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Tobacco and Tar Babies: The Trickster as a Cultural Hero in Winnebago and African American
Myth

By

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The trickster holds a central place in mythology around the world and across the ages. Humanity's fascination with the mysterious trickster character predates major organized religion, civilization, and even literature itself. The psychologist Carl Jung called the prevalent and recurring idea of the trickster an archetype, a figure that appears largely intact throughout numerous human cultures no matter the distance of time or place between them. These thoughts, beliefs, ideas, and characters lie dormant in everyone's mind until something in our world sees fit to awaken them. Joseph Campbell and Carl Jung both believe that the archetypal figure and story explains how so many cultures in the world employ such mythology and mythological figures to explain the world around them. This idea illuminates the similarities between certain characters whose civilizations could have never previously contacted each other. Whether one believes in archetypes, the trickster figure remains a prevalent and compelling figure in ancient and modern mythology. The archetypal trickster is a boundary dweller, messenger, and bringer of culture. While these criteria seemingly do not apply to all trickster characters, Karl Kerényi remarks that, "we must grant him the greater consistency, an unchanging, indestructible core that not only antedates all the stories about him, but survives in spite of them" (Radin, Kerényi, and Jung 174). A trickster is a trickster no matter our own inconsistency in naming him or her as such.

Just as civil society reviles him for his cultural immorality they also exalt him, for who else allows humanity to live out its forbidden desires? Who shows the people the way and then consequentially allows them to be lost on the trail? The trickster does what we cannot, but wish that we could: he shapes society by flaunting its structure, and, from the edge of chaos, brings

balance to the world. Perhaps then, this is why the trickster archetype often takes on the role of the culture hero. Both characters, the hero and the trickster, bring a wild element of change to a society in flux. The biggest difference between how the trickster and the hero channel this “trickster energy” is through the outcome they seek. A hero creates definition while a trickster embodies chaos, a truth not universally accepted. Though his stories are widely accepted and retold, it is important to note that the trickster himself lives outside the margins of society. There is a paradox here between the hero and the trickster, one who operates in the day and the other beneath the moon. Therefore, the challenge is to reconcile these two different entities by examining the trickster through the lens of a culture hero.

The trickster embodies this cultural hero role in much of North American folklore, most specifically, in the literature and oral tradition of Native and African Americans. Two characters in particular, Winnebago Hare and Brer Rabbit, embody the trickster in the role of a cultural hero. Winnebago Hare, a nephew of men and women, shapes his world through his cleverness, but also through divine providence. He transforms through his cycle into a figure in Winnebago myth that transcends his own foolishness and both consciously and unconsciously shapes human civilization. The role of Brer Rabbit in African American folklore is somewhat different. The meaning of his stories are not quite as implicit as the Winnebago Hare's, and often the listener wonders if he or she should care if he wins. Like all tricksters he is amoral, a figure who uses his cleverness to get what he wants or to save his own skin. Both characters are difficult to understand, and both represent the duality of the trickster in that their actions are simultaneously reprehensible and celebrated. It is impossible, and perhaps unnecessary, to extricate the details of the trickster from the culture and vice-versa, although these characters work outside and within cultural boundaries. However, despite their differences, there is strong evidence to

suggest a connection between not only the trickster and cultural hero figure, but also a connection between how these two cultures in particular portray these characters. In these stories, the trickster is more than a buffoon; he represents a cultural balance unachievable by heroics alone, for there is no balance or creation without an element of chaos, even when the trickster himself causes that chaos.

Winnebago Hare Shapes the World

In modern Western society, we say that the third time's the charm; once is an incident, twice is a coincidence, and the third is a pattern. Not so for Winnebago Hare, he follows a pattern of fours. There are three attempts, three warnings in song, and three chances before the fourth moment when either Hare fails or succeeds in turning events to his favor. Harold Scheub would call this fourth instance the trickster moment, a "moment of transition" when "we are out of ourselves," meaning the trickster presides over all moments that transcend normalized boundaries (3). While the number four itself might not have any significance in Winnebago mythos, a closer look at Winnebago Hare reveals the importance of the trickster moment in the formation of Winnebago culture. Hare's reactions and motivations in this moment are pivotal in the world shaping Winnebago mythos. In the second story in the Winnebago Hare trickster cycle as presented by Paul Radin and Sam Blowsnake, Hare comes upon a being walking on two legs that he assumes he can easily best. The incident proceeds thusly,

It seemed so weak that he expected it to fall over at any moment. Hare ran ahead of it and waited. When it came near, he blew at it, thinking he could thus blow it over but he did not succeed. Again and again he blew at it, in each case without avail. The fourth time he did it, the being walking on two legs became aware of something white (namely the hare) and shot at it with an arrow. (63)

The pattern is established, and the Hare shows that he has much to learn about the world, including how to best use that knowledge and his cleverness to his advantage. Learn he does, and by the end of the next story, he learns to make his own arrows. As Harold Scheub says, “the Winnebago hare shapes himself,” he learns how to outsmart his opponents and successfully pull his tricks and therefore he also shapes “the world of people” (103). These themes of self-creation and subsequent culture shaping present themselves throughout the Winnebago Hare trickster cycle. Hare, born of a virgin human woman, bumbles his way through the recreation of the world. Although the earlier stories in the cycle usually depict his beneficial actions as unthinking and therefore unintentional, he more deliberately becomes a friend of humans (his aunts and uncles) in the later stories. However, Radin makes an important point concerning the nature of the trickster, saying that, “one must distinguish carefully between his consciously willed creative activities and the benefactions that come to mankind incidentally and accidentally through the Trickster’s activities” (125). Although at first these two different motivations seem obviously distinguishable in the Winnebago Hare cycle, the Hare’s motivations are often far from clear. Above all else, we must remember that the trickster lies. He lies and speaks the truth, he deceives and reveals, he runs and he fights, he acts entirely in his own self-interest while simultaneously assisting all of humankind. He is simultaneously the hero and the villain, a being whose duplicitous nature defies explanation.

