyes, and the quaintest little ways that ever were seen; and he was polite and thoughtful of others. He was very choice in the use of words, and talked as if he had picked his language out of a book. (541)

Harris no doubt was condemning "new standards for rearing children," but a careful reading of the narrative frames reveals an odd and intriguing inarticulateness in Remus that seems to suggest something in addition. Remus and Miss Sally, the new little boy's grandmother, discuss the child. "'What dey gwineter do wid dat chile? What dey gwineter make out'n 'im?'" Uncle Remus asks Sally, who offers little in reply. Remus continues, "But it's a pity – a mighty pity." The rest of this exchange is revealing in what it does not tell the reader, in what Sally won't admit and Remus can't seem to express:

> "What is a pity?" the lady inquired, though she knew full well what was in the old negro's mind.
>
> "I can't tell you, ma'am, an' 't wouldn't be my place ter tell you ef I could; but dar 'tis, an' you can't rub it out. I see it, but I can't say it; I knows it, but I can't show you how ter put yo' finger on it; yit it's dar ef I'm name Remus."
>
> The grandmother sat silent so long, and gazed at the old negro so seriously, that he became restive. (542)

What is not said gives this passage a weight that certainly puts it beyond a critique of new-fangled child-rearing. The little boy *is* the New South in Remus's mind, and Harris's—emasculated and fragile. Lost were the rugged rural ways – the little boy had been reared in the city of Atlanta – and the loving attachment to imagination and fantasizing, or storytelling. The white boy, standing in for the white South, has suffered because he has not had a country life steeped in black culture and wisdom. His skin is even too white – he "had hardly any color in his face."

Remus and Sally, both elderly, representing the old ways, the Old South, one white, one black, lament something they won't or can't put into words.

Chapter Four: White Like Me

Joel Chandler Harris created with the Uncle Remus stories a racial utopia, as several critics have observed. Dialect, as an integral part of both the stories and the framing narratives, helps him to make this idyllic world, in which "black and white love one another and share a childhood, just as Harris thought he had done at Turnwold," (Hemenway 19). Dialect also serves Harris because it is the language of his "other self," an alternative identity that allowed him to slip off the clothes of the politically moderate white Southern man, and pull on the costume and the persona of an artist, an outsider, a black person. This persona gave him the release he needed to create Uncle Remus and the animal tales. Dialect gave cover to a side of Harris he dared not show freely. It let his soul breathe freely. It allowed him to become Uncle Remus, and Remus to be the second self.

Harris's thorough fluency in the stories is in Middle Georgia black pronunciation and colloquial expressions, and rather than dialect in the strict sense of the word. However, the language of Uncle Remus has struck many readers and critics as authentic. Sidney Lanier, a fellow Georgian and contemporary of Harris's called it "real Negro-talk" (Pederson 292). Lee Pederson convincingly explains that "the narrative art of Uncle Remus is no 'happy accident" and that the language of the tales is neither 'uncompromising dialect writing' nor 'incredibly precise transcriptions of speech." It is, instead, a "reflex of a literary tradition that has its roots in the old fields of Athens and Rome. Pederson identifies Uncle Remus's language as carefully developed poetic language using and manipulating Ciceronean and Senecan sentence styles to create a "rhetorical and emotional impact that has no counterpart in ordinary language" (292-

296). Harris uses double negatives, colloquialisms and non-standard phrases to give the words of Uncle Remus and the animals in the tales authentic-sounding black Southern color and flavor. Pederson suggests Harris synthesized three cultures and their heritage with the Uncle Remus narrative: the rural tradition of Middle Georgia, using linguistic features shared by both blacks and whites; the African-American tradition of the southern United States through the beast fables; and the classical tradition of English prose "through the syntax and prose style that elevate the spoken word to literature" (298).

This fascinating, complex, convincing synthesis which captivates, charms and enrages readers, acknowledges the Africanness at the core of Southern culture. It is a mix of "black" and "white." In fact, most Southern "accents" themselves acknowledge African influence, with the African-origin pronunciations, expressions and tones that have woven themselves into the language since African slaves' first arrival. For a white man such as Harris to then absorb fully the black language to give it a voice takes the acknowledgement further, from accent and colloquialism to language, to persona, personality and eventually to some kind of "self."

Many critical interpretations of the Uncle Remus character have held that as complex as he is, Remus is ultimately "white," a blackface, disguised mouthpiece for Harris's moderate segregationist views, and that the utopia he makes is one based on white superiority and dominance over blacks who are subservient if not actual slaves. Harris's characters and settings are without doubt stereotypes. Uncle Remus is on the surface a contented old "darky" with no resentment of slavery, and the plantation as Harris presents it is a Southern paradise – a safe, secure home where a community of blacks and whites live in harmony. However, Harris was a trickster, and like all tricksters,

what he says and what he does are often two very different things. The mask and robe of dialect allow Harris to express what he cannot as Joel Chandler Harris, journalist – that black people are human, for one thing, and that he craved some alternative to the soul-killing Jim Crow laws and some sort of racial and societal unity. The dialect stories and the narrative frames allow Harris to describe the richness and complexity – and the difficulty – of black life in late 19th century America, because the tales are trickster tales, pure expressions of rage, frustration, liberation and prophesy: the last shall be first and the one that appears weakest now will become the strongest.

A strong case can be made for the "dialect" and the black character serving as a vehicle for the writer to pose questions about racial identity and definition. It must be acknowledged, though, that Harris, if he was conscious of posing the questions, never admitted it. In writing (and speaking) in Middle Georgia black language, Harris implicitly asked, "Am I black?" If Joel Chandler Harris could even unwittingly or subconsciously ask such a question, then every "white" American, certainly every white Southerner could ask it. Why would Harris or any white person ask such a question? The answer lies in the history of slavery and Emancipation in America, in the impact Jim Crow laws had on the self-perception of whites and blacks. The question is interesting and important because the answer for whites has always been complex and for many, hard to accept. Whether the question is meant purely genetically, or culturally and artistically, the answer would always be, at least in some part, yes.

A key to reading Harris with any sort of satisfaction is the ability to tolerate opposing meanings and points of view at the same time and to accept that both have validity and that Harris's contradictions will never be fully resolved.

In the opening story of the first collection, "Uncle Remus Initiates the Little Boy," the omniscient narrator describes the little boy's mother, "Miss Sally" as searching for the youngster. She hears the sound of voices from Uncle Remus's cabin, and watches the old man and the child through the window. Remus and the little boy sit close together in the golden glow of the fire "and the confusing world of racial caste disappears at the slave cabin's door." Harris is able to make the realities of black-white relationships in antebellum and post-Reconstruction America disappear, and the fact that one of the participants is a child essentially goes unnoticed, Hemenway observes. Harris sustains this utopia in the narrative frames most successfully in the first two collections.

He never explicitly admitted in writing a strong identification with black people, but he managed to accomplish what many whites in the South failed to do: communicate with black people. White teachers and folklorists – even blacks from other parts of the country – reported extreme difficulty in communicating with Southern blacks. The problem often was outsiders, white or black, simply could not understand Southern black dialect, but it went further. Folklore collectors reported that black people refused to tell them stories or even to speak in their everyday tongue in their presence. For example, Lorenzo Dow Turner, a linguist, found in his studies that Georgia and South Carolina Sea Islanders used one vocabulary and syntax when talking among themselves and a language considerably different when speaking to strangers, even to Turner, who was black (Levine 146).

The sense of belonging and comfort Harris felt among black people went unnamed, but can be sensed in his characterization of Remus and in the way placement of

the little boy in relation to Uncle Remus physically contrasts with where he puts the other white characters.

"A Time W'en All de W'ite Folks Uz Black"

In the first story in the first collection Harris uses Miss Sally, the little boy's mother, as a stand-in for white readers, many if not most of whom never heard the tales first-hand as he had done. Miss Sally gazes through the window at Remus and the boy, just as the reader gazes through the window created by Harris, the stories themselves. Miss Sally will never join Remus and the boy, never listen to the animal tales first-hand, never be "initiated" into the secret world of the stories.

As Miss Sally is allowed a glimpse of Remus and her son through the cabin window, the boy is allowed to gaze into the world of the animals through the window of the tales. The departure from "standard" English to dialect is as distinct as stepping from dooryard to threshold. The dialect portion is set off with a paragraph break and a colon:

> This is what "Miss Sally" heard:
>
> "Bimeby, one day, arter Brer Fox bin doin' all dat
> he could fer ter ketch Brer Rabbit, en Brer Rabbit
> bin doin' all he could fer ter keep 'im fum it, Brer
> Fox say to hisse'f dat he'd put up a game on Brer
> Rabbit, en he ain't mo'n got de wuds out'n his mouf
> twel Brer Rabbit come a lopin' up de big road,
> lookin' des ez plump, en ez fat, en ez sassy ez a
> Moggin hoss in a barley-patch." (4)

This typographical arrangement gives the reader reading aloud to others a strong cue to shift into character, and to make the rather difficult leap into pronouncing the words. The stories were intended by Harris to be read aloud, because the origins of the animal tales were in the oral tradition, and so this cue was no doubt useful to the thousands and millions who made up Harris' enthusiastic readership during his lifetime

and for many years afterward. Pederson cites this sentence when he suggests that an important question deserving attention in Harris's work is that of "the psychology of perception":

> With Remus's first sentence, Harris pulled all the stops in a highly stylized set piece. Such deliberate use of literary devices recurs in the introductory lines of works deemed important by their authors, from the epic poetry of Virgil and Dante to the tortured syntax of Cotton Mather in his opening paragraphs of *Magnalia Christi Americana*. In his own way, Harris was more successful with this than any of his predecessors. No other sentence in this first book matches the elaborate craft of that initial sentence, and brought it off in language that his readers accepted as "real Negro-talk," a down-home example of the classical dictum *Ars est artum celare*. (298)

Just before the break, the omniscient narrator describes Remus and the child. Miss Sally sees the little boy sitting by Uncle Remus: "His head rested against the old man's arm, and he was gazing with an expression of the most intense interest into the rough, weather-beaten face, that beamed so kindly upon him" (3). Several pages later, the third story opens with "'One night,' said Uncle Remus – taking Miss Sally's little boy on his knee, and stroking the child's hair thoughtfully and caressingly..." (8). The physical gestures of love and affection are an important part of the utopia. The love between black and white is real and sincere in Harris's view. A number of critics have noted how affectionate Remus is toward the boy, and have taken this to indicate Harris's longing to believe that blacks love their white masters, or as a reassurance to northern readers that freed blacks held no bitterness toward their former owners. This interpretation connects Harris strongly to the moderate segregationist view of black-white relations. Yet undeniably the little boy loves Remus, too. His love certainly could and did stand for

post-Reconstruction white southerners, reassuring the north that the race situation in the South would work out just fine. But the white child's affection and "intense interest" was Harris's as well, and the utopia was a world in which that love and interest was warmly received and gratified through intimacy and acceptance.

