

Visual Vernaculars of the First Uncle Remus Tales

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Though the original Uncle Remus illustrations now abound in the public domain, they will probably never reenter the public sphere. Deaccessioned, like so many Speedy Gonzalez cartoons from children's television, Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler from the literary and cinematic canons, and avuncular or matronly smiles from classic advertising, the illustrations have gone the way of racist kitsch, no longer befitting today's less prejudicial ways of regarding fellow Americans. Recent editions of Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus stories, at least since the ones Robert Hemenway edited in 1982, omit the illustrations. Jason Sperb's study of *Song of the South* (1947) never mentions Remus illustrations as bases for the movie's imagery. Robin Bernstein's *Racial Innocence* recuperates nineteenth-century illustrations for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Raggedy Anne and Topsy-Turvy dolls, discussing the Uncle Remus tales at length but remaining silent on the illustrations. One would scarcely know from recent studies, or from most online digital editions, Harris's prose once accompanied one of the nineteenth century's richest visual fields. African American studies, theorizing tricksters and signifying monkeys, and cultural studies, rethinking graphic-arts and cartoon histories, were looking elsewhere as Uncle Remus became an invisible man.¹

We lose more than paternalism, prejudice, and casual racism when we deaccession these illustrations, for *Uncle Remus, His Songs and Sayings* (1881) is fascinatingly layered and liminal. Text yields space on nineteenth-century pages to ingenious children's illustrations; illustrator

A.B. Frost adds sophisticated insets to line drawings James Henry Moser and Joseph Church had supplied decades earlier; ambiguous creatures disport in lively animation, part personification, part anthropomorphism; an embedded black storyteller models what must have been decades of Caucasian, parental performances of bedside blackface shows. Type-written dialect becomes a script for live-action, inter-racial playacting. Eighteen-eighties children's literature imagines intergenerational, interracial exceptions to that era's segregating, subjugating "rule," yet this arrangement is not apparent from prose-only paperbacks. "For every sincere and gifted Joel Chandler Harris," John Strausbaugh estimates, "there would be a dozen hacks who exploited the genre for low humor or the most vilely racist stereotyping"—*after* vaudeville and film debase Harris's more original figures.²

If we reconstruct Remus's unusual degree of visibility within his time and place, interesting subtexts come to light. "One evening recently," readers are told, the lady whom Uncle Remus calls "Miss Sally" "missed her little seven-year-old. Making search for him through the house and through the yard, she heard the sound of voices in the old man's cabin, and, looking through the window, saw the child 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. This is what 'Miss Sally' heard [...]." (3-4)³ "Uncle Remus Initiates the Little Boy" following that introduction, as this eavesdropper gains perspective on a story she is neither telling nor intended to hear. The unnamed boy is specifically within the servant's space. Comfortably ensconced, his setting preconditions how he shares the stories. "In a word, writes Robert Bone in the 1970s, "the scene is idyllic. What it proclaims to the reader is this: 'There is nothing to be afraid of, or even upset by, in these animal fables; they were merely quaint legends or harmless children's stories.'" ⁴ "Uncle Remus's cabin constitutes one of the most secure and serene environments in American literature," writes Hemenway during the following decade, "in the half-light of evening, in the flickering shadows of the fire, black man and white boy enjoy an

intense and loving bond. Time stands still while animals walk the earth like natural men. Parental authority has retired to the big house, and the confusing world of racial caste disappears at the slave cabin's door. Two human beings share an atmosphere of mutual care and respect, a frozen moment of innocent childhood purity."⁵ Though the boy is safe, Hemenway reads naïvely. The visible, former slave can tell any subversive story he wishes yet the mistress could be *invisible*, her listening presence not apparent. The stories unfold for the listener yet at one point "exclaimed the old man": "chilluns can't speck ter know all 'bout eve'ything 'fo' dey git some res'" (53). Truths must wait. Facts lie beyond what children know. Meanings haunt dreams but only fully occur when children get older. We know more about racial, gender and family politics than the storyteller could speak to under surveillance and during orchestrated bedtime performances.