The Selfish Buffoon

How then can this figure play “the double role of culture-hero and trickster” and why would anyone mistake the trickster for a hero (Carroll 106)? Michael Carroll remarks on this remarkable paradox in his essay on the North American trickster character, “the Indian trickster is foremost a selfish-buffoon...because so much of the trickster’s activity is oriented toward the

gratification of his enormous appetites for food and sex” the pursuit of which often makes him look incredibly foolish (106). In one story, for example, the Winnebago Hare returns a piece of an old man’s scalp to him and, in return, the man gives him the power to order all things to do his bidding and pass that power unto humans. He has only to follow two simple rules: never ask for the same thing four times in succession and never harm in any way the woman who resides in the old man’s lodge. Hare, of course, cannot follow these simple rules. His lust drives him to summon four different women to lie with him four times in succession and he has sexual intercourse with the fourth woman. Thus he loses the power that the old man has given him; which consequentially loses it for all humankind, “he obtained a good thing for us and he lost it...that is why we cannot order things about today as the old man did” (Radin 86). However, despite all of his bumbling, Hare, like many other trickster characters in Native American myth, is considered a culture hero as well as a selfish-buffoon. He is often responsible for “creating the conditions that allowed for the development of human civilization,” which cements his role in Winnebago myth as a trickster character that takes an active part in the creation of modern culture (Carroll 106). In this cycle, the stories credit to Hare the recreating and remolding of the world after a purifying flood. Whether his actions are intentional or accidental, he helps make the world survivable for his aunts and uncles (his human kin).

Another characteristic that separates the Winnebago Hare from his label as a selfish-buffoon, though he also frequently earns that title, is that he learns so much from his enemies. In one story, he learns to make his own arrows after a very tall man shoots him. After four attempts to make an arrow work the same way that the other creature demonstrated, Hare succeeds in his endeavor and as the legend goes, “after that he made his own arrows” (Radin 65). Most of Hare’s encounters with strange creatures proceed in a similar fashion to this story. The creatures

withhold something from him, he gives them four chances to give him what he asks for, and they inevitably do not concede, so he chases and kills them. He tells his grandmother about his deeds, and after some posturing, she concedes that the man he killed was in fact a bad man in disguise who was hurting all humankind with his selfishness. This dominant pattern of storytelling remains mostly unchanged throughout the cycle.

In a similar story, Hare visits some of his uncles across the river. When he arrives, he notices that all the people there are without bodies and “they consisted only of heads” (72). Radin notes that this is a very unusual point in the traditional cycle for such beings to appear and, in most instances, these creatures are evil. However, on the Hare’s first visit they treat him well and even offer to feed him. They “boiled bear ribs with corn,” and he found it so delicious that he “ate a great deal of it” (73). Of course, in the next story the Hare must slay his uncles because they prove themselves truly evil beings when they attempt to eat him. He uses his singing and his cleverness to lull them to sleep and escape. Not content with escaping, he also tricks the heads into drowning in a creek that only he can jump across. He grinds their remains with a stone and tosses them into the river, renaming them “fast-fish” who now will only be able to annoy the people by nibbling at their ankles. Hare’s realization of the danger that these creatures present to humanity paves the way for his world shaping behavior in some of the later stories; however, in this story he is very much the selfish buffoon. His main motivation in this story is retribution against the bodiless heads who tried to eat him, using his trickery to gain the upper hand and then crush his enemies. Any benefit to others is accidental.

In this part of the cycle, the Hare is still what Michael Carroll calls a “selfish-buffoon” a character who only cares about his own troubles and satisfaction. He kills these creatures because he thinks that they are trying to trick and cheat him. The only reason that he seeks them

out in the first place is because he wants to make his own arrows for himself. It is only after the fact that grandmother even tells him that his actions benefit anyone else. Any benefit that humans receive from his actions is merely a side effect of the trickster's own motivations. Why then call this trickster in particular a "culture hero," and what exactly makes him different from any other trickster in Native American tribes? In the later parts of the cycle, Hare takes grandmother's words to heart and approaches situations not only with his own welfare in mind but with the wellbeing of humanity in mind as well. He dispatches many of the creatures and men he meets in the later part of the cycle because they would do or have done harm to humans. Paul Radin notes that while many other sequences of the trickster have inconsistent stories that are often interchangeable in order, the Winnebago Hare sequence is "a fixed sequence which is adhered to fairly consistently," even when other Winnebago trickster cycles are not (125). Despite his dubious motivations, Winnebago Hare consistently shapes himself into a culture hero throughout his cycle, both consciously and unconsciously.

Becoming a Culture Hero

In a previously discussed story, Hare loses a valuable power for humanity because of his own selfish desires. He does not follow the rules of the old man and so loses the power to command things, which in turn is then lost for all humanity. This seems somewhat typical of general trickster lore. The trickster follows his own selfish sexual and material desires, makes an irreversible mistake, and his own schemes backfire on him tremendously. Any benefit that humankind receives from the trickster is accidental or incidental, a chance windfall on the wings of the trickster's own bumbling success. In his study of West African tricksters, Robert Pelton calls the trickster "loutish, lustful, puffed up with boasts and lies, ravenous for foolery and food," and yet he manages to always "draw order from ordure," creating a balance in the world that

otherwise would not exist (1). Reconciling the role of the chaotic and selfish fool with his role in order is one of the greatest difficulties we face when we look at the trickster. How can he simultaneously be a fool and hero, selfish and selfless, and more importantly why do we want him to fill both these roles? Winnebago Hare seemingly grows out of one of these roles and into the other; he goes from being the selfish-buffoon to something more heroic than foolish. As Radin implies, he not only shapes himself but he also shapes the world. The story is obvious, but the real effect of this combination of trickster and creation is harder to untangle; “the audience knows the trickster,” and is in turns both repulsed and amused by him (Scheub 109). However at the same time “something sacred is happening,” something world shaping and awe-inspiring which makes us all part of force that is “at once familiar and outrageous and sublime” (109). In this moment of storytelling, the selfish fool and the clever hero exist as one.