At the same time that the stories reassured readers of a good future for the New South, they took Southern plantation society – and by implication, all of Southern society, and turned it upside down, placing a black person at its spiritual and emotional head, and reducing the white owners and power elite – except for the child who is Remus's companion and primary audience – to minor roles.

Harris wasn't the first to put slaves at center stage, however. By the time he began writing stories, Harriet Beecher Stowe had already forever changed the way writers treated Southern plantations. William R. Taylor observes in *Cavalier and Yankee* that after *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* the slave rather than the master became the center of fictional representations of plantation life. Stowe's placement of the slave influenced Harris, Thomas Nelson Page and Mark Twain, all who began to write some twenty years after the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (307). Stowe was not the only influence pushing the white plantation owners into the background in fiction. After Emancipation the reading public craved local color stories about blacks and black life; Harris was well aware of this demand.

Stowe places a black slave at the center of her novel in order to serve her revolutionary purpose, which was to suggest that American slavery was a sin. Her point was that the virtues associated with white women—domesticity and Christianity—were superior to the qualities and institutions associated with white men, such as politics,

industry and commercialism. Similarly, Harris associates with black people and black life a number of qualities he considers superior to those typically associated with white men, and he uses Uncle Remus in his central role to express this association. Through Uncle Remus, Harris connects with rural and agricultural life, and whites to commercialism and industry. Blacks are associated with the fanciful, with long-standing cultural traditions such as story-telling, with respect for the past, and with strong social and familial bonds. Whites in Harris's works value the practical, the material, the financially profitable and the future. This point becomes more acute with each volume of stories. In 1903, the introductory story in *Told by Uncle Remus* had the old man, who had moved to Atlanta with the boy, now grown, and his family, "tired of the dubious ways of city life" (541). In the later books, the dialect seems more forced, and the work is less interesting. Uncle Remus develops a relationship with a new child, the grown-up little boy's son. The family returns to the country but nearly everything about the new little boy and his parents' modern child-rearing practices strikes Remus as wrong.

Unlike Stowe, though, Harris admitted to none of this as his purpose in writing the Uncle Remus tales. He claimed he was doing nothing more than preserving beloved old slave stories, and the use of so-called dialect seems to reinforce that notion. But dialect was the language of storytelling, and storytelling was the currency of the aspect of plantation life that Harris cared most about. This was not the Southern plantation where everyone knew his place, but where everyone *had* a place, and the question of one's place—the role freed slaves were to play in Southern society—was *the* question of the era, the dominant political and moral issue, the "Negro Question." To understand how and why Harris wrote about it and thought about it is extremely important in

understanding his creative work. During Reconstruction and after, a large number of black people were displaced. Some were unwilling to return to the farms and plantations of former owners or other whites and take up a life of tenant farming or sharecropping that would amount to slavery. Many were drawn to the railroad work as lines expanded westward, and others were able to buy land cheaply in sparsely settled regions. This movement and restlessness disturbed Harris, but if he was nostalgic about the old plantation, it was because the plantation was where not only black slaves had a place, but where he, a poor, illegitimate white town boy also found a sense of belonging. Darwin T. Turner gives an "abandoned child" interpretation to Harris's impossible plantations, utopias "in which each deserving Anglo-Saxon American is satiated with love from childhood to death," where children are "entertained, comforted, and advised by a devoted black nurse or a slave playmate" and adults are attended by servants. "Such a utopia had existed, or had been possible, Harris imagined, on plantations before the Civil War" (114).

Old Harbert, Uncle George Terrell, and other Turner family slaves liked young "Joe" and offered him respect and emotional support. A number of critics speculate that Remus and the animal tales functioned as vents for Harris's frustration over his life as an outsider. "There's no question that as a teenager on the plantation, Harris identified with the slaves," according to Bruce Bickley. "They were outside mainstream society, and in many ways he felt he was, too. He felt comfortable in the black community. They told him stories, and he was a good listener" (*JCH* 23). The dialect and the stories create a space where he could express this identification, for he saw himself as having existed, like them, at the bottom of American society, having been born to an unmarried woman,

into an impoverished childhood. A sentence in a grade-school copybook from a mock oration clearly illustrates his question of his place in society: "Which is most respectable, poor folks or niggers?" (Flusche 175).

The only way to safely portray idealized black-white relationships was to mask them in dialect. The intimacy and honest affection Harris shows would, in standard English, have been unacceptable to a broad readership, and unbelievable to many, for the standard language would have equalized or "standardized" the racial status of the two characters.

The dialect provides an opportunity to convey much more meaning, in addition to the portrait of affection between the black man and the white child. A number of critics perceive a significant distinction between Uncle Remus and the tales, or, more specifically, between Remus and Brer Rabbit. They believe Remus stands for the idealization of the old South by a penitent new generation of Southern writers, with Harris in the lead. Remus was a "safe" black man, happy, loving toward whites – nothing to be afraid of. The tales, on the other hand, have authentic origins in Africa, and some critics hold they therefore cannot be construed to be a product of Southern slavery, as Remus is. They are all about trickery, deceit, immorality, and survival. "They reproduce, in their jagged images of violence, the emotional universe of the Negro slave" (Bone 138).

However, Remus and tales, and Remus, Harris and the tales, cannot be separated. In the strange and wondrous world that opens up with the first "bimeby, one day," religion is reinterpreted, conventional society is subverted, convention itself overturned, and morality flouted, and like it or not, Remus, as central character and teller of the tales,

is an instrument of the subversion. For example, the intriguing characters Miss Meadows "en de gals" play a role in several stories. One of those roles clearly is that of white women to Brer Rabbit's black man. Rabbit goes courting at the home of Miss Meadows and the girls – the most devastating moral violation in the white South that any author could have come up with at the time. Harris depicts him in the presence of the girls as flirtatious and crafty:

> Brer Rabbit, he sot dar, he did, sorter lam' like, en den bimeby he cross his legs, he did, and wink his eye slow, en up en say, sezee:
>
> 'Ladies, Brer Fox wuz my daddy's ridin'-hoss fer thirty year; maybe mo', but thirty year dat I knows un,' sezee; en den he paid um his 'specks and tip his beaver, en march off, he did des ez stiff en ez stucdk up ez a firestick." (17)

Rabbit knows full well that the girls will tell Fox what he said, thereby starting a dispute that will allow him to show off.

However, neither Harris nor Remus says exactly who Miss Meadows is. If they are simply white women, a mother and daughters or a group of sisters, then Harris is flouting one carefully guarded moral precept, that black men will not court white women. If they are brothel madam and prostitutes, as they come across, at least from the vantage point of a twenty-first century reader, then he violates at least a couple of moral codes. Remus refuses to explain the characters when the little boy asks about them: "Don't ax me, honey. She wuz in de tale, Miss Meadows and de gals wuz, en de tale I give you like hi't wer' gun ter me" (17). Harris himself offered a completely unsatisfying explanation as to who they were in agreeing with illustrator Frederick S. Church:

> My relations toward the sketches you are illustrating are those of a compiler merely;

> consequently I cannot pretend to know what is meant by Miss Meadows. She plays a minor part in the entire series, as you will perceive when the concluding numbers have been sent to you. Why she is there, I cannot say.... By all means let Miss Meadows figure as Nature in the shape of a beautiful girl in a simple but not unpicturesque costume. (*Life and Letters* 150).

"A truly bad rabbit"

In "Mr. Rabbit Nibbles Up the Butter," Brer Rabbit is at his most malevolent because he causes the death of an innocent being. Rabbit steals and eats the animals' communal supply of butter, and then smears the paws of a sleeping Brer Possum to lay the blame on him. The next morning, Possum, in order to exonerate himself, suggests a trial by fire: the animals should make a "big bresh-heap en set her afier, en all han's try ter jump over, en de one w'at fall in, den he de chap w'at stole de butter." All the animals easily leap over the flames except, ironically, clumsy Possum, who falls into the fire, "en dat wuz de las' er ole Brer Possum" (*53*).

The little boy protests the unfairness of the story's outcome, and it is at this moment of questioning, and others like it in other stories, that the reader can see most clearly the layering of multiple and often contradictory meanings in the Uncle Remus stories that sets Harris apart from other white writers. Eric Sundquist, in an illuminating analysis of the Uncle Remus tales, lays out Harris's layering scheme with clarity:

> Brer Rabbit is a trickster disguise for Remus, who in turn is a trickster disguise for Harris himself. This superimposition of created selves that Harris offers the reader is clarified in those moments where he self consciously comments on the multiple layers of Remus's stories and the boy's near-recognition of the deeper truth they can reveal. (345)

When the little boy protests, "Uncle Remus, Brother Possum didn't steal the butter after all," Uncle Remus replies, "In dis worril, lots er fokes is gotter suffer fer udder fokes sins. Looks like hit's mighty onwrong; but hit's des dat away. Tribbalashun seem like she's a waitin' roun' de comder fer ter ketch one en all un us, honey" (53).

Interestingly, the debate over Rabbit and his actions continues to this day. Julius Lester, a University of Massachusetts professor, has retold a number of black folktales, including many Uncle Remus stories, starting with volumes published in the late 1960s. June Jordan, in reviewing Lester's 1987 collection *The Tales of Uncle Remus*, fell into the Brer Rabbit-as-sociopath camp, calling him a "pathological hustler" and "a truly bad rabbit" who is lazy and an incorrigible liar (qtd. in Brasch, 311).

Harris reverses the "civilizing" effect of white culture on black slaves: it is not ex-slave Uncle Remus who needs to learn anything, or to be civilized; it's the little white boy who must learn, and what he learns, in addition to the fact of Africanness as both center and backdrop in his world, often contradicts the established, white justice system, Christian teaching and any sense of a universal moral code. The only way Harris/Remus could teach such a lesson is through a dialect tale. It might be argued that the animal fable itself provides enough of a mask or buffer to allow Harris to express the lesson, but a white reading audience in the late nineteenth century would not have tolerated such an unadulterated presentation, for the dialect allowed the audience to ascribe its own meaning to the story and left open as to how and where it found it.

Harris's utopia was unlike the plantation nostalgia of Thomas Nelson Page, or even that of Harris himself in essays such as "The Negro as the South Sees Him." Only in dialect could Harris express the tale's underlying message of doubt in the future of New

South progress and desire for a Utopic past quite unlike that in the essay which describes the "old-time darky" in pure Plantation Nostalgia terms. Many critics use this and other similar passages to accuse Harris of longing for slavery or a Utopia of white dominance. But Harris's longing focused not on dominance but togetherness.

A story called "Why the Negro is Black" spells out the reasons for differences in skin color, but expresses implicitly and explicitly longing for racial unity that few Southern whites would have dared to utter. The little boy watches Remus twist and wax shoe thread, and "he made what appeared to him to be a very curious discovery. He discovered that the palms of the old man's hands were as white as his own... (102). Uncle Remus replies, "...dey wuz a time w'en all de w'ite folks uz black." He says that the desire to become white was overwhelmingly strong and led to a situation in which some were washed "clean" of their blackness, others became partially clean and became mulattoes, and the rest remained black. Remus's meaning is veiled by dialect, and further disguised by the idea that blacks *wanted* to be white, and sought to be clean of the their blackness. He adds a couple of sentences and one crucial word that allows, again, an opening for interpretation for those wise enough to see it. He adds, "Yasser. Folks dunner w'at bin yit, let 'lone w'at gwineter be. Niggers is niggers now, but de time wuz w'en we 'uz all niggers tergedder" (102). The key word is "tergedder" – together. The white, successful, middle class, politically middle-of-the-road Harris could never have mused on the desirability of a time long ago when everyone was black, but that is exactly what he can safely do as Remus. And he can stress the idea that people lived as one, together.