The photogravure frontispiece that accompanies the scene differs slightly from the intimate contact Harris's opening description grants as it emphasizes equalizing stances (*Figure 1*). The image belongs to the tradition of Hammatt Billings' images of Uncle Tom learning to read the Bible with Eva, and E.W. Kemble's caricatures of Jim teaching a cross-dressed Huck how to move as a girl. In all three images, a folksy, African American adult presides over a child's intimate communication, the black adult's potential threats neutralized by Eva's Bible, Huck's swagger, and the boy's distance from his raconteur. Since the artist does not recreate Miss Sally looking in, readers look in *as* Sally. Though the image originates in an era of weekly lynchings and segregated public transport, it facilitates interracial, intergenerational if fictive intimacies. Caucasian child, avuncular adult, monitoring mistress exchange coded information, fitting configurations of raconteur, listener, unseen overseer, readers of the prose and viewers of the images. "Harris's writings," comments Robert Cochran, "display a persistent manipulation of his culture's social and literary conventions, a deliberate tension between a surface in comfortable accord with the dominant sentimental pieties (and related ideological projects) of the day and a subversive subtext profoundly critical of those

same pieties.”⁶ Some subtexts are *so* subsumed, we must search for them in interplays with images. When the illustrations are deaccessioned, we overlook any possible subtexts in turn.

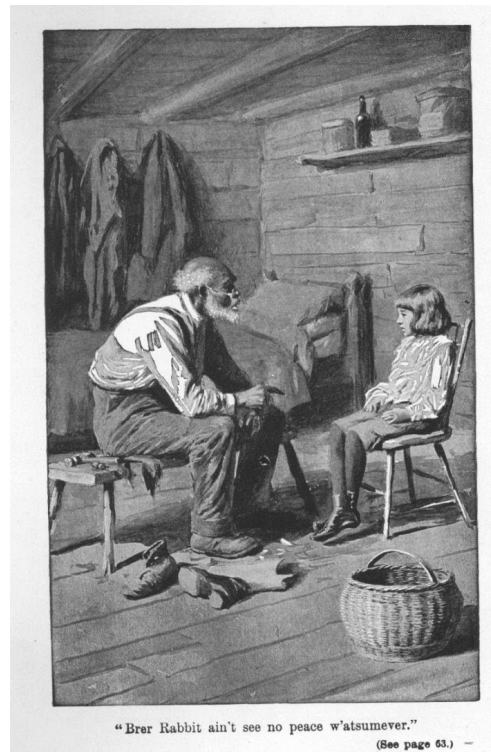


Figure 1

Music and metaphor meanwhile govern theories of children’s illustrations—Perry Nodelman’s rhythm or Joseph Schwarcz’s musical score. These theorists recreate the story recitation experience, claiming visual and verbal mediums complement one another, embedded narrator and adult “live” reader mimic one another, and child in the story and child *hearing* the story also become identified. In a musical orchestration of the reading experience, according to these theories, the reading performance

matches the rhythm and timing of the listening child's responsive imagination. The "blending of two components" is for Schwarcz, "intriguing because each is a rich system of expression and communication," "language with its vocabulary, syntax," and "the picture, with contour, size, shape, color" and "texture."⁷ If, as Nodelman writes, "the rhythm of picture-book stories is a continual move forward and then stop, forward and then stop," sans illustrations, Remus loses that rhythm.⁸ Pictures temporalize narration, literalize metaphor, reinvigorate cliché. "Didactic illustrations," Schwarcz writes, "please and instruct by being rather drily descriptive and often funny," though they "view the metaphor as if it were denotative." "When the illustrator succeeds in creating a picture," he continues, "which somehow resounds with the mood that gave rise to the metaphor in the first place, even without rendering the verbal image at all, he is asking the child to join him at a point in time *before* this image was coined or applied." "The vagueness of the aesthetic information," he concludes, "implies an open invitation to the child to experience some empathy with the author."⁹ Remus as an embedded author corroboratively "coins" the metaphors he narrates, his listener imagines and illustrators literalize. Words and pictures "have a combative relationship" but also "complementarity," runs Nodelman's hypothesis, meaning "the relationships between pictures and texts in picture books tend to be ironic: each speaks about matters on which the other is silent."¹⁰ Pictures punctuate actions, "speak" within verbal pauses and leave to adults' discretion what should be suspended for more grown-up comprehension.