In the later part of the Winnebago Hare trickster cycle, Hare comes into his own. The entire cycle so far has shaped the Hare in ways typically attributed to the trickster, his selfishness resulting in predictable pratfalls. Any benefaction that others received from Hare was an unconscious side effect of his own fortune. However, in the later stories his motivations consciously include human interests as well as his own. In one story, he comes upon a very tall man with a tiny waist and large cane. Wondering how such a creature did not simply bend and snap in two because of his oddly shaped body, Hare decides to speed up the inevitable by attempting to blow the old man over. On Hare’s fourth attempt to blow the old man over, the man notices Hare’s efforts and crushes him with his cane. After Grandmother rescues Hare, he admires the power of the old man saying, “I was sitting far away from this being yet he could do this to me. What a great man grandfather must be!” (75). Hare then takes the form of an old man and befriends the other being. With this being’s trust in hand, Hare then takes up his own cane

and crushes the old man beneath it. This trick reveals the old man's identity as a large ant. At first, it seems like Hare is merely up to his old tricks, but then he says to the old man, "you were trying to abuse human beings and, for that reason, you will henceforth remain down there close to the earth and the people will tramp upon you." (75). It's impossible to tell whether this comment functions as a smokescreen for the Hare's own mischievous revenge or whether he truly knew that this man preyed upon human kind, but it serves as a turning point in the motivation behind the Hare's adventures and tricks. All of the stories after this one involve some human element, and all of the Hare's tricks seem to have the welfare of others in mind.

One night something appears outside of Hare's lodge and starts threatening him, saying, "you who live with your grandmother, wherever you go I will trail you with dogs and crush you in my mouth" (80). It repeats itself three times, and each time Hare tries to find a new place to hide, but somehow the creature knows where he is trying to hide. So, the fourth time that the being says he will hunt Hare down with dogs and crush him, Hare gets angry and goes outside, where he finds that the loud voice is only coming from a little frog. He smashes the frog with his club and, wondering how such a being could speak in such a loud voice, he opens the frog's mouth and sees that it has many long teeth. He then knocks out the frog's teeth saying, "You talk too much and you scare people. Henceforth you will never be able to harm anyone." (81). He does this to the frog not only as vengeance for what the frog has done to him, but also because he believes that the frog will use his voice to harm others. These two stories are the first instance that Hare does something not only for himself, but also with others in mind. He is no selfless hero, and he does not sacrifice himself or his own comforts for others. He does not create the world he lives in, in fact he often does not make anything but a good story. However, in these few stories he becomes more than a selfish buffoon, more than a mere boundary dweller. He uses

his skills to transform the world around him. He still has a selfish motivation in many cases, but he also consciously realizes the impact that his deeds will have on his aunts and uncles. These deeds make room for the sacred in the profane world of the trickster. Although this trickster is very earthy and human, born of a human mother and lacking the some of the divinity of the Greek Hermes or the African Legba, there is something sacred to his actions, something that forms the world into a more bountiful place for his aunts and uncles.

The Origin of Death

There comes a time in the story when Hare thinks to himself, “By this time I must have trampled upon all the evil beings that were abusing my uncles and aunts. That is what the Earthmaker sent me here for,” and so he brings his cycle full circle (87). After saying this, he pushes all the birds that were abusing humans high into the sky and stomps all the evil spirits that might harm humans into the ground. By doing this, he makes the world safe so that the people might live without fear of evil creatures. He then puts himself to the task of preparing humans something to eat. He gathers all the animals together and asks them “how do you wish to live?” (88). The elk says that it wants to use its long and fearsome teeth to eat human beings, so Hare gives a him fruit so sour that it knocks almost all of his teeth out. He goes next to the bear, who says that humans may eat him, but they will have to be fast enough to catch him. Hare then asks the animals that will allow human beings to eat them to roll in oil and be fattened. After all the hunted animals have rolled in oil and parted ways, Hare designs the method by which humans will hunt Bear. He prepares a medicine that is hard to overcome and then gathers dogs together to find Bear. He then lures Bear out of his cave and has the dogs chase him to where Hare is hiding and waiting to shoot him. The Hare’s clever strategy shows Bear that he cannot win against humans for, as Hare says, “this is what human beings will do to you” (90). Therefore

Bear allows that humans may find him wherever they hunt for him and people “to this day do as Hare did when they want to hunt bears” (90). Hare utilizes his cleverness to gain a valuable resource for humanity.

Just as he taught himself to hunt those more powerful than him in the earliest stories, Hare teaches human beings how to hunt a creature that they would not be able to face without his wit and cleverness. The later stories build on what Lewis Hyde calls “reflective consciousness,” in which “mental experience replaces physical experience” and the trickster learns from his mistakes by using his newly found knowledge against others (56). In him “we see the both the need for reflective consciousness (without it he suffers) and the rewards of that consciousness (with it he exploits the world)” (56). In this case, the methods that he uses against Bear thwarted him in the past, but Hare, having learned these methods, uses them against Bear and ridicules him for making the same mistakes. However, unlike other trickster tales, where the trickster merely uses this information to his own advantage, Hare shares his cleverness with others. There is more at work here than a trick, Hare is completing work that he “had been appointed to do” (Radin 87). As Paul Radin says, the “Trickster is represented as the creator of the world and the establisher of culture” and these stories represent more than a fool, but also how that fool factors into the creation of the world as we know it (125).