The tale serves as a nimble satire of plantation nostalgia, taking one of its staples, the desire for the good old days when blacks and whites lived together in harmony on

idyllic estates, and pushing it to what has to be its logical end: a state of harmony and togetherness reaches its ultimate point with complete unity and oneness, in a heavenly state where there are no distinctions, in a time when "We 'uz all niggers tergedder." Harris's longing, the desires of his other self are palpable in this passage.

Harris's best-known tale, "The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story" reaches its famous conclusion in another story called "How Mr. Rabbit Was Too Sharp for Mr. Fox," which contains the familiar brier patch scene. In the first story, Brer Fox fashions a sticky trap by making a "tar-baby" from a mixture of tar and turpentine. Fox lies in wait for Brer Rabbit, who, prancing down the road, comes upon the Tar-Baby. Rabbit tries a simple "Mawnin'!" to no avail, then "How duz yo' sym'tums seem ter segashuate?"—again, silence. Rabbit then becomes angry:

> "I'm gwineter larn you howter talk ter 'specttuble fokes ef hit's de las' ack. Ef you don't take off dat hat en tell me howdy, I'm gwineter bus' you wide open." (6-7)

The story lampoons whites' rage at black insolence, reflecting the satiric mimicry that slaves indulged in among themselves, when Brer Rabbit speaks to the Tar-Baby, and she remains silent (Wolfe 80). Fox tries to punish Rabbit for his arrogant capers around the neighborhood and for trying to strike up an acquaintance with the Tar-Baby "widout waitin' fer enny invite." In a reversal of signifiers, now the Fox plays the "white" role to Brer Rabbit's "uppity black." Brer Fox threatens Rabbit with all kinds of grisly deaths: he says he'll barbecue him, hang him, drown him, or skin him. Brer Rabbit dons his verbal mask and pleads with the fox:

> "Skin me, Brer Fox, snatch out my eyeballs, t'ar out my years by de roots, en cut off my legs, but do

> please, Brer Fox, don't fling me in dat brier-patch."
> (12)

Brer Rabbit signifies upon Brer Fox magnificently. A few moments after Brer Rabbit hits the bushes, Fox sees him far away on a hillside, "settin' cross-legged on a chinkapin log koamin' de pitch outen his har wid a chip." Remus says, in a perfect example of the language of reversal, "Den Brer Fox know dat he bin swop off mighty bad." Rabbit "fling[s] back some er his sass: "'Bred en bawn in a brier-patch, Brer Fox—bred en bawn in a brier-patch!'" (13) (Hugh Keenan reads the Tar-Baby story as a parable of North-South relations. The rabbit is a white southerner who gets caught by the Negro Question, the tar-baby, and who distracts the north, the fox, by asking to be left alone in his own brier patch of local political matters. He finally frees himself by a partial disfranchisement of the Negro [60-61].)

Remus tells of a time "'fo' enny un us wuz borned" when the creatures "had lots mo' sense dan dey got now; let 'lone dat, day had sense same like folks" in "The Story of the Deluge." The great flood comes about when the Elephant steps on several crawfish, making them angry. They bore deep into the earth and, in retaliation, "dey onloost de fountains er de earf", causing the earth to be flooded and all the creatures to be drowned. This being the story of *the* flood, the little boy asks about the ark. "W'ich ark's dat?" Remus replies (15).

"Noah's ark," the boy answers, but Remus replies that there is no ark in the story of the Crawfishes' flood. Remus's story is from a parallel history, a second secret history shrouded in mystery. Even the authenticity of this parallel history is a secret: "Dey mouter bin two deloojes, en den agin dey moutent," the old man says. He warns his young charge to protect their secret shared knowledge: "Don't you bodder longer dat

ark, 'ceppin' your mammy fetches it up" (15). In other words, when spoken to by an outsider, speak the language of the outsider. It might seem today a bit difficult to miss the reversal of Christian teaching in "The Story of the Deluge and How It Came About," but the dialect allowed the nineteenth century reader the necessary distance to read the story as simply another Negro animal tale.

Harris acknowledges the authority of the tales in "Brother Rabbit and the Mosquitoes," in *Nights with Uncle Remus:*

> "Why Uncle Remus how did Brother Wolf get away from Mammy-Bammy Big-Money?"
>
> The old man's frown deepened and his voice was full of anger as he replied:
>
> "Now, den, is I'm de tale, er is de tale me? Tell me dat! Is I'm de tale, er is de tale me? Well, den, ef I aint de tale and de tale aint me, den how come you wanter take'n rake me over the coals fer?" (255)

Remus uses personification to stress the authoritative nature of the tales: "Dat w'at de tale say. Ole Remus is one nigger en de tale, hit's a n'er nigger." (255)

The stories in "dialect" no doubt seem exotic or antiquated to contemporary readers, if not downright embarrassing. However, the nineteenth-century reading public clamored for Negro dialect. Readers everywhere wanted Southern local color. Southerners were eager to "authenticate a version of the plantation system as tragic Eden" (MacKethan 210-11) while Northerners were curious about the people, language, and customs of the land that had been the Confederacy. Historian Lawrence J. Friedman sees Joel Chandler Harris as exemplifying the "New Cavalier" writer:

> Harris made a special effort to tell Northern readers that they no longer differed with white Southerners on vital issues, particularly race issues. Yankees could rest content, for Southerners would treat the

> Negro in a manner any Northerner would approve. (59)

At the same time, Harris could also appeal to readers who clung to the proslavery ideology that had survived Reconstruction, because many read the character Uncle Remus as the nonthreatening old-time black slave. Friedman sees the search for "servile Negro behavior," as manifested in this sterotype as a central theme in post-bellum Southern history (v, 33).

At the time of original publication and for years afterward, adults and children delighted in the encounter between Brer Rabbit and the Tar-Baby:

> Den Brer Rabbit squall out dat ef de Tar-Baby don't tu'n 'im loose he butt 'er cranksided. En den he butted, en his head got stuck. Den Brer Fox, he sa'ntered fort', lookin' des ez innercent ez wunner yo' mammy's mockin' birds. (7)

The final words of the story became familiar to generation after generation of readers, and resonates today although the number who read Harris's tales has dwindled:

> 'I don't keer w'at you do wid me, Brer Fox, sezee, 'so you don't fling me in dat brier-patch. ...Hange me des ez high ez you please, Brer Fox,' sez Brer Rabbit, sezee, 'but do fer de Lord's sake don't fling me in that brier-patch,' sezee. (12)

When the end comes, and Fox does throw Rabbit in the brier patch, readers of all ages, black and white, up to the mid-twentieth century and into the Civil Rights era laugh with the same joy at seeing the clever rabbit succeed.

White readers in Joel Chandler Harris's day valued Negro dialect simply for itself: black life, folkways, speech and sayings were the objects of great curiosity. Americans were eager to establish a culture uniquely their own, and to establish a genuine American folklore, and so dialect literature such as Negro, German and regional helped put America on the world cultural map. That Harris's dialect stories were used to

tell stories out of slave life made it all the more powerful, and placed it far from the cultural shadow of Europe and Great Britain. A *New York Times* review *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His* Sayings, in December 1880, expressed this desire for a truly American culture:

> We are just discovering what admirable literary material there is at home, what a great mine there is to explore, and how quaint and peculiar is the material which can be dug up. Mr. Harris's book may be looked on in a double light – either as a pleasant volume recounting the stories told by a typical old colored man to a child, or as a valuable contribution to our somewhat meager folk-lore. (3)

The review called the interactions between Remus and the little boy "happy little bits of by play" and focused on "the strange myths which are still kept alive by the negroes in Southern plantations, and the dialects, which curious subjects Mr. Harris has cleverly arranged and presented to us with a great deal of skill and judgment" (3). (Not all of Harris's contemporaries were as charmed, however; Anna Julia Cooper, a black feminist, wrote that he simply recorded black speech, and got rich doing it [224-225].)

Some reviewers wondered whether the tales could have any staying power among future generations because of the dialect.

> "The dialect—that very dangerous medium for the maker of literature—is clear enough for those who are fortunate enough to have had some acquaintance with the Southern Negro, but we can readily imagine that fifty years from now it will be an undecipherable jargon to the general reader. It is, however, not merely cleverly rendered; it is profoundly studied, following in every inflection and suggestion the personality it represents" ("Mr. Frost's Edition of *Uncle Remus*" 25).

Harris claimed his purpose was "to preserve the legends themselves in their original simplicity, and to wed them permanently to the quaint dialect – if, indeed, it can be called a dialect..." (Introduction, *Songs and Sayings* 39). He never acknowledged a more complex motive than this, and his detractors say he used Remus and black dialect to make fun of post-Reconstruction blacks and to reinforce white values, thereby assuaging white fears regarding blacks' place in society. Yet clearly if the tales, their narrative frames and the other Uncle Remus sketches contain such racist humor and a conciliatory tone with regard to race relations, they also contain subversion, satire and secrecy, and the dialect serves as a mask that allows Harris a second voice, an alternative persona to that of the middle class white journalist, the moderate on segregation and the "Negro Question." His fluency in black dialect allowed him to develop Remus as a second self.

From the time Harris began publishing the tales, the gap between black and white widened, and Jim Crow laws grew in stringency and prevalence. By the late 1890s, Frederick Douglass was dead and black agitation for rights and freedoms was softening. In 1895 Booker T. Washington delivered his famous accommodationist Atlanta Exposition Address.

Anti-negro hysteria, in evidence late in the century, continued into the early twentieth century, which was its most intense period in history (Friedman 89). The lynching of blacks reached an all-time high in 1892, and newspapers reported that Southern mobs were beginning to torture and burn their victims instead of simply hanging them (Frederickson 273). Deportationist thinking, the notion that American blacks must be expatriated to Africa, experienced a major revival from 1887 to 1891. President Benjamin Harrison said in his speech accepting the Republican nomination in

1888 that the nation had a duty to exclude or expel "alien races" that could not be assimilated (Frederickson 263, 265). Many whites feared that blacks harbored contagious diseases, their fear helping to facilitate the full implementation of Jim Crow laws, which the Supreme Court found constitutional in the 1896 "Plessy v. Ferguson" case (Friedman 122-3). The North was hardly less to blame than the South.

Apparently Jim Crow and anti-black sentiment and race hatred weighed heavier and heavier on Harris, and apparently he lost his nerve because of it. Kathleen Light explains that he grew suspicious of his own materials and "the spurious interpretations that could be attached to them" and he stripped the stories of all possible meaning.