These visuals, I argue, communicate truths between raconteurs on the page and listeners at nineteenth-century bedtimes, transmitted in folk rhythms we now sacrifice in deaccessioned illustrations. Artists' pictures "voice" an author's shared language of an African American who has survived slavery and a Caucasian too young to have experienced it. Legends encode plantation generations' gender- and sexual politics in symbolic, anthropomorphic subtexts the boy may comprehend, but the mistress—if she listens—does not have cause to question. In-text pictures manipulate margins, add to sequences and meld storytelling modes into single rhythms. The same ink seemingly

constitutes typography of the author's prose, lines of the artists' works and the Tar Baby's essences integrated into descriptions and depictions. We seek to equalize history and erase sentimental paternalism when we deaccession these illustrations but we also risk recreating the cliché that one cannot hear the rhythm for the drums: one cannot now picture keeping time with Remus without keeping these pictures timed to the historical text itself.

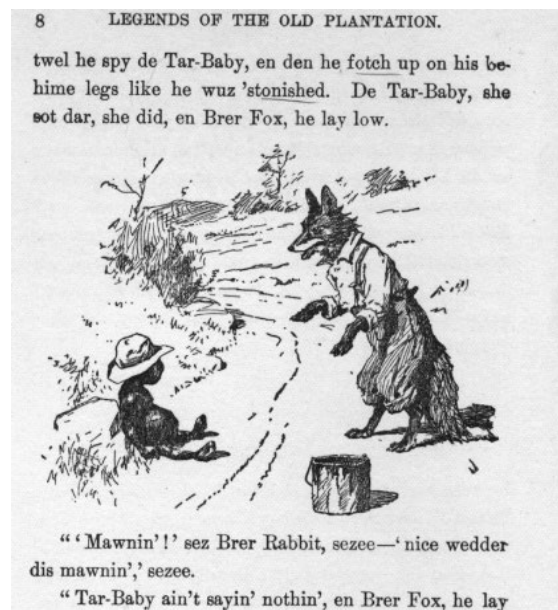


Figure 2

Selected stories in the collection revolve around linguistic elisions and indistinct, dialect pronouns as the artist facilitates visual vernaculars and as the author slyly suggests subtexts. “The Wonderful Tar Baby Story” “came to be mistaken for a racist joke,” Strausbaugh writes, “when in fact Harris was simply transmitting a folktale that has its roots in Africa and is told throughout the lands of the diaspora”—less simply, within the performance itself.¹¹ The story comes with three illustrations from Moser and Church and a plate from

Frost (Figures 2, 3, 4). The baby appears here just as "human" as the anthropomorphic rabbit. Bryan Wagner writes, the image "reinforces something that everyone in 1880 was already supposed to know: the tar baby is an image of a slave," with "an arching nasal bridge and projection in the mouth and jaw, that were associated with the so-called Negroid feature set in the racial typology favored at the time."¹² If it is "Negroid," it does not necessarily look female. Frost's rendition is more bulbous, notably male. Its (or "his") belly bulges to the right, proportionately to the rabbit's knee, bulging left. Frost has the rabbit making contact with the baby, whereas Moser and Church had not had them touching. Pictures reiterate motifs of the "stuck" rabbit's reoccurrences, visually and even sexually objectify animal subjects and seemingly infiltrate media: the same spilling ink forms Harris's typography, blobs in Frost's imagery, a baby's inky tar and a rabbit's inescapable snare.