The last Hare story that Paul Radin includes in his cycle is the origin story of both death and the medicine rite. In this story, Hare learns that humans will not “live peacefully and forever” as he previously hoped, but rather they must die for, as Grandmother said, “they were not made thus” (90). Everything eventually ends, and the mortality of humans and of Grandmother herself is something that even Hare, for all his cleverness, cannot fix. This causes him to weep for the people, but it also inspires him to create the Medicine Rite. Through this

dance, which today the Winnebago people suppose is a repetition of the ceremony “instituted by the Rabbit, when he initiated the first man into its secrets,” and through which people learn to live a better life (Radin 91). Through this rite and all the stories in his cycle, Hare changes, molding himself and the world around him, which ultimately eliminates all the things that would intentionally seek to harm humans. That is why, though his character seems morally reprehensible at times, the Winnebago consider Hare a cultural hero instead of solely a trickster. A “spirit of disorder, an enemy of boundaries,” he shapes the world (Kerenyi 189). His role in the world brings balance for the Winnebago and provides them with a model against which they form their own culture and beliefs.

Wakdjunkaga

The last few stories in the cycle also imply that the Earthmaker did not make Hare in the same manner as Grandmother and his aunts and uncles, though he was born from a human woman. This uniqueness raises the question of whether or not he is deity or was originally a deity. All collections of Winnebago myth refer to their origin as an emergence myth.

The first world that came is Earthmaker’s; there Earthmaker lies-extended. The second world that Earthmaker created is that of Trickster; there he has his lodge and there he lies extended in control of life. The third world that Earthmaker created is that of Turtle and there he lies extended. The fourth world is that of He-whom-we-call-nephew (Hare) and where he lives; there he was placed and there he lies extended in possession of life, of that indeed was he put into control (Radin 37).

This story alone does not confirm or deny the divine nature of Hare, and perhaps, as Radin implies, it is not necessary to make such a distinction. The true purpose of Hare is not to serve as

a distinction between these elements, the worlds of divine and profane, but rather, to bridge the gap, as any good trickster character would. Lewis Hyde elaborates on this theme of trickster as a boundary crosser by emphasizing his role as the one “who creates a boundary, or brings to the surface a distinction previously hidden from sight” (7). In the case of Hare, the Earthmaker creates him and assigns him the role of protecting and shaping human life. Through his cycle, he finds himself shaping the world of humans, whether consciously or unconsciously, and all of his actions seem to have an effect on all of his aunts and uncles.

This idea of the trickster as a separate entity from the world he represents appears much more clearly in the other Winnebago trickster cycle. In fact, the traditional Winnebago trickster character heavily resembles the archetypal Amerindian trickster: ruled by his appetites, unrelated to humanity, and a boundary dweller. He is more clearly amorous and amoral than Winnebago Hare, and he rarely, if ever, gives any thought to the wellbeing of anyone but himself. The Winnebago make a clear distinction between Trickster and Hare, and while both are trickster characters, they seem to have very different functions in Winnebago myth. One is the archetypal trickster character, who cuts off his own body parts and, in the guise of a woman, marries a chief’s son. He is non-human, friendly but distant, and completely driven by his own appetites. Most of his stories end in his own pratfalls and he becomes a model of what not to do in order to be successful. He too firmly dwells on the boundary of civilization, but is less of a vehicle for culture than Hare. He instead becomes the idea that culture forms itself against. Hare, in contrast, while often driven by lust and his own satisfaction, is born of a human woman and therefore many of his actions are intertwined with humanity. He sometimes unconsciously forms the world around him, but he also plays a pivotal and ordained role in the formation of human

culture. Though both play similar roles, Hare is a more active participant in the making of civilization, while Trickster is content to cross boundaries and dwell on the fringe of society.

Of human birth and with human interests Hare seems not to suffer from the boundary dwelling nature of other tricksters. He lives within society and shapes it for the better in many ways. However, in those same stories he stands apart from his aunts and uncles, for though they will die, he may not. His actions in the old man's lodge costs humans the power to command things to do their bidding, and he presumably resides in a different world than his aunt and uncles, for the tobacco he spills in one story falls upon his ground and upon our sky. He pushes the evil birds far into the air and stomps evil spirits into the earth, creating a safe and separate world for humans, protecting and separating. He shapes the world and then he becomes separate from it, a constant outsider who crosses boundaries between the mortal and the eternal. The Winnebago call him *wakdjunkaga* or "tricky one," he who plays tricks and forms the world around him. He separates the world from what it once was and makes it into what it is now. Although he exists outside our world, on the fringe of society, he plays an active role in the creation of culture as we know it. He is the nephew of all Winnebago and sculptor of his own destiny and that of the world.

Brer Rabbit Does it Again

Another example of the trickster in the role of a culture hero is the African American trickster Brer Rabbit. Although they are different characters, born of different experiences, Winnebago Hare and Brer Rabbit fulfill the same role in their societies in strikingly similar ways. The biggest difference between Brer Rabbit and the Winnebago Hare is that Brer Rabbit has no divine presumptions. He is not part of a ceremony, and he does not live in a world removed from our own. Although in a mode reminiscent of many Native American creation