> What he did in these later stories was to emphasize the theme of trickery and mischievousness while at the same time undercutting the theme of victory and triumph. The later stories thus carry less allegorical force, being frequently nothing more than settings for Brer Rabbit to display his precocity" (155).

The rabbit is less commanding and Uncle Remus frequently emphasizes his fallibility. Interestingly, Disney's "Song of the South" drew its material almost exclusively from the later stories (155). Yet even in the later stories it is clear that he empathized with blacks and their plight, and that he continued to identify with them to the point of preserving the black persona Remus for himself.

The fact that Harris presented a front acceptable to himself and his white peers, while at the same time creating an enduring black character in literature and preserving an important and large body of black culture is subject enough and justification enough for study. For some readers, careful consideration of Harris's white double-consciousness could be a valuable insight in a white studies context. There are therefore always two

levels to the Uncle Remus series: a 'white' viewpoint and a 'black' viewpoint. (Light 149)

If Harris had been interested in becoming an open advocate for black people, he would have faced unfathomable opposition and oppression from other whites. On top of that, the current in contemporary folklore ran against his true feelings about his material. He became caught up in a school of scientific thought, which was building an argument to explain the cultural inferiority of the American Negro, according to Kathleen Light. Darwinian evolutionism was influencing ethnologists to draw analogies between societies and biologic organisms: complex industrial societies were analogous to organisms high on the scale of evolution while primitive societies were analogous to organisms at rudimentary stages of evolution. "All this culminated in the late nineteenth century in educational, social and legal theories which posited the separate status of blacks" (147).

As Light evaluates,

> The theory that American Negro folklore represented a lower, more primitive stage of culture might not have bothered Harris, had it not clashed with his original interpretation of the tales.... What Harris saw in the Brer Rabbit stories was a type of compensatory fantasy which portrayed the triumph of the black man over the white society that enslaved him. (148)

Light adds that Daddy Jack/African Jack is presented as the most primitive of the storytellers, but that Harris gives him the most sophisticated story in *Nights with Uncle Remus*, thereby confounding the notion of cultural evolution (152).

Harris was not willing to cast himself as a champion of the Negro, and therefore never challenged the racist interpretations of folklorists.

"The success of the Uncle Remus series depended upon his skill in submerging and disguising racial issues but the theory of cultural evolution forced him to confront these very issues. He came to understand how the theories degraded black folklore and undermined his own art" (Light 156).

Harris eventually dropped most of his ties to folklorists, and he satirized them in some of his late works such as "The Late Mr. Watkins of Georgia" in *Tales of the Home Folks in Peace and War*, published in 1898. *Wally Wanderoon* (1903) tells of a professional storyteller who is imprisoned in a box for the crime of giving scientific explanations of his stories (Light 156).

Harris swore off the Uncle Remus tales, too, and managed to stay away from writing them for more than 10 years after *Uncle Remus and His Friends* was published in 1892. With the publication of *Told by Uncle Remus* in 1905, Harris confided to James Whitcomb Riley that he felt his latest collection was not equal to the quality of previous volumes (Harris, *Life and Letters 488).*

In the introduction to *Uncle Remus and His Friends* (1892), Harris wrote:

> I knew a good deal more about comparative folk-lore then that I know now [referring to *Nights with Uncle Remus*].... Since that introduction was written, I have gone far enough into the subject (by the aid of those who are Fellows of This and Professors of That, to say nothing of Doctors of the Other) to discover that at the end of investigation and discussion Speculation stands grinning. (vii)

This passage conjures an image of Brer Rabbit in some sort of long, crazy conflict in which Brer Fox stands in for critics and professional folklorists. At the end, Brer Rabbit, who represents the stories and maybe Harris himself, stands grinning. And this is not Bernard Wolfe's giver's grin. This is a "please-don't-throw-me-in-the-brier-patch" grin.

This is the grin of someone saying, "You still can't figure me out. You've analyzed and analyzed but I'm still standing, untouched by all this, and you are still somewhat clueless, aren't you?"

Remus resembles Uncle Tom as a covert agent – a disguise for Joel Chandler Harris, who was a white Uncle Tom by day – affable, loving, lovable, kind. But at night he engaged the tales, the secret knowledge they contained. The fact that he played along with the folklore aspect for a while, then lost interest, demonstrates this. He ultimately saw the tales for what they were – tales of truth, anger and magic.

Harris claims to be putting an end to Remus. "It is not an easy nor a pleasing ceremony to step from behind the curtain, pretending to smile and say a brief good-by for Uncle Remus for those who have been so free with their friendly applause (x)," but then comes some Brer Rabbit-ness:

> But there is no pretense that the old darkey's poor little stories are in the nature of literature, or that their re-telling touches literary art at any point. All the accessories are lacking. There is nothing here but an old negro man, a little boy, and a dull reporter, the matter of discourse being fantasies as uncouth as the original man ever conceived of. (x)

"Why, He's White!"

Harris needed a second self. His journalism writings express a white, moderate, segregationist stance that might be summed up in the subtitle of an essay in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1904 titled "The Negro as the South Sees Him." The subtitle reads "The Old-Time Darky" (Harris, *Editor and Essayist* 114). In the essay, he claims *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is actually a defense of the slave system, which Stowe obviously intended to attack. The basis of Harris's argument is the assessment that "all the worthy and beautiful

characters in her book – Uncle Tom, little Eva, the beloved Master, and the rest—are the products of the system the text of the book is all the time condemning." Harris goes on, as many other readers and critics have done, to point out that the most despicable characters are northerners, particularly Simon Legree (116-117).

So far, so good. Harris has only observed the irony, one feature that makes *Uncle Tom's Cabin* so compelling. But the next sentence contains enough evidence to condemn Harris forever as an entrenched Plantation nostalgic, a slavery apologist of the highest order. And indeed, if he had not written the Uncle Remus literature, but only essays such as "The South as the Negro Sees Him," he would be so condemned, and would appear only as a minor footnote in Southern history books. He writes:

> The real moral that Mrs. Stowe's book teaches is that the possibilities of slavery anywhere and everywhere are shocking to the imagination, while the realities, under the best and happiest conditions, possess a romantic beauty and a tenderness all their own; and it has so happened in the course of time that this romantic feature, so beautifully brought out in a volume that was for along time taboo in the South, has become the essence, and almost the substance, of the old plantation as we remember it. (117)

He was, with this sort of piece, able to appeal to readers who clung to the proslavery ideology that survived Reconstruction, and to those of a more moderate position not necessarily favoring slavery but not supporting racial equality and integration, either (and most readers also read the character Uncle Remus as the non-threatening "old-time darky.") This position was safe for a politically moderate, white journalist in Georgia in the late nineteenth century. Fred Hobson connects an increasing reticence for white journalists and leaders to publicly express racial guilt, which was rare to begin with in the late nineteenth century, to expanding Jim Crow laws and de facto

racial segregation (12). Not all the segregation was forced by whites. C. Vann Woodward pointed out in his monumental study *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* that blacks voluntarily withdrew from white Protestant churches, often over white protest, for example, to establish and control their own religious institutions. The new order was adding physical and psychological distance between blacks and whites (22). Harris reached adult maturity and published his first stories as segregation was beginning to take hold in the South, and like contemporaries Walter Hines Page and Lewis Harvie Blair, he approached race in his journalism on practical and economic rather than moral grounds (Hobson 12-13).

The reader can glimpse a few redeeming ideas in this essay. Harris goes on to praise "old plantation negroes" as going about their business "with a simplicity and an energy that accomplished wonders" and as possessing genuine humility. However, the essay largely upholds sentimental plantation stereotypes and a romanticized view of slavery. This was written by Harris the journalist. Clearly, he developed a double identity based on "dialect" so that he could explore another side of Southern reality. He was aware of his double identity, his other fellow.

Harris gives his "other fellow" more credibility and authority than he gives himself: the other fellow "takes charge" creatively in his writing, and, significantly, regards Harris's newspaper editorials with scorn and contempt.

"Harris apparently had a deep need to imagine himself as Uncle Remus," according to Robert Hemenway in his introduction to a Penguin Classics edition of *Songs and Sayings.* "When the 'other fellow' took over his writing in the voice of Uncle

Remus, that fellow was a black man of Harris's childhood, a plantation figure who told stories that Harris's conscious mind had long forgotten" (16).

The stories were Harris's bridge from life as a journalist to a life as a creative writer, but stories and storytelling had an enormous significance in black life that Harris was well aware of. He scatters anecdotes throughout the tales to illustrate the value of knowing a good story and possessing the ability to tell it. In the second collection, *Nights with Uncle Remus*, Daddy Jack is trying to court 'Tildy, but she wants little to do with him, and expresses her disapproval in terms of storytelling: "'Humph!' exclaimed 'Tildy, contemptuously, 'you'll set over dar in dat corner an dribble many's de long day 'fo' I tell you any tale'" (345). Tildy understands the value of a tale as currency. Within the tales, storytelling is clearly a way of gaining trust, just as Harris used his own gift to gain the trust of black people so that he could not only learn new tales, but also gain the acceptance of the tellers.

Harris struggled his entire life for a sense of acceptance. He carried a sense of shame over his father's having abandoned his mother without marrying her. He was pathologically shy and spoke with a stammer. In a letter to his friend Georgia Starke in 1870, he wrote that he had an "*absolute horror* of strangers" and that he was morbidly sensitive. He went on to explain in some detail how he felt: "With me is an affliction – a disease – that has cost me more mortification and grief than anything in the world.... It is *worse* than death itself.... My dearest friends have no idea how often they have crucified me" (qtd. in Harris, *Life and Letters* 83-84)

Yet he reported no horror of the black strangers he met at a railway station in Norcross, Georgia one evening in 1882. As he stood waiting for a train he noticed some

black railroad workers relaxing at the end of their workday. He sat down next to one of them and listened to their stories and jokes for a while, then told the tar-baby story "'by way of a feeler.'" His listener was captivated, and enthusiastic in his response to him. He told two other stories and then, for two hours, the whole group swapped tales. There were no traces of the painful shyness that caused him, in other circumstances, to flee from conversation with strangers, no traces of the obsessive lack of confidence in his art. As Robert Hemenway observes, Harris's psychological investment in the Remus character is "startlingly revealed" in this anecdote. Harris wanted to think he was one of those workers, "their language shared, their stories mutually possessed" (Hemenway 17-18). On the railroad tracks he did not merely imitate black speech, he was fluent. Like Samuel L. Clemens' Roxy in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, Harris was "as white as anybody," but from his manner of speech, "a stranger would have expected him to be black."

The source of his linguistic supply was what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. calls the "cultural privacy" of language—the meanings behind the metaphorical mask, available only to the culture's initiates (170-72).

A truism regarding relationships between black people and white people is that blacks know whites much better than whites know blacks. Harris took great pride in breaking this barrier through his storytelling skills, but most white Southerners in Harris's day, had they been honest, would have agreed with Duncan Clinch Heyward, South Carolina's governor from 1903 to 1907, who wrote in *Seed from Madagascar* (1937): "I used to try to learn the ways of these Negroes, but I could never divest myself of the suspicion that they were learning my ways faster than I was learning theirs" (qtd. in Levine 101).