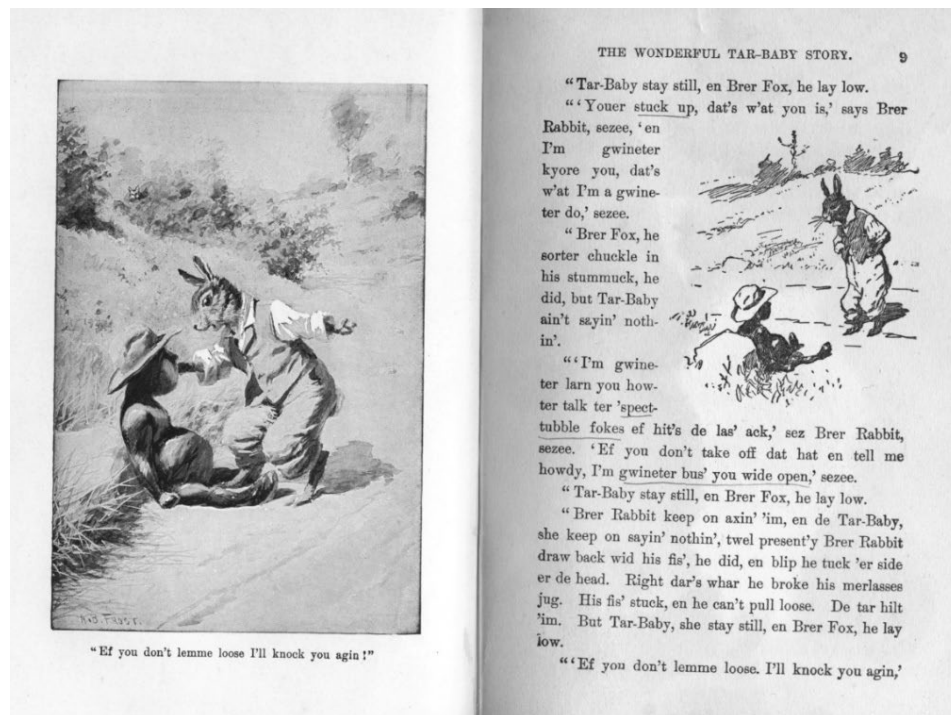


Figure 3

The narrative reinterprets adult sexuality in a children's story as it complicates distinctions between man and animal, man and woman, and person and thing. "Harris preserves a vestige of the femaleness of the tar-baby": "pronouns consistently refer to the tar-baby as she," and Hugh Keenan observes that "the sexual courtship or attack is, however, minimized. But Harris was certainly aware of the strong sexual component of the tale."¹³ As Remus's dialect has it:

Brer Fox went ter wuk en got 'im some tar, en mix it wid
some turkentime, en fix up a contrapshun w'at he call a
Tar-Baby, en he tuck dish yer Tar-Baby en he sot 'er in de
big road, en den he lay off in de bushes fer to see what de
news wuz gwine ter be. (7)

The "contrapshun" he creates is an "it," a thing of tar and turpentine. Remus tells the boy the Fox took the tar baby "en he sot 'er in the big road," attributing a feminine pronoun to "'er," before the rabbit first appears (7). Remus follows suit, attributing gendered motives: the hare "come prancin' 'long twel he spy de Tar-Baby, en den he fotch up on his behime legs like he wuz 'stonished. De Tar Baby, she sot dar, she did, en Brer Fox, he lay low" (7-8). Listeners miss the pronoun-shift to "'er" and "she," and the attribution of patience to (somehow female) tar. Rearing up, the rabbit plumes his masculinity to respond to "'er" feminine appeal.

The story repeats the "no-reply formula," "a dramatic monologue that devolves from greeting ('Good-mornin' ter yer, ma'am!') into threat ('You no talk ter me, me larn you wat manners is!') into the signature five-fold sequence in which the rabbit is caught by one hand, the other hand, one foot, the other foot, and by the head."¹⁴ Nine times, readers are told, the baby, "she stay silent," and the fox, "he lay low"—as if tar and turpentine *could* say something as often as a fox could decide to emerge; as if tar and turpentine could be gendered "she" as a fox could be gendered "he." The repetition makes it sound as though "she" decides on silence. It makes the listener in the frame story and readers of the embedded one forget the tar-baby is an object, a "contrapshun," unable to make its (or "her") own decisions. Readers forget "its" object-status, never realizing amid reiterations "she" is not an animate being:

'Tu'n me loose, fo' I kick de natchul stuffin' outen you,' sez Brer Rabbit, sezee, but de Tar-Baby, *she* ain't sayin' nuthin'. *She* des hilt on, en de Brer Rabbit lose de use *er* his feet in de same way. Brer Fox, he lay low. Den Brer Rabbit squall out dat ef de Tar-Baby don't tu'n 'im loose he butt '*er* cranksided. En den he butted, en his head got stuck. Den Brer Fox, he sa'ntered fort', lookin' dez ez innercent ez wunner yo' mammy's mockin'-birds. (10; emphasis added)

Wagner argues, the Fox entraps the Rabbit because he knows "the rabbit is inclined, to some extent, to attribute intent to inanimate objects," but he is not the only one set up for the joke.¹⁵ The tar as a trap within the story, and Remus's means of framing the story, confuse ontological categories, being and object, animal and "contrapshun."