stories, he dives with the rest of the animals from the sky to the earth, he himself is not divine. In *From Trickster to Badman*, John W. Robert attributes this representation of the trickster to the “the conspicuous disparity between [African-American slaves’] social status and that of the masters and the differences in their respective material and physical situations” (35). He also believes that the artificial resource shortages perpetuated by masters towards slaves contributed to the somewhat altered manifestation of the African trickster in America, and enslaved Africans “created and re-created tales of the animal trickster to serve as a model of behavior” under these artificial conditions (34). These situations do not “offer them reasons to envision their situation as resulting from the natural order of things,” and, therefore, Brer Rabbit cannot be divine like Winnebago Hare or Legba (35). He does not perpetuate the natural order of things as many divine African tricksters do, rather he serves as a representation of and rebellion against the storyteller’s own situation. Although perhaps originally a divine figure in myth, through African American conversion to Christianity Brer Rabbit lost many of the divine qualities of his ancestors. The heavy presence and belief in the Christian God in the tales presented by both Zora Neale Hurston and Julius Lester, further contributes to the imagining of Brer Rabbit as a non-divine figure. People do not worship him; his tales are not told traditionally at night, like those of Wakaima, and he does not receive roadside offerings like Hermes. He is not his own divine entity and he walks and talks because God has made it so, instead of under his own divine power. In the stories people do not fear or inherently respect Brer Rabbit, but instead interact blithely with him. Even the Winnebago Trickster for all his foolishness inspires some sort of divine awe or respect, but not Brer Rabbit. The storyteller gives the divinity firmly to God and Brer Rabbit is instead the friend who keeps showing up and getting into trouble. The role of Brer Rabbit as a

culture hero in this new world represents the situation of enslaved Africans. He is essentially powerless in a world where he constantly has to outsmart those with greater advantages.

The idea of artificial material shortage often appears in Brer Rabbit's tales. Although he often finds himself outwitting stronger adversaries because of his own mischief, he sometimes pulls off tricks that award him a resource previously denied to him. Take for example the tale of "Brer Rabbit and Sister Cow." Brer Rabbit, running from the wrath of Brer Fox, comes upon Sister Cow grazing in the field. Thirsty he would like to drink some of her milk, but he knows she will say no because she once would not give him milk for his sick wife. Therefore, instead of asking her for milk outright, he asks her if she would mind to knock some persimmons out of a nearby tree.

Sister Cow allowed as to how she thought she could do that. She took a running start and banged her head into the tree, but no persimmons fell. And there was a good reason too. The persimmons were green and weren't ready to fall, which Brer Rabbit knew. Sister Cow backed up farther and galloped toward the tree like a racehorse and—BAM!—hit that tree so hard that one of her horns got stuck. Brer Rabbit jumped up and did the shimmy, 'cause that was just what he'd been waiting for. I'm stuck, called out Sister Cow. Come give me a hand Brer Rabbit. Don't believe there's much I can do, but I'll run and get Brer Bull. Brer Rabbit ran all right, right straight home to get his wife and all the children. They come back with buckets and milked Sister Cow dry (Lester 22-23).

To paraphrase Roberts, it is not famine or scarcity that motivates Brer Rabbit's actions, but rather enslaved Africans' perception of their place in this new world steeped in the traditional actions and motivations of African tricksters (36). As compelling as Roberts's argument is, he often misses the more mythical and fundamental connections of Brer Rabbit towards other, older

trickster figures. As Lewis Hyde says, “to read this as a story about race alone is to fall into the very trap it warns against” (278). Looking at Brer Rabbit from just this perspective, while important, limits the complexity and importance of the character as he developed from African traditions into African American heritage.

A Critique of Brer Rabbit's Credentials

John Robert’s study is invaluable in its comparison of African and African-American myth, and he realizes, in a way that many scholars do not, that even among African trickster tales there is a very diverse cultural representation of the trickster. Often scholars fall into a conceit that they have the right and knowledge to decide whether a tricky character should be categorized within the category of trickster. That Brer Rabbit is a culture hero to African-Americans and many other people in the Southern United States is indisputable, and yet because of his lack of divinity and underhanded actions many scholars refuse to call him a trickster at all. Despite Michael P. Carroll’s excellent characterization of the Native American trickster as a selfish-buffoon and culture hero, he too falls prey to the assumption that just because this trickster hare story doesn’t look the same as its Native American and African counterparts, means that it doesn’t hold the same cultural or literary weight. He asserts that “in fact Afro-American tricksters are almost never culture heroes” and he believes that African tricksters lost their role as cultural heroes through reincarnation in America (126).

Julius Lester’s reimagining of the controversial *Tales of Uncle Remus* reconnects Brer Rabbit to the older and powerful characteristics of the trickster archetype. “Brer Rabbit don’t take no stuff off nobody” and as such the collection of his stories, though presented chronologically, do not conform to the same neat arc as Winnebago Hare’s. He takes very little time creating the separation between the sky, the divine world, and the ground. He brings all the

animals to Earth because of his own quarrel with the moon, in which he demonstrates some of the violence of the Winnebago tales. One of the traits of the trickster is that he himself causes the rift between one world and the next and so, he, like Hermes, becomes the boundary dweller of the rift he created. Indeed, Brer Rabbit often causes many of the rifts in the animal community, many of which involve his own misdeeds. Interestingly enough this exodus to the Earth, in Native American tradition labeled the earth-diver story, does not involve any sort of creation story. Since Christianity so heavily influences this culture, which becomes evident in many of the later stories, the assumption of creation is the same in these stories as it is in the Christian mythos. However, despite this influence, it is Brer Rabbit who takes a pivotal role in bringing the animals down to the earth, and thanks to his convincing “they took the long jump and this [Earth] is where they’ve been ever since” (Lester 3). Carroll, though many of his arguments have merit, forgets the very nature of the trickster to cross boundaries, and, in his railing against cultural norms, create and cement them.