Years after Harris was collecting and writing down the tales, Lydia Parrish, a painter who turned to a life devoted to collecting slave songs, wrote that a black cook who worked for her waited fifteen years before she revealed that she could sing the songs Parrish was so keenly seeking. In *Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands* (1942), Parrish wrote,

> "When I periodically ask why, in all those years, she never told me she could sing, she smiles quizzically, but says nothing. I am convinced that the average Negro enjoys intensely knowing something the white man does not, and the exquisite delight he derives from realizing that the white man has been bested in a little game makes up for any loss or indignity he may be obliged to endure." (Qtd. in Levine 101).

Perhaps if Parrish had sung some of the songs to her cook, things would have been different. Harris explained the significance of having learned to tell the tales himself:

> "Curiously enough, I have found few negroes who will acknowledge to a stranger that they know anything of these legends; and yet to relate one of the stories is the surest road to their confidence and esteem. In this way, and in this way only, I have been enabled to collect and verify the folk-lore included in this volume." (45)

Throughout his written works, the fictional characters also win acceptance from others and membership in social groups through storytelling, just as he did on the railroad tracks in Norcross. They tell stories about animals that practice one-upmanship, and they themselves use the stories to one-up each other. The little boy himself isn't even fully accepted until he hears his first tale, as the key word in the title of the first story suggests: initiate, in "Uncle Remus Initiates the Little Boy."

The pathologically shy Harris, who could not bear the company of strangers, who stammered, and who on occasion would literally escape through windows to avoid

talking to them, ironically would don the language mask to occasionally approach strangers on streetcars to tell them jokes in dialect, and he once took on the persona of Uncle Remus to entertain Andrew Carnegie. He often called himself Uncle Remus, using the name to sign letters. Others used it in addressing him, including Theodore Roosevelt, who referred to him as "'a man of whom I am very fond—Uncle Remus'" (Hemenway 16-17, Bickley, *JCH* 40).

The stories and their language were for Harris not only a mask but an entire wardrobe, and he cross-dressed as a black man for the same reasons people cross dress to traverse gender lines: to satirize and parody the dominant culture, to break down codes of acceptability with regard to gender roles, to criticize, question or challenge societal mandates where gender-based behavior is concerned – all while entertaining and making audiences laugh and cry.

Robert Bone interprets Uncle Remus and Brer Rabbit in terms of disguises of a different nature: mask and countermask. Uncle Remus is a mask to justify the restoration of white supremacy, while Brer Rabbit is a countermask that exposes the harsh reality (139). However, it seems clear that *dialect* is the mask. Harris employs it to masquerade as Uncle Remus, who behaves both as an ameliorative for conservative, uneasy white readers and as a messenger with a revolutionary, subversive message. Brer Rabbit is Remus's primary device in pulling back the veil for the little boy. Bone is quite right when he describes the moral vision of the animal tales: "that of men who have been brutalized, degraded, rendered powerless – and yet who manage to survive by dint of their superior endurance and mother wit, their cunning artifice and sheer effrontery" (138). The message? If a rabbit's survival is threatened every minute of every day, he

will respond by dropping all moral scruples and will utilize theft, murder and ruthlessness. He will employ any means possible to fight the power of the system that excludes him from a normal life.

Writing the tales allowed Harris to express his awareness of the savageness of human circumstance and his sense of fatality, without the inhibitions of the genteel literary tradition or southern racial imperatives (Rubin 167-68), not to mention his longing and desire for the security and acceptance he found among black people. But it was the Uncle Remus persona that truly liberated Harris. Remus allowed Harris to create and to write and he was compelled to write. He could reconcile his deeply creative side with his journalist side, the side that engaged in New South rhetoric, only by developing a second identity. Bernard Wolfe, in a beautifully crafted and convincing argument written more than 50 years ago, proposes the stammer that plagued Harris all his life was a literal choking on words and was "like a charade of the novelist *manqué* in him; his blush was the fitful glow of his smothered self, a tic of the guilty blood. And the smothered self had a name: Uncle Remus" (82).

The Blackness in Our Whiteness

Morrison's point in *Playing in the Dark* is that American writers depend on blackness, on an "Africanist presence," to write about whiteness, particularly on the themes associated with white males such as the search for freedom, independence or self-reliance. She analyzes the Africanist persona or the existence of blackness in several works by major white American writers. The blackness can be a disturbing presence, though, as Morrison points out, citing Willa Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* as a

work that has been pushed aside by critics as inferior when actually, Morrison suspects, the trouble is the difficulty of coming to terms with the question white dominance over black slaves.

Today, the ex-slave Uncle Remus is not the only disturbing presence in Harris's works. The "Negro dialect" itself presents serious problems. One hundred years ago, or fifty years ago, the dialect was troublesome because it simply was difficult to read. Today, readers frequently find it malignant. This is particularly true in other authors when it is used to ridicule or sentimentalize black characters, observes Elsa Nettels, who believes the Negro dialect written by post-Civil War writers is itself a symbol of servitude, "reflective of the white's desire, conscious or not, to enslave the Negro through language" (76). Robert Hemenway and other critics regard Harris's vivid dialect, made more conspicuous because of the "standard" English of the narrative frame, as suggesting "black language is colorful but ignorant, that black people are picturesque but intellectually limited" (21-22).

Clearly, though, the dialect itself is a key component of the Africanist presence in the Uncle Remus tales. The language is the life force of the stories, the vehicle for the tales, and its magnitude and volume – the very fact that it runs for pages and pages – should clue the reader in to its significance and its positive nature. Yet the dialect is troublesome.

Some of the trouble comes from the difficulty in reading that it creates. While few have a problem reading "Hang me des ez high ez you please, Brer Fox, ...but do fer de Lord's sake don't fling me in that brier-patch..." other passages present greater challenges:

> De animals en de beastesses...day kep' on gittin' mo' en mo' familious wid wunner nudder, twel bimeby, 'twan't long 'fo' Brer Rabbit, en Brer Fox, en Brer Possum got ter sorter bunchin' de perwishuns tergedder in de same shanty. ("Mr. Rabbit Nibbles Up the Butter" 50)

Elsa Nettels points out that the mere "the look of dialect in print" can elicit negative responses in readers and even "eye-dialect," phonetic spellings that represent the way a word is pronounced regardless of race or education can put contemporary readers off (78). Harris emphasized the stories were meant to be read aloud and was concerned that important elements got lost when the stories were are not told aloud, such as pronunciation, intonation, facial and body expressions, and, perhaps most significant, the silences.

He uses a story to comment on the cultural validity of the spoken word. In "Mr. Fox and the Deceitful Frogs," in *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings,* Remus greets the little boy with "I-doom-er-ker-kum-mer-ker!" He explains, "Dat's Tarrypin talk, dat is. Bless yo' soul, honey, when you git old ez me—w'en you see w'at I sees, en year w'at I years—de creeturs dat you can't talk wid 'll be mighty skase—dey will dat." Harris tells his readers that the intonation and pronunciation of the terrapin's speech "can not be reproduced in print" (42). But ever the trickster, he reverses reader expectations and turns his own medium inside out—after all, it is in written form that he records and promotes oral culture.

Harris went to great lengths to collect the folklore and to learn the dialect, yet he himself sometimes denigrated the language. For example, in the introduction to *Nights with Uncle Remus,* he calls the Gullah dialect spoken by blacks on the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia "merely a confused and untranslatable mixture of English

and African words (xxxii-xxxiii). It might have been "untranslatable," but he was able to use it effectively in writing his Sea Island character Daddy Jack. This kind of denigration was common among Harris's generation, according to Lawrence W. Levine, who explains that such negative attitudes were "ridden through with ambivalence" among whites such as teachers and folk collectors, well into the twentieth century, for they took great pains to preserve black speech and "noted continually the striking phrases and creative terminology they so commonly encountered" (147). Interestingly, it wasn't only whites who put down black dialect. Charles Chesnutt, in a letter to Walter Hines Page, wrote:

> Speaking of dialect, it is almost a despairing task to write it.... The fact is, of course, that there is no such thing as a Negro dialect; that which we call by that name is the attempt to express with such degree of phonetic correctness as to suggest the sound, English pronounced as an ignorant old Southern Negro would be supposed to speak it, and at the same time to preserve a sufficient approximation to the correct spelling to make it easy reading. (Burnette 446)

Today, the act of speaking in black dialect can create such serious challenges for storytellers that they sometimes lose heart and give up. Storyteller Jackie Torrence, a black woman, experienced humiliation when she told the stories in dialect in the early 1980s. A group of young black people surrounded her and began jeering and calling her names as she attempted a Brer Rabbit storytelling session in New York's Central Park. She abandoned the program and returned to her hotel. On other occasions she has been shouted off stages or interrupted in mid-story. Torrence rarely invokes the name of Uncle Remus when telling the trickster tales, but the dialect still arouses ire. "'It's the (baby) boomers who get offended,'" Torrence said. (Stephens 17).

Why do baby boomers become offended when hearing the Brer Rabbit tales? Some immediately equate Uncle Remus with Uncle Tom – often having read neither Joel Chandler Harris nor Harriet Beecher Stowe, one can rightly suspect. Alice Walker places the blame on the permanent fusion of the folktales with Remus/Harris, a fusion that for many is the product not of the stories Harris wrote or the books he published, but of Walt Disney's 1946 film "Song of the South." In a 1981 essay titled "Uncle Remus, No Friend of Mine," Walker describes her response when asked to write an essay on folklore and what it meant in her writing and thinking: "I started doing research, and I became very depressed...because, when you think of folklore in America, you have to think of Uncle Remus and you have to think of Joel Chandler Harris" (29). Harris no doubt diminishes his credibility with Walker with the infamous line in the introduction to *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*, in which he asks his readers to imagine Uncle Remus as an old Negro "who has nothing but pleasant memories of the discipline of slavery" (30). Walker, ironically from the same hometown, Eatonton, Ga., as Harris, had heard the folktales first-hand from her parents, not through a second-hand interpretation in the pages of a white man's book. For Walker, "Song of the South" was a further misappropriation of the tales and fertilizes the ground for embarrassing popular culture interpretations such as the mannequin of "an elderly, kindly, cottony-haired darkie" that sat on a rocking chair in the now-defunct "Uncle Remus Restaurant" in Eatonton. But as understandable as some of her objections are, she conflates Harris and Walt Disney, and it really seems as though it's the Disneyfication of the tales she resents: "In creating Uncle Remus, [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" (31).

Walker's point about the repackaging of Brer Rabbit by both Harris and Walt Disney is valid, but how much of her discomfort, one wonders, comes from the way Uncle Remus talks in both the Harris and the Disney versions (and the way Brer Rabbit talks, for that matter)? What if Remus in either version had spoken in a simple Southern accent? Or no identifiable accent?