Figure 4

The story ends, as "stuck" to the tar as the hero is but the action continues two stories later, with Brer Fox telling him, "You des tuck em jam yo'se'f on dat Tar Baby widout waitin' fer enny invite, ... 'en dar you

is,” he continues, “en dar you’ll stay twel I fixes up a bresh-pile and fires her up, kaze I’m gwinter bobby-cue you dis day, sho” (17). As he disclaims setting the trap, he again makes gender an arbitrary distinction: foliage ablaze is somehow feminine as he “fires her up.” Anthropomorphism ending, he reverts from semi-human to voracious beast. Harris and Frost arrest characters at liminal moments as humans become animals verbally described and then objects visually depicted. Entities ordinarily designated “it” first get to be—or no longer can be—“he” or “she.” Ruskin once discussed visual art as “our recovery of what may be called the innocence of the eye,” or “a sort of childish perception of” “flat stains of color, merely as such, without consciousness of what they signify.”¹⁶ The baby is a “flat stain,” an inkblot or typographical error. “Innocent eyes” do not perceive it as signifying subject or object, human or animal, male or female. It “bulges” there, never forming a character in the image, reading as a legible letter in the prose, nor signifying anything other than ink. Blackness might, then, *be* as ink: cork coloring with which whites “black up,” or mere tar, which can never engender nor signify. Objectification cannot escape the baby’s sexuality or stereotype even as its ink arrests the rabbit, stops the action and lands on bedside storytellers’ faces. They find themselves symbolically stuck enacting blackface, reciting the inky baby’s tale.

“The Story of the Deluge, and How It Came About,” for its part, signifies a revision of the Noah’s Ark parable in a crawfish revolution as it erases the supposed Curse of Ham. “In dem days,” Remus begins a periodic sentence, before Harris’s narration interrupts and before a picture *then* interrupts his gerund phrase: “observing a look of incredulity on the boy’s face,” Remus is “reading” a dubious look (20). We are then “observing” animals as typesetting draws our eyes, right to left, across an image (*Figure 5*). Elephants seem hidden; paired cats, bison, and giraffes flank them; crawfish anchor the image. The elephant’s back extends the hills, implanting the pachyderm in the landscape, on which reigns a kingly lion.

Remus cannot tell exactly what legislators did in their assembly but he knows “dey spoke speeches, en hollered, en cusst, en flung der

langwidge 'roun' des like w'en yo' daddy wuz gwineter run fer de legislater en got lef'. Howsomever, dey 'ranged der 'fairs, en splained der bizness" (21). Remus's inflections call attention to legislators' linguistic tricks, likening animals' congress to the boy's father's electoral race. Outsized congressional animals flatten fellows until "de Elephant trompled on one er de Crawfishes. Co'se w'en dat creetur put his foot down, w'atsumever's under dar wuz boun' fer ter be squshed, en dey wa'n't nuff er dat Crawfish lef' fer ter tell dat he'd bin dar" (21). Having had enough of getting squished, combining the word with *crushed* to get "squshed," the crawfish drew up a preamble, replete with "wherefores." Puny statures only get the meekest creatures listening. Larger beasts, "dey might ez well er sung Ole Dan Tucker ter a harrycane" (22). They occupy the same geography, accept the social footing, sing the songs of impoverished Reconstruction-era Blacks.