Brer Rabbit is not a culture hero because he creates or constantly shapes the world; his role is much more subtle than that. He is a hero because he finds some way to live in a world where everything seems to be stacked against him. He is a trickster in the sense that his existence constantly opposes our own morality or cultural values. Brer Rabbit is a culture hero because he does not have to fulfill the same role that Winnebago Hare does. He lies and he uses every opportunity that he has to get out of trouble. He, like all tricksters, does not conform to anyone else’s morality. He crosses the boundary of culture and nature; he’s the prey that always manages to outsmart the predator. As Lewis Hyde and Karl Kerényi would say, he finds his *poroi*, which is, “a nick in time, a gap in the screen, a looseness in the wave” that creates “opportunities in the ancient sense” (Hyde 46). For Hermes this portal was the gate to the underworld and his

responsibility to ferry souls to the afterlife, and for Brer Rabbit, it is the briar patch and the opportunity to clear his path. “Each being in the world must find the set of opportunities fitted to its nature” and the trickster’s opportunistic craft must mold itself to individual environments (46). This idea represents nature of Brer Rabbit as discussed by John Roberts: to what extent is Brer Rabbit and his struggle with the Tar Baby the reincarnation of Wakaima and the Clay Man, and to what extent is his foolishness his own? A look at both characters puts Michael Carroll’s assertions that the African-American Brer Rabbit is not a culture hero like Wakaima into an even more ridiculous light.

Brer Rabbit and Wakaima

The two tales, “Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby” and “Wakaima and the Clay Man” are strikingly similar, although the popular version of Wakaima’s story condenses several other episodes into one story. In the tale of Wakaima, he and Wanjovu the elephant both agree to work on separate farms. Wanjovu then spends his days working hard and growing his crops meticulously while Wakaima runs off into the jungle and eats wild fruit instead of working on his farm. One day when the two agree to have dinner with the harvest from their farms, Wanjovu notices that the food that Wakaima brings to the dinner resembles crops from his own garden. Suspicious, he sets a clay man in his garden to try to catch Wakaima in his lie. That night when Wakaima inevitably comes to steal food from Wanjovu’s garden, he notices the clay man and calls out to him. When the clay man does not respond, Wakaima grows angry, and after repetitions of this exchange, he punches the clay man. First, he sticks one paw to the clay man, then another, and another, until, eventually, he cannot free himself. Wanjovu catches him in the same spot the next morning and in his anger, says that he will eat the rabbit for his transgressions. However Wakaima convinces Wanjovu to throw him into the jungle saying, “by

the time I hit the ground, I will be dead, and you can eat me” (Kalibala, Davis, and Johnson 11). When Wanjovu throws him, instead of dying, the rabbit lands lightly on his feet and scampers away, the two never speak to each other again.

This tale is strikingly similar to the tale of Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby, though Brer Rabbit’s attempt to create a farm with Brer Fox, his dupe in both stories, comes later in Lester’s recounting. Another key difference is the reason that Brer Rabbit wants Brer Fox to throw him into the briar patch, saying of Brer Fox’s suggestions “Do what’nsoever you want to do with me, Brer Fox, but please, please, please don’t throw me in the briar patch” (Lester 14). All of Brer Rabbit’s yelling and denying convinces Brer Fox that throwing the rabbit in the briar patch would be the worst thing he could do to him. Alas, once again, the rabbit knows something that the fox does not. Brer Rabbit was born and raised in the briar patch, and he knows how to navigate the briars and escape. In both stories, the rabbits know that they’ll be able to get away, but for Brer Rabbit this opportunity is based on his skill and cleverness rather than Wakaima’s natural talent and luck. In this case, Wakaima’s *poroi* is his natural talent and skill, and Brer Rabbit’s comes from living in and learning from a harsh environment and using that knowledge to his advantage. Both rabbits trick their dupes into letting them go after their enemies capture them, but the method and the meaning behind these two tricks are completely different.

The meaning and themes of the stories are also different in Wakaima’s story; his laziness and lying hurts his relationship with his friend. Wanjovu and Wakaima never speak to each other again, while Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox continue their ongoing rivalry, constantly trying to outdo one another, much as foxes and rabbits do in real life. In Brer Rabbit’s tale, he does not face retribution for lying to and stealing from friend; rather he finds himself trying to escape from a vengeful trap. He cunningly thwarts his enemy’s plan of revenge and turns a deadly situation to

his own advantage through his knowledge and cleverness. There is also an element of storytelling to Brer Rabbit's tale that explicitly reveals the moral or lesson of the story, unlike the implied morality of the Wakaima stories. It often seems that in some ways Brer Rabbit's chaotic element is completely in his control and events often turn in his favor. This leads many to call him a clever hero rather than a true trickster character, despite his African roots.

Although there are many similarities between Brer Rabbit and Wakaima, there are differences in the characters that point to difference in cultural circumstance in the storytellers. Wakaima himself is different from the tricksters that Robert Pelton discusses in *The Trickster in West Africa* in the fact that he is from an East African tribe called the Baganda and the tricksters that Pelton discusses are from West African tribes. According to the native author of the Wakaima stories, the Baganda use these stories to "teach children first that it does not pay to lie, to cheat, to hate, to steal, to be cruel, to disobey parents and old people" (Kalibala, Davis, and Johnson 138). These stories exist "to inculcate in their [children's] tender minds that it is better to live in harmony with other people and to become part of society, each playing his role" (138-139). With this purpose in mind, the Baganda consider Wakaima a hero, because his cleverness allows him to succeed "in spite of his disabilities" and to overcome his stronger enemies (139). Although he is the liar and the thief in the first story, he is often the victim of conspiring predators and must use his wits to escape, interestingly enough making him exactly the clever hero that Carroll accused characters like Brer Rabbit of being despite their African origins. However despite this somewhat damning evidence towards the consideration of Wakaima, and therefore Brer Rabbit, as a trickster in the role of the culture hero, Ernest Kalibala also emphasizes the importance of understanding that "these stories tell the life of the people" (140). They are not just embodiments of what not to do, but also representative of the history of a

culture. They represent a desire and hope to succeed despite disadvantage and the trickster bridges the gap between the possible and impossible. Brer Rabbit is not only a friend of the people, but through him, the people can tell their story. Through his actions, people not only learn the way to live, but also the origins of those ideas. The trickster and his stories do not exist in a vacuum; he is primarily a figure who interacts with culture, which is why so many cultural objects and beliefs inhabit his stories. Therefore, although the Winnebago, Baganda, and African American stories might have different meanings and origins, some more religious, some more pedagogical, they all tell the story of the people. The trickster in this case is not only the originator and facilitator of civilization, but also a living, breathing embodiment of culture.