Not that the Zip A Dee Do Dah Remus isn't objectionable on some levels. (Never mind that when "Song of the South" was re-released into theaters in 1980, lines of both white and black families formed around the block for tickets.) Today we want black characters to be strong, defiant, and rightfully and righteously angry. But is the complacent and downright subservient Remus that makes some readers and viewers angry and uncomfortable? Or is it his language?

The language is the very breath of the stories, and must be interpreted as an important aspect of the Africanist persona of the Brer Rabbit tales. When we acknowledge it as such, we then also acknowledge its enormous significance, its inextricable quality in the stories and in Remus. The language is dialect in quotation marks, a new invention of Harris's that seamlessly melded black language and white language the way he longed to meld the world of blacks and the world of whites.

Harris accessed his art through his alter ego and his "dialect," but he also used them to sort out what Maurice Berger calls "our complacent fantasy that our racial and ethnic identities will always be manifest, simple, pure." Berger writes: "It is the awareness of the blackness in our whiteness, and the whiteness in our blackness, that

most confuses us..." (206). Harris acknowledges the blackness in our whiteness with at least some awareness, but little direct acknowledgement.

Chapter Five: Becoming Uncle Remus

The work of Joel Chandler Harris endures, not only as he originally created it, but also in numerous retellings of the tales. Harris fulfilled his ostensible mission, which was simply to preserve the numerous folktales that he had heard throughout his life. He put to pen and paper a portion of black oral culture that he believed would pass into oblivion as emancipation freed black people not only from slavery, but also from a way of life that facilitated storytelling. Life in the South in the 1880s was speeding up. Urbanization, industrialization and commercialization threatened to push the old ways aside. And significantly, increasingly strict Jim Crow laws enlarged the physical and psychic divide between whites and blacks: "The immediate response to the collapse of slavery was often a simultaneous withdrawal of both races from the enforced intimacy and the more burdensome obligations imposed by the old regime on each" (Woodward 22).

Harris's predictions that the stories would fade to oblivion were not entirely correct, as Southerners, particularly blacks, report they grew up hearing the tales *told* to them, not read aloud. Alice Walker is one example. Walker famously condemned Harris, or, more accurately, Walt Disney, for stealing her heritage, saying that she had grown up on the tales in a true oral tradition:

> ...my brothers and sisters and I ... listened to those stories. But after we saw "Song of the South," we no longer listened to them. They were killed for us. In fact, I do not remember any of my relatives ever telling any of those tales after they saw what had been done with them. (26).

But Walker does return to Harris himself in her essay, which was originally titled "Uncle Remus, No Friend of Mine," then renamed "The Dummy in the Window: Joel Chandler Harris and the Invention of Uncle Remus" for a collection of her essays. She

cites Harris's notorious statement that Uncle Remus is simply "an old Negro ... who has nothing but pleasant memories of the discipline of slavery" (28) and writes:

> I think I know why he did not read or tell these stories to his own children. I think I know why he never said them aloud to an audience. I think he understood what he was taking when he took those stories and when he created a creature to tell those stories. There are very few people who were slaves who have "nothing but pleasant memories of the discipline" of that institution. And to base the personality of the storyteller on such a preposterous foundation constituted a deception beyond Harris's attempt somehow to pass himself off as a black man. As a white man, when he opened his mouth to speak as "Uncle Remus," perhaps he felt this. (29)

Walker goes on to describe "the dummy in the window"—a mannequin of a black man done up to look like Uncle Remus, sitting the window of the Uncle Remus Restaurant. "Blacks, of course, were not allowed in this restaurant" (31).

Walker's outrage is just and right. It is preposterous to think anyone could have pleasant memories of being enslaved. And the Uncle Remus restaurant, the dummy and the Jim Crow laws that kept black people out create an absurd irony almost beyond comprehension. But Walker does seem really to be thinking more about the Disneyfication of Uncle Remus, and of what a well-meaning but ignorant and insensitive restaurant owner did with the concept of Uncle Remus, who likely by mid-twentieth century was an amalgamation of Disney's spin, the white owner's memory of Harris's Remus, and other stererotyped images of old black men.

A bigger difficulty with Walker's position on Harris is that she returns again and again to phrases like "our heritage," "our birthright," "our doings," "our ways." Walker draws a very clear line between black and white, and she claims the Brer Rabbit tales as

belonging to black culture. She ends her essay with a poignant and memorable statement, deeply touching, but extremely problematic: "Joel Chandler Harris and I lived in the same town, although nearly one hundred years apart. As far as I'm concerned, he stole a good part of my heritage. How did he steal it? By making me feel ashamed of it" (32).

Walker is absolutely correct in her assessment of the way dominant, oppressive cultures work: they control the production and dispersal of images in the media (32). In doing so, the oppressive culture can make members of the oppressed feel ashamed of their ways. But she in no way seems to acknowledge that black culture and heritage inevitably and unstoppably became a part of white culture, and it happened a long time before Joel Chandler Harris and Uncle Remus. Brer Rabbit's roots were in Africa, but for good or bad, he became a part of American culture the first time the first slave on some unknown plantation in a time now lost was surreptitiously overheard by a white owner. Or the first time a black slave given the responsibility of looking after white children sat them down to listen to stories.

The presence of the African is the defining presence in white American history and culture, more than any others. This is not to say that Native American culture and history is not extremely important and influential, or the presence of Asian peoples, or others. But none has the depth of impact of the African. Walker would seem to have black folklore, black culture and black "ways" as part of some secret sect. But slavery, Jim Crow, legal segregation and race prejudice all could not keep the African influence out of white culture—and white hands. Yes, Harris took parts of Walker's heritage, but it was freely given to him.

The tales as Harris preserved them inspired several retellings. Just as Harris slipped into a disguise in the form of Uncle Remus, so have storytellers who have followed him. Harris's invention has become everybody's Uncle Remus, whether the old man is retained as an actual character in the stories, which Disney did in the 1946 film "Song of the South," or whether an artist himself takes on the role of Remus.

Julius Lester regards slavery, the characters of Uncle Remus and the little white boy, and Jim Crow culture as the obstacles to the tales' relevance, and so removes all references from the stories, leaving a suggestion of the old man in the language and tone of the tales. He preserved Uncle Remus as a name, a "voice" and a presence in his retelling of the tales. Lester writes, " I hesitate to call it my voice, because it is also the voice of a people, the black people of Kansas City, Kansas; Pine Bluff, Arkansas; Nashville, Tennessee; and the state of Mississippi." He further explains he decided against changing the characterization of Remus to avoid distracting those who know and love Harris's Remus (Foreword, *Uncle Remus: The Complete Tales, xvii).*

In his collections of the tales, Lester becomes Uncle Remus, telling the tales himself, but he allows Uncle Remus's name to remain as the title of his work: *Uncle Remus: The Complete Tales.*

Lester published four volumes of tales: *The Tales of Uncle Remus: The Adventures of Brer Rabbit* (1987); *More Tales of Uncle Remus: Further Adventures of Rabbit, His Friends, Enemies and Others* (1988); *Further Tales of Uncle Remus: The Misadventures of Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox, Brer Wolf, the Doodang, and Other Creatures* (1990); and *The Last Tales of Uncle Remus 1994)* – all of which were gathered into one volume in 1999, *Uncle Remus: The Complete Tales.*

He lays out a simple mission in retelling the stories: to preserve them but to divorce them from their association with slavery. "The power of folk tales is that they transcend their social origins, and that is certainly true of these tales," Lester writes in the introduction to the compilation of the four collections (viii). Yet he consistently, and I think rightly refers to the stories as "the Uncle Remus stories," giving Harris the credit he deserves for the collecting the stories and creating Uncle Remus. "It is questionable whether the tales would have been so popular if Harris had not created a character named Uncle Remus as storyteller," Lester writes in the foreword to his first collection.

While Lester gives a nod of acknowledgement to Remus, but refrains from allowing his presence into the stories because of the association with slavery, David Clark, a white man who lives in Georgia and gives public performances, reading the stories in character as Uncle Remus, in dialect, divorces Remus from slavery completely. The stories are not told by an old ex-slave; they are told by a wise old black man. A 2002 profile of Clark and his work reveals his attitude toward what he does:

> The Uncle Remus stories are not without controversy, including allegations of racism. Nor is Clark unaware of the controversy. But "I always ask how many Uncle Remus stories objectors have heard," he says. "The Uncle Remus stories honor the wisdom of old black folks; the stories honor old folks in general.
>
> "I was taken with the rhythm in the reading of the Uncle Remus stories," he says. "These stories relay an old man's wisdom. There is at least one sentence in each Uncle Remus tale that teaches." (Lynn)

Lester is part of what Mark Schone calls "a final line of defense, an argument about the authenticity and accuracy of the dialect, for the purity of the tales" (92). Schone says most "black Harris haters" reject the argument out of hand—that Remus is real.

Schone cites the evidence that Remus is a composite of three slaves at Turnwold plantation, most specifically "Uncle" George Terrell. More important in relation to Lester, "Remus is realistic," writes Schone (92). Lester defends the interpretation of Remus as the "faithful darky" when he writes: "There are no inaccuracies in Harris's characterization of Uncle Remus. Even the most cursory reading of the slave narratives collected by the Federal Writer's [sic] Project of the 1930s reveals that there were many slaves who fit the Uncle Remus mold" (xiv).

Schone concludes:

> So despite those who scorn him as "inauthentic," and despite [Walter] Brasch and [Bruce] Bickley's attempt to reshape him, the problem may be that Remus is too authentic. In his lack of rebellion, and in his identification with his master, he is uncomfortably believable. That, more than his politics or the tainted dialect, may be what puts Harris beyond redemption. (92)

But Lester, "Harris's best-known black admirer," as Schone calls him, believes Harris is owed credit for saving the stories, and that Remus cannot be completely extracted from the tales. In the introduction to his collection, Lester offers an explanation for his work: " ... a question I have been asked often is, "Why did you keep the name of Uncle Remus?"

His reply is simple. The title of his works, he says, "identifies a particular collection of Afro-American folktales, the largest single body we have" (ix). Lester observes that the genius of Joel Chandler Harris was creating Uncle Remus, and Harris made the story and storyteller one. The teller and tales cannot be separated, and the tales would not have survived without Remus (x-xi).

Another Uncle Remus is Van Dyke Parks, who also extracts Jim Crow, and the relationship between Uncle Remus and the little boy as barriers to the value of the tales. He places Brer Rabbit front and center. Mississippi-born musician and composer Parks put Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus tales to music in 1984 and followed the unusual album rapidly with three slim volumes of adapted tales, which Barry Moser illustrated with rich watercolors. Parks is careful to credit Joel Chandler Harris but to omit Remus as a presence. The books give Harris as the author. Below Harris's name on the covers is "Adapted by Van Dyke Parks/Illustrated by Barry Moser."

Parks sought to reclaim nineteenth-century minstrelsy, according to Timothy White, who described the debut live performance of the album material at a small venue in Santa Monica, Calif., in 1985. Calling the music "a shimmering, tuneful evocation of *Uncle Remus and Br'er Rabbit*," White writes:

> The subject may seem more than a trifle obscure, even for a quasi-"art-rock" artist noted for an unusually esoteric output. But as a child of the deep South, growing up musically precocious and culturally inquisitive, with the Remus stories, the cakewalk and ragtime for psychic wallpaper, Parks has been building for ten years to a peculiarly wonderful reclamation project: a modern recasting of the popular entertainment in the United States between 1845 and 1900—the minstrelsy.