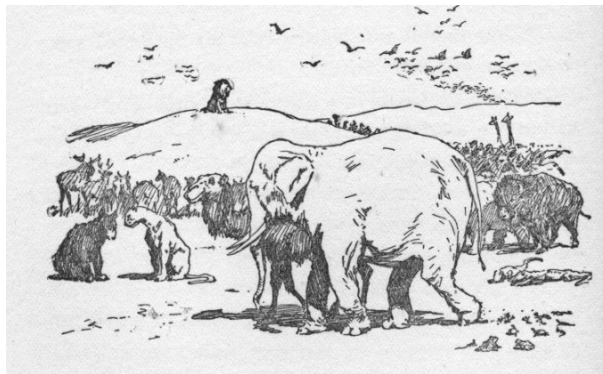


Figure 5

Salt-of-the-earth and trod underfoot, they "bo'd inter de groun' en kep' on bo'in twel dey onloost de fountains er de yeth; en de waters squirt out, en riz higher en higher twel de hills wuz kivvered, en de creeturs wuz all drowned." Their revenge brings about a revolution, a biblical deluge—"en all bekaze," Remus explains, the legislators "let on 'mong

deyselves dat dey wuz bigger dan de Crawfishes” (22). Relative size is whatever animals suppose themselves to be. Creatures on social spectrums face disenfranchisement, enacting class warfare: lowly creatures bring on the deluge from below, forestalling forces that in Noah’s story, rain from above. The episode recasts the history of Black legislators in the Reconstruction South, brought in but trampled by larger party interests. Remus side-steps the textual politics of Noah and Ham, denying any knowledge, when the boy asks, of better known floods. Remus has crawfish emerge victorious, more palatable alternatives than the Flood’s cursed creatures. If Miss Sally overhears, she is left appreciative of the boy’s remembering and bringing up Noah’s Ark, unaware of subtler, subversive class warfare that Remus has antediluvian crawfish symbolize.



Figure 6

As the boy asks, “Where was the Ark?” another picture intervenes, not to answer but to pose the elephant as the remaining embodiment of hills, the only form rising above the waters (23). (*Figure 6*). Elephants as in Remus’s story and Frost’s rendering denote Republicans in Thomas Nast’s editorial cartoons as early as 1874.¹⁷ Elephants occupy similar ground in Nast’s images as editorial anthropomorphism spelled out politicians’ weakness, inhumanity, or crossdressing effeminacy in

newspaper cartoons. Rising waters editorially eclipse elephants' statures until they are immersed. This elephant bears kangaroos and birds. Partly submerged nearby are antlered deer, giraffes with necks foreshortened by floods, ink spots, presumably representing crawfish—but no presiding lions. "W'ich ark's dat?" Remus responds, directly below the image that answers the boy's question with an absence (23). He times his revisionist biblical history to go without the Ark and the ideology that oppress Remus and his ilk.

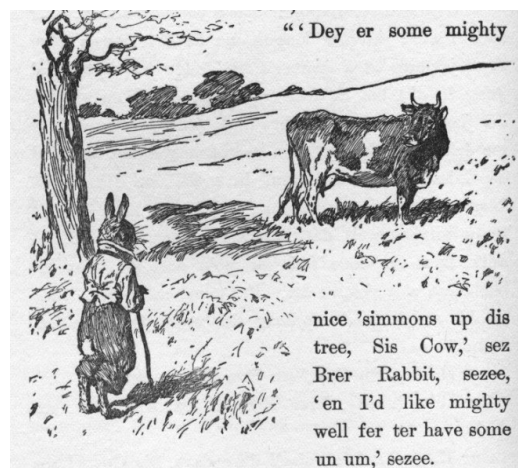


Figure 7

Another story illustrates creaturely disproportions, not as political or biblical conflict but gender and misogyny—if such terms apply to “Miss Cow.” In similarly placed images on two consecutive pages, male rabbit confronts bovine female. Brer Rabbit is nearer in the first image, facing away as he stands with a cane (*Figure 7*). The cow looks at him, not at us as she occupies the right-side background and as she is more aligned with the type on the page. She is stuck by the horns to a tree and even more displaced in a second image (*Figure 8*). Our eyes must cross the rabbits' path as we move between paragraphs. When we reach the bottom of the

page, we find ourselves positioned to receive milk-bearing rabbits—as if we are among Miss Cows consumers. Harris and Frost position us to feel complicity, even guilt, in the cow character’s animal objectification, in her sexual symbolism and in her milk production for the rabbit’s—and potentially for our own—consumption.