Shaping the World

Brer Rabbit and his friends live on Earth a time when animals “were walking the earth like natural men way back in the days when God himself was on the ground and men could talk with him” (Hurst 3). These events exist in a time different from our own, and in some way are responsible for the ways we think and act in our own time. In the Winnebago myth, this idea manifests as different worlds and the emergence of a new world that humans reside in, which is shaped by the trickster. In the story “How Brer Fox and Brer Dog Became Enemies,” after the animals jump to the Earth from the sky they start to behave differently and “where before they had gotten along with each other, now they started having little arguments” (4). The paragraph ends with the line “it was only a matter of time before they started acting like people,” which implies that time on Earth with people changes them in some fundamental way (4). The animals start to have arguments where before there were none and natural enemies begin to emerge. What is the instigator of this change?

Brer Rabbit, throughout the stories and beyond his involvement in their leap to the earth, often instigates this change in the animals. In one of the stories that Zora Neal Hurston collects on her travels through Florida, Brer Rabbit ruins Brer Dog's beautiful voice. The way that Joe Wiley tells the story in Hurston's collection, is that both the rabbit and the dog used to court Miss Saphronie. When Brer Dog would come to Miss Saphronie's house and sing, she would be so busy listening to his beautiful voice that she "wouldn't pay no mind to Brer Rabbit at all" (109). So, Brer Rabbit stops Brer Dog one day and tells the dog that he knows how to make his voice sweeter. Brer Dog demands to know the secret and the rabbit says

Ah got to see inside yo' throat first. Lemme see dat and Ah can tell you exactly what to do so you can sing more better. Brer Dog stretched his mouth wide open and the rabbit peered way down inside. Brer Dog had his mouth latched back to the last notch and his eyes shut. So Brer Rabbit pulled out his razor and split Brer Dog's tongue and tore out across de mountain wid de dog right in behind him. Brer Rabbit had done ruint Brer Dog's voice, but he ain't had time to stop at Miss Fronie's nor nowhere else 'cause dat dog is so mad he won't give him time (110).

Through the rabbit, we learn the dog's *pourquoi*, or origin, story. Much like the Winnebago Hare, Brer Rabbit is the reason why many of the animals exist the way that they do in the world today. He is the reason that Brer Gator is black instead of white, and he is the reason that Brer Buzzard does not have any tail feathers. Just as in Winnebago myth, many other animals trace the origin of their forms to an animal trickster. All of these antics are reminiscent of Eshu, whose people the Yoruba, know as "the embodiment of paradox," simultaneously old and young, weak and strong (Pelton 129). The trickster is simultaneously chaotic and structured, creator of boundaries and emissary between them. Although Brer Rabbit's only divine boundary crossing

occurs at the very beginning of these stories, he still shapes the world around him by creating the boundaries between the animals themselves as well as the boundaries between humans and animals.

The Signifying Monkey

Brer Rabbit often uses other animals as dupes, sometimes for a particular reason, but often without cause. He is often responsible for their misfortune as well as his own, and he is the reason that the animals even live on the Earth. In another story “Brer Rabbit Saves His Meat,” the storyteller begins by telling the listener that Brer Wolf, who Brer Rabbit killed many stories ago, was going home after fishing one day. The narrator then addresses the presumed disbelief of the reader that Brer Wolf can do anything when he’s dead by saying “you got to understand: Back before ‘once upon a time,’ dying was different. Just because you died in one story didn’t mean you stayed dead for the rest of the stories. That would not be no fun, would it? Of course not” (Lester 47). This somewhat metafictional excerpt appears many times throughout both Lester’s and Hurston’s collections of African American folklore. Statements such as these are evidence of a continuing oral tradition, but they also show how Brer Rabbit shapes culture through the very act of telling his stories. The storyteller is present in way that the narrator is not in Radin’s retelling of Winnebago myth or in the retelling of the Wakaima stories. Many attribute this idea of a present narrator to Joel Chandler Harris and his creation of Uncle Remus. However, as many scholars attest, these stories have a rhythm steeped in the use of language and music. To discount the influence of signifying language and music in the rhythm of these stories does them a great injustice.

Robert Pelton’s chapter on African tricksters Legba and Eshu opens with the creation of Legba. The story asserts that, “after she gives birth to the gods, Mawu makes Legba her linguist.

From the beginning he is the master of languages, the bearer of messages among his brothers, and the translator of Mawu's purposes for all" (Pelton 113). He calls these African trickster gods "Writers of Destiny," and he believes that they shape the world through language. Hermetic tricksters in the strictest sense of the word, Legba and Eshu fulfill all the roles of the Greek god Hermes between them. Both are messengers of the gods, and Eshu in particular fills the role of boundary dweller and god of the marketplace, who oversees commerce and watches over the passageways of Yoruba life. They are also both gods of language who hold the knowledge of written and spoken word for their people. Henry Louis Gates connects this idea of language to African American tricksters with his idea of the signifying monkey. Both Eshu and the monkey are linked together through the origin story of divination, that is, the interpretation and use of language. This role of the monkey in African tradition carries into African American trickster myths.

In The Signifying Monkey tales, another African trickster tale told typically by "black men as a traditional, but ever-changing oral narrative" the monkey uses double *entendres* to confuse other characters for his own gain (Smith 182). Henry Gates explicates this plot in his book *The Signifying Monkey*:

In the narrative poems, the Signifying Monkey invariably repeats to his friend, the Lion, some insult purportedly generated by their mutual friend, the Elephant. The Monkey, however speaks figuratively. The Lion, indignant and outraged, demands an apology of the Elephant, who refuses and then trounces the Lion. The Lion, realizing that his mistake was to take the Monkey literally, returns to trounce the Monkey. It is a relationship between the literal and the figurative, and the dire consequences of their confusion, which is the most striking repeated element of these tales. The Monkey's trick

depends on the Lion's inability to mediate between these two poles of signification, of meaning (55).