Parks, then, sees Harris as a blackface entertainer, and the stories as a form of minstrelsy. He views minstrel shows as "'the reigning rock 'n' roll of the nineteenth century'" and believes they have been unjustly maligned and miscomprehended, according to White. "Scholars and sociologists investigating the minstrel show concur that it thrived not when it burlesqued black experience, but when its racial authenticity was most in evidence. The nation got to know itself through the minstrelsy, esteeming the culture of the American

black." (If Harris were alive today, he might not approve of Parks' linking him to the minstrel stage. In his introduction to *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings,* he states "The dialect, it will be observed, is ... different ...from the intolerable misrepresentations of the minstrel stage..." [39].) Parks also sees himself as a "blackface" entertainer, putting the animal fables to music and performing them onstage, and planning a theatrical run of the show. (The run never happened, however. Parks was unable to obtain financial backing.)

Parks' ideas about minstrelsy are validated in Eric Lott's work, although Lott recognizes that the meaning of minstrel shows is a lot more complex than Parks would have it: "The phenomenon of minstrelsy itself was an admission of fascination with blacks and black culture" (97), Lott writes in *Love and Theft* "...the social unconscious of blackface suggests that he whites involved in minstrelsy were far from unenthusiastic about black cultural practices or, conversely, untroubled by them, continuous though the economic logic of blackface was with slavery" (234).

Lott sees the minstrel show as having arisen "from a white obsession with black (male) bodies which underlies white racial dread to our own day" and that the shows were, on one level, whites' response to their "fleshly investments": they employed ridicule and racist lampoon to push aside the obsession, and the love (3).

Lott's purpose in examining minstrelsy so thoroughly and minutely is to "reorient the traditions of American Studies by asking questions about the role of culture in the political development of a specific national identity," and to acknowledge that culture, rather than shared work experience "primarily creates the conditions for social movements" (11, 12). As for justifying studying and teaching Joel Chandler Harris,

another comment by Lott works perfectly. He writes, "If at this juncture we are to understand anything more about popular racial feeling in the United States, we must no longer be satisfied merely to condemn the terrible pleasures of cultural material such as minstrelsy, for their legacy is all around us" (11).

David Clark's performances are a kind of minstrel show without burnt cork. The dialect is the blackface:

> Clark recently introduced the Uncle Remus stories to a group of men—most of them black—from a nearby prison. The Uncle Remus stories are written and meant to be told in the old-style black Country dialect. During his performance Clark went into character as Uncle Remus and asked in dialect, "Now can all you white boys understand me?" Some audience members were hearing the dialect of their ancestors for the first time. "The place exploded in laughter because that's exactly what most of the crowd was thinking," Clark remembers.
>
> When the concert was over, prisoners lined up to shake Clark's hand. Many of them asked about the Uncle Remus stories. "Each one said their grandfathers had told them the stories," Clark says. "The one who impressed me the most was a man who hung back at the end of the line. When he finally got up to shake my hand, he was almost trembling. He had tears in his eyes. He asked if he could hold my Uncle Remus book. He held the book in his hand, and started crying."
>
> Clark asked, "What is it, brother?"
>
> "I thought these stories were gone. My granddaddy used to tell me these stories, and I thought they went with him when he died," the prisoner replied. (Lynn)

Indeed, the legacy of Joel Chandler Harris and Uncle Remus is all around us, and search and study of that legacy gives a window into popular racial feeling one hundred years ago and today. The things revealed by studying Harris, Remus and their legacy are

no less important than the answers we seek today to questions about affirmative action, racial discrepancies on SAT tests and the like, or racial profiling in crime detection, for example. Race and racial identity still compose one of the most important questions in American culture, politics and society.

Parks tells White:

> "Minstrel shows weren't the nigrification of the black experience in America. They were simply, I think, a bilateral agreement, an unavoidable scenario in the longed-for unification of racial interests. And they brought two social elements, black and white, to harmonious display. They made great entertainment in the course of the experiment.
>
> "In developing Jump! I felt that this was something I wanted to restore to the American musical theatre in the way of melody, and sentiment, and the socio-political force that is the very reason for musical theatre!"

Parks retells the stories in plainer language than Harris uses, and does away with Uncle Remus, the little boy and the rest of the framing devices. By removing the dialogue between the little boy and Uncle Remus, the tales move quickly. Harris's version opens: "'Didn't the fox *never* catch the rabbit, Uncle Remus?' asked the little boy the next evening" (6). Parks' version gets more quickly to the point: "On the day after Brer Rabbit fooled Brer Fox in the well, Brer Fox went to work and fixed up a contraption that he called a Tar-Baby" (*Jump Again!* 7)

Parks makes no attempt to duplicate black dialect. The stories are told in standard English sprinkled with words and sentence constructions that give the tales a countrified flair. For example, he repeats the subjects of sentences, using a pronoun: "Brer Fox, he

lay low" and Brer Fox, he winked his eye slow, and the Tar-Baby, she wasn't saying anything" (7).

He also brings the story more rapidly to its conclusion, whereas Harris stops the story as Fox is ridiculing Rabbit for being stuck in the tar. '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 mought, en den again he moughtent. Some say Jedge B'ar come long en loosed 'im—some say he didn't. I hear Miss Sally callin'. You better run long.' (7-8)

Parks responds to the stories through the music he composes, and the music both expresses the stories and updates them. "In Love for a Day" is Parks' rendering of Brer Rabbit's courtship of one of Miss Meadows' gals. The words and music are published in *Jump Again! More Adventures of Brer Rabbit*:

> An opportunity for two
> It had to be me
> It had to be you.
> It seems to be a dream
> It happens to be true.
> A fine futurity for one
> A day to make hay
> A race to be run
> Thru the blue for you
> They say you the one
> We might happen to meet
> Ain't it sweet when it's a glad song
> Just keep a-flappin' your feet to beat the band out of a sad song.
> God only knows
> Which way the wind blows

Could blow us away
So I always say
My honey don't go.
Let's spend today
And dream this away
Like honey to bee
It's just you and me
In love for a day. (40)

Parks captures the sweetness of a simpler time and a carefree attitude with his lyrics, yet delicately threaded through the song are references to the uncertainties of life that can be connected to the idea that post-bellum black life was unstable, and certainly courting a prostitute was not without its issues, as the phrase "in love for a day" would suggest. The lines "God only knows/ Which way the wind blows/ Could blow us away" hints not only at everyday vicissitudes but also echoes faintly the separation of slave families.

Parks attempts to resolve the matter of exactly who Miss Meadows and the gals were, and what Rabbit's relationship to them was, with the help of Moser's watercolor illustrations.

Moser updates the setting of the tales with touches of twentieth-century culture that seems to place the stories in the 1920s. "Brer Rabbit's Courtship" opens on a spread with a picture of an old-timely country store, complete with glass-cylinder gasoline pump and a Coca-Cola sign marked with "Miss Meadows Place" in black letters across the top.

The story begins: "Maybe you've heard talk about Miss Meadows and the gals, and about how Brer Rabbit was visiting there so much. Well, it happened that the lady friend Brer Rabbit had his eye on was one of the gals" (31). If this opening is not suggestive enough that Miss Meadows is a madam and her place is a bawdy house, the

observant reader will catch the partial glimpse of an old-fashioned, white iron bedstead in one of the upper windows of the "country store" (30). Cleary, Brer Rabbit has fallen in love with a prostitute.

Any further doubt is removed when we turn the pages to find a portrait of Miss Molly, the gal Brer Rabbit loves. Harris had disingenuously explained to his illustrate, Frederick S. Church, that Miss Meadows was "Nature" (*Life and Letters* 150). In the Parks-Moser version, in a stereotypical pose, Miss Molly sits at an open window, elbow on sill. Dressed in soft pink, large eyes seductive with long lashes, flowers in her "hair," Miss Molly Rabbit gazes at the viewer with a combination of longing and demure disinterest. But her cherry lips, red fingernails, hint of bosomy cleavage and feather fan draped alluringly over the window sill leave little doubt as to who she is and what's she's about (34).

In "Home," Parks' lyrics seem to capture something not necessarily only about Brer Rabbit and Uncle Remus but about Joel Chandler Harris himself: "Home to my destiny dear/back Home I can rest without fear/Home For the soul who has found he is half not whole/Going Home..." (*Jump on Over!* 40) The idea of home in Harris's works is fraught with a complex mixture of uncertainty, insecurity, fear, longing and comfort. Uncle Remus's home, his cabin, is the heart of the tales and the center of the plantation for the little white boy and for Harris. Rabbit's home is never 100 percent safe, as he must constantly guard it against the wily ways of Fox and Wolf. His home is the scene of one of the most violent and gruesome passages, where is able to trick Wolf, trap him in a box, scald him to death (40-41).

Parks and his co-adaptor Malcolm Jones embrace the tales Remus tells as "universal" in the "Storytellers' Note" at the beginning of the first collection, *Jump!*:

> Harris has been both applauded and deeply criticized for his portrayal of life in the Old South. But the lessons in these stories are universal, and there are few corners in life that they do not illuminate. Tempered by hardship and nourished by hope, these tales are a testament to the belief that no one can be wholly owned who does not wish it." (vii)

Parks' statement is either an outlandish attempt to assuage his white Southern guilt (he was born in Mississippi) by saying, essentially, "At least their spirits were free," or it is a sincere declaration of love, and the recognition that a person can be a slave, but the condition of slavery does not define everything about the person. Or, it's a little of both.

Parks and Lester, one hundred years after Uncle Remus's heyday, have chosen to don the disguise themselves. Each has become Uncle Remus for new generations of readers.

The Problem of Racism

Joel Chandler Harris is easy to dismiss as a racist, and therefore worthy of attention only in order to learn about America's racist past. Harris wrote warmly and favorably of times gone by on Southern plantations, although we might more accurately put the word in quotation marks when discussing Harris on paper—"plantations"—for he was not born on one, and in fact lived on one in Georgia for a period of time only because he was an employee, an unpaid employee. However, according to some critics, Harris appropriated black folktales, did not condemn the plantation system, did not oppose racial segregation, therefore he can be useful only as a window into the mentality of white

Southern slaveholders, those who supported slavery, and other racists. For example, Trudier Harris, in a 2001 book titled *Saints Sinners Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature*, wrote:

> Television producers therefore assuaged their stereotyped images with laughter, and the institutionalization of black women as very large, strong, Christian, and basically happy moved into a new era and a new medium of distortion. Many of these shows are twentieth century counterparts to the plantation tradition that we castigate Joel Chandler Harris, Thomas Dixon, Thomas Nelson Page, and Paul Laurence Dunbar for perpetuating (6).