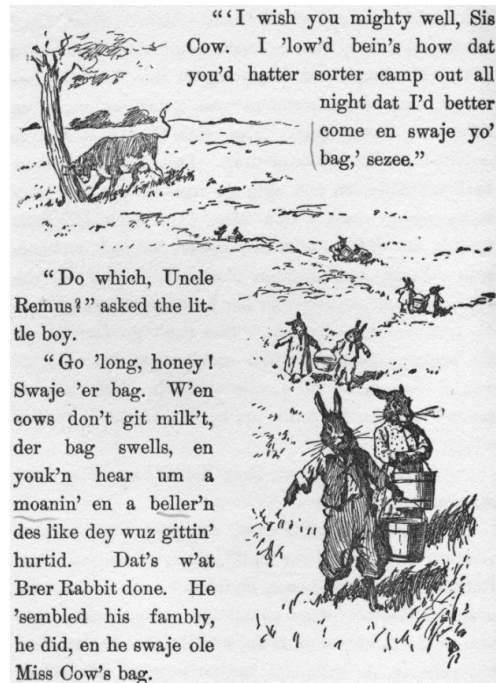


Figure 8

Remus informs the boy that Brer Rabbit “spied ole Miss Cow feedin’ roun’ in a fiel’, he did, en he ’termin’ fer ter try his han’ wid ’er” (41). The freedom, socially and sexually, this reference implies gets explained: “Brer Rabbit know mighty well dat Miss Cow won’t give ’im no milk, kaze she done ’fuse ’im mo’n once, en w’en his ole ’oman wuz sick, at dat” (41). Even as a substitute for his “ole ’oman” (presumably a rabbit spouse), the cow has refused the succor he has previously requested. He

asks after Brer Bull, who, an underwhelmed Miss Cow replies, is just “sorter so-so” (42). He spies persimmons and suggests, “I might ax you fer ter butt ’gin de tree, en shake some down, Sis Cow,” who does not want to “diskommerdate” him, so:

Miss Cow butt de tree—blim! Na’er ’simmon drap. Den
Miss Cow sorter back off little, en run agin de tree—blip!
No ’simmons never drap. Den Miss Cow back off little
fudder, she did, en hi’st her tail on ’er back, en come agin
de tree, kerblam! en she come so fas’, en she come so
hard, twel one ’er her horns went spang thoo de tree, en
dar she wuz. (43).

We have the violent onomatopoeia of “blim,” “blip,” “kerblam” and the bodily verb “butt.” Three iterations of “come” come next. The culmination, “she come so hard,” has her pierce hard substance and somehow arrive: “dar she wuz.” If we consider an acceptable symbolic range for a child, dialect diction figures vigorous, loud sexual contact.

The effort into which the rabbit tricks her leaves her immobile: “she can’t go forreds,” Remus explains, “en she can’t go backerds,” and “Dis zackly w’at Brer Rabbit waitin’ fer” (43). With the cow stuck by her horns, the rabbit feigns running to Brer Bull for help but returns “wid his ole ’oman en all his chilluns, en de las’ one er de fambly wuz totin’ a pail,” so that “De ole uns milk’t en de young uns milk’t,” until “dey milk’t ’er dry” (43). What is already a rather cruel parody of a slave “mammy,” a wet nurse and sexual partner for any white male plantation family member, does not stop there. The rabbit reasons, “I’d better come en swaje yo’ bag,’ sezee” (44). The boy asking for a translation, Remus explains, she would want him to “swaje” (“assuage”) the utter or “swaje” (“squeeze”) every drop from an organ that would otherwise swell excessively. The bovine’s swelling organ, her orgasm, her inclination not to “diskommerdate” give the boy the impression her insatiability, not his entrapment, drives the action of the scene.

By the next scene, the cow has worked herself free of the tree but pretends to be ensnared so they can tussle again. Their struggle intimates

that she feigns helplessness to lure him and that prowess compensates for stature: “‘I’m a mighty puny man,’” the rabbit admits, “‘en I might git trompled,’” so rabbit-man says to cow-creature, “‘You do de pullin’, Sis Cow, sezee, ‘en