The monkey cannot physically best the lion, but the elephant can, so the monkey has to use his wits to get the lion to provoke the elephant into trouncing him. As Gates says, the monkey "is a term of (anti)mediation, as are all trickster figures, between two forces he seeks to oppose for his own contentious purposes, and then to reconcile" (55). Brer Rabbit uses this method numerous times throughout his adventures. He cannot physically best his opponents so he utilizes language to turn his enemies against themselves.

Although Gates does not connect this concept of signifying language use to Brer Rabbit, the rabbit uses it to get himself out of trouble when Mr. Jack Sparrow overhears him saying something bad about Brer Fox. Afraid that Brer Fox will chase after him again, Brer Rabbit finds the fox before the sparrow can and twists the situation in his own favor, telling Brer Fox that Mr. Jack Sparrow was telling everybody that the fox wanted to kill Brer Rabbit's family and tear his house down. Brer Fox, angry that someone is telling lies about him, seeks out Mr. Jack Sparrow and eats him for his trouble, giving Brer Rabbit a smooth getaway. Brer Rabbit extricates himself from a dangerous situation, in the same way that The Signifying Monkey does, through language and the confusion of his lies and the truth. Gates calls this "repetition with a difference" a phenomenon that deviates from the original in that it creates its own truth (66). "Signifying creates a new subtext through the intersection of the original with the trope that is analogous to the physical and metaphorical," which connects to the rhythm of the story and the way that Brer Rabbit shapes his own destiny (Smith 184). The rabbit demonstrates his ability to signify, to twist language and its meaning to suit his own means, and in doing so, he connects to the divine

Legba and Eshu and to the Signifying Monkey. A master of paradox and misdirection, his deeds and misdeeds shape his own world and write an unlikely destiny.

In sum, the role of Brer Rabbit in African American literature and oral tradition seems superfluous. He lies, he steals, he cheats, he is lazy, he is amoral, and yet he somehow always manages to spin things into his favor. How then do we compare him to Winnebago Hare and what exactly is his purpose? Some quickly misjudge him, labelling him merely as a clever hero or fool especially when compared to the pedagogical Wakaima or the divine Eshu; however he serves a purpose in African-American culture that differs vastly from any in African culture. As John Roberts says in *From Trickster to Badman*,

The animal trickster tales of enslaved Africans were not intended to provide a literal guide for actions in everyday life, but rather served as an expressive mechanism for transmitting a perception of cleverness, guile, and wit, as the most advantageous behavioral options for dealing with the power of the slave masters in certain generic situations (37-38).

Therefore, Brer Rabbit is a character who knows how to use his limited resources and copious cleverness to succeed in the face of adversity. For the role of the trickster is not to show us what we should do, but rather to do what we wish we could; he defies the concept of morality as well as social constructs and rules to bring balance to the world. He brings culture to the world, not only by shaping it with his mischief, but also by providing an opposing force for civilization to organize itself against. He exists as a simultaneously separate and internal entity, boundary crosser and dweller.

In a closer look at these two characters, the connection between them, while not always readily apparent, becomes much clearer. This clarity not only appears in each character's relation to the role of culture hero but also in their relation to each other. While there may not be a documented relation between the Winnebago and enslaved Africans, there is a clear influence of Native American culture and storytelling in the folklore of Brer Rabbit. The most notable instance of this influence shows in the structuring of the "How the Animals Came to Earth" story, in which the animals, in a move reminiscent of the earth-diver story of Native American origin, jump from another world to the world that we live in today. Both Brer Rabbit and the Winnebago Hare, find themselves in a similar situation; they initially exist in a world that is the same, but still different from our own. Karl Kerényi believes that the function of the trickster in such a society, "is to add disorder to order and make a whole, to render possible, within the fixed bounds of what is permitted, an experience of what is not permitted" (185). The purpose of these two characters, Brer Rabbit in particular, is to allow the storyteller to create a world where permitted actions are tempered and shaped by necessary chaos. This so-called "spirit of disorder," embodied by the trickster, shapes culture, not only by bringing balance, but also because it gives civilized society something to form itself against (185).

Each character becomes a conduit for the culture of his society in a different way. Winnebago shapes the world, through his "selfish-buffoon" antics and through divine providence. In a way, bringing civilization and influencing the life of man is the reason that he exists. Brer Rabbit teaches us what we shouldn't do; he represents all the things that we wish we could do, but that society condemns. He creates and crosses the boundaries that shape society, though he himself lives in the margins. His purpose is not ordained, like Winnebago Hare and his African trickster ancestors; he merely does what he can to get by and pull tricks on others,

whether they deserve it or not. Both of these characters exist as a part of humanity and they create or represent the boundary between human and divine. They do not create the world itself; that is the job for a nobler character. Instead, they form and cross the boundaries that form the backbone of society.

Through this action, and others, these two characters represent two different incarnations of the trickster, but both fulfill the same societal role. They are the creators of a great distance between divinity and humanity, between morality and immorality. Lewis Hyde in *The Trickster Makes this World*, puts the paradox of the trickster thusly, “the origins, liveliness, and durability of cultures require that there be space for figures whose function is to uncover and disrupt the very things that cultures are based on,” and “without this disruption there is not culture, there is nothing to clearly define it” (5). Although these characters defy the rules of society, by doing so, they also define them. That, in essence, is the definition of the trickster as a culture hero. Whether this idea arises unconsciously across cultural boundaries, as Campbell and Jung suggest, or not, these two characters embody that idea despite their distance.

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