"Castigate" Joel Chandler Harris? Trudier Harris too easily assumes that "we"—black people, black women, women, literary critics, college professors, Southerners or whomever she means by "we"—naturally and automatically castigate Joel Chandler Harris. And the fact that Harris breezily places Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Dixon together as similar writers, both belonging in "the" plantation tradition, demonstrates how easy it is even for sophisticated readers to write off Harris as a relic of the Old South whose work must be condemned.

One of the many places to draw a line between Harris and true plantation school writers is at the site of the plantation house. Lucinda MacKethan notes that Thomas Nelson Page's lengthy descriptions of the houses establishes the credentials of his heroes: "...if they come from a fine plantation, they are almost invariably of high moral quality and deserve universal admiration. ...the plantation homes are ... visible signs of the spirit of the people who settled the Southern region and created an aristocratic utopia out of a wilderness" ("Thomas Nelson Page" 318). Harris, in contrast, describes at length the slaves on the plantation, scenes from nature, and stories told by blacks, by the itinerant

print-shop foreman, and by the illiterate hat maker. But the big house remains a vague background presence. Interestingly, one of the ways in which Harris reorganizes Southern plantation culture is by taking legal slavery out of it. Uncle Remus is a *former* slave, as multitudes of readers, including scholars, overlook. The stories are set long after Emancipation. Nonetheless, Robert Bone comments: "There is nothing in his characterization of Uncle Remus that violates the spirit of the plantation myth. On the contrary, it is the author's avowed purpose to create a sympathetic, nostalgic, and untroubled portrait of plantation life before the war" (137).

The second most important item in the plantation fiction of the 1870s and 1880s was the voice of the black slave (MacKethan, "Plantation Fiction, 1865-1900" 211). Harris blew his literary competitors away in the arena of voice. Even the competitors admitted this: Thomas Nelson Page wrote, "No man who has ever written has known one-tenth part about the Negro that Mr. Harris knows, and for those who hereafter shall wish to find not merely the words, but the real language of the Negro ..., and the habits of mind of all American Negroes of the old time, his works will prove the best thesaurus" (56). Of course, Page was wrong about "the real language of the Negro," but at least he gave Harris his due. And Harris was rare in that the black voice in "black language" was *the* voice in the text. And of course, while Harris undoubtedly provides some sort of insight into the "habits of mind" of black people from a bygone era, he provides an enormous entrance into the study of the white enjoyment of racist pleasures, to borrow Eric Lott's phrase, and a portal into white racist longing, as I will call it, a complicated mix of love and fear.

Students today might quite understandably label Harris a racist. However, if they examine the truly racist photographs, sheet music, postcards and other cultural material of the late nineteenth century, they will surely detect a big difference between Harris and those who created such ephemera. Lott discusses what he calls "racist pleasure" in his study of the minstrelsy, and the concept is useful when thinking about Harris. Lott writes:

> The function of race in blackface comedy has tended to defeat critics of the minstrel show, particularly when it comes to the subject of racist pleasure. So officially repugnant now are the attitudes responsible for blackface joking that the tendency has been simply to condemn the attitudes themselves—a suspiciously respectable move, and an easy one at that—rather than to investigate the ways in which racist entertainment was once fun, and still is to much of the Caucasian population of the United States. It will hardly do to nod toward ideology as a sufficient explanation for such pleasure, as though it were inherently enjoyable to have one's prejudice's confirmed, or indeed as though cultural products were mere reiterations of ideology. (141-142)

Indeed: cultural products iterate the objects of our love and of our fear. Minstrel masks – the actual burnt cork facial makeup—allowed performers to express the simultaneous longing for and dread of the black body, as Lott and others have amply elucidated. Hints of this occur throughout the Uncle Remus tales. In the opening passages of "Uncle Remus Inititates the Little Boy," Harris describes the easy physical male-to-male closeness of the little boy and the old man. (55)

A useful idea in teaching Harris could be to discuss Remus in terms of cross-dressing. Most students today will have seen drag shows live or on television and might have even performed in them in student productions or fraternity events. In typical drag shows or female impersonation shows, the performer works off an unequal, unjust, off-

balance society. The performance would not make sense or be necessary if society were perfectly fair and just. Female impersonations meant for a largely straight, mixed audience play off heterosexual male-female differences, the battle of the sexes. Gay drag shows derive a lot of their entertainment value from the spaces between gay and straight. There would have never been an Uncle Remus and a little white boy if slavery had never existed or if Reconstruction had achieved anything such as equality, justice or true reparation. And little interest would be shown in any kind of transvestite show if men and women did not play separate roles on some levels, and if homosexuals were seamlessly integrated into mainstream society and never the victims of misunderstanding, hate and crime.

Teaching the Uncle Remus tales could be extremely productive if it includes the idea that if there had been no "Negro Problem" there would have been no Uncle Remus. There would have been no need for him. Students should attempt to look at minstrelsy, racist ephemera, books in the plantation school of fiction, and Joel Chandler Harris in these terms. Minstrelsy, particularly, is fascinating when thought of as societal surrogacy: it mocks racial attitudes but at the same time confirms and affirms their existence. Students of Harris might ask themselves what uncomfortable, inexpressible values or truths Remus expresses. The answer might well be that his existence says that wisdom and love can be pushed to the side. He is a scapegoat for the South's inferiority complex.

I have attempted to show in these chapters that Harris does not belong in the plantation school, at least not without a handful of strict qualifications. Even racism, onerous and evil when it is part of our life experience today, becomes a stumbling block of an idea in nineteenth-century American Studies. It is likely that the thoughts and

behavior of virtually every white person alive in the nineteenth century would be taken as racist today. Joel Chandler Harris was racist. Yet the part of him that contradicted the racism of his day is extraordinary, revealing and important.

He did not see his world in the South in the nineteenth century in the same way as undoubtedly other white men saw it. He viewed his world through a fractured race lens, and he spoke with two voices. Without doubt, through his writings, particularly his journalism, we can detect that Harris saw black people as inferior to whites, and he exploited black culture and whites' curiosity about it.

But Harris's strange other depiction of the world was unlike anything any white writer had expressed.

Black people were at the center of that other world. He created a new language that combined the pronunciation in Middle Georgia black dialect with more or less standard English sentence structure to create a kind of black white language – or is it a white black language? Harris's attempts to reproduce black language resulted in one scholar's creation of a label, "Remus orthography," to refer to the scientific legitimacy and standardization of dialect that followed the work of Joel Chandler Harris" (Hadler 119).

Jim Crow's Effect

From the time Harris began publishing the tales, the gap between black and white widened, and Jim Crow laws grew in stringency and prevalence. By the late 1890s, Frederick Douglass was dead and black agitation for rights and freedoms was softening. In 1895 Booker T. Washington delivered his famous accommodationist Atlanta

Exposition Address. Joel Chandler Harris's rabbit grows less commanding and Uncle Remus frequently emphasizes his fallibility. Interestingly, Disney's "Song of the South" drew its material almost exclusively from the later stories (155). Yet even in the later stories it is clear that he empathized with blacks and their plight, and that he continued to identify with them to the point of preserving the black persona Remus for himself.

The fact that Harris presented a front acceptable to himself and his white peers, while at the same time creating an enduring black character in literature and preserving an important and large body of black culture is subject enough and justification enough for study. For some readers, careful consideration of Harris's white double-consciousness could be a valuable insight in a white studies context. There are therefore always two levels to the Uncle Remus series: a 'white' viewpoint and a 'black' viewpoint (Light 149). The central problem with Harris was that he truly articulated two voices. Both a racist, or a "racist," and also a preserver and aficionado of black culture, Harris was a white man who sincerely sought to feel and understand black life. And whether or not he got it right, he identified with black people. Alice Walker was right. He stole black culture, but he stole because he had to—it was a matter of spiritual and psychological survival for him.

Remus resembles Uncle Tom as a covert agent—a disguise for Joel Chandler Harris, who was a white Uncle Tom by day—affable, loving, lovable, kind. But at night he engaged the tales, the secret knowledge they contained. The fact that he played along with the folklore aspect for a while, and then lost interest demonstrates this. He ultimately saw the tales for what they were – tales of truth, anger and magic.

Harris claims to be putting an end to Remus. "It is not an easy nor a pleasing ceremony to step from behind the curtain, pretending to smile and say a brief good-by for Uncle Remus for those who have been so free with their friendly applause (x)," but then comes some Brer Rabbit-ness:

> But there is no pretense that the old darkey's poor little stories are in the nature of literature, or that their re-telling touches literary art at any point. All the accessories are lacking. There is nothing here but an old negro man, a little boy, and a dull reporter, the matter of discourse being fantasies as uncouth as the original man ever conceived of. (x)

Harris's Uncle Remus stories, particularly the Tar Baby story, should have a prominent place on any syllabus for a course in American popular culture or any survey of American literature. The tale in "The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story" concludes in "How Mr. Rabbit Was Too Sharp for Mr. Fox," which contains the famous lines: "Skin me, Brer Fox," sez Brer Rabbit, sezee, "snatch out my eyeballs, t'ar out my years by de roots, en cut off my legs," sezee, but do please, Brer Fox, don't fling me in dat brier-patch" (12).

Both Remus and Brer Rabbit can be construed as early blues performers, telling of tragedy and defeat, and a life of violence, tricksterism and the struggle to survive—all with the mysterious joy that defines the blues. The tales are pieces of American history, commentaries on nineteenth mores and morals.

The violence and tragedy and evil inherent in the stories are part of Southern culture, a part that is at least partially irreconcilable with America's image and self-image. C. Vann Woodward in *The Burden of Southern History* wrote: "The experience of evil and the experience of tragedy are parts of the Southern heritage that are as difficult to

reconcile with the American legend of innocence and social felicity as the experience of poverty and defeat are to reconcile with the legends of abundance and success" (21). Why would a white writer choose to use a black man as his alter ego? A black man is the symbol of tragedy of the Southern experience and a reminder of the evil of slavery. If this is an important question for scholars interested in American culture, then it is important to study Joel Chandler Harris.

Harris's influence and impact on American literature and popular culture "may never be fully appreciated," believes Bruce Bickley (Stephenson 18). Toni Morrison announces with her novel's title that *Tar Baby* owes a debt to the folktales, and likely to Harris. Less obvious connections are to be found in Faulkner, more obvious ones in Charles Chesnutt and Mark Twain. References to Harris, Remus and Brer Rabbit and the other characters or outright retellings of the stories are found in films in addition to "Song of the South" such as "Fletch Lives," with Chevy Chase, and Ralph Bakshi's animated "Coonskin." Innumerable consumer products through the years have featured the characters, such as Brer Rabbit brand molasses, still available on grocery store shelves today.

The question still stands: will Harris have the last laugh, as Bickley believes (Stephenson 19), or are Harris and Remus both waiting, have been ejected, to be invited back into the cabin and manor house of American culture, as Mark Schone believes (92)?

The very fact that critics, scholars, filmmakers, musicians and artists continue to explore Harris's work, to adopt the Remus persona and to wrestle the questions raised by Harris one hundred years ago, fifty years ago and twenty years ago is evidence that the work is important and pursuing it worthwhile.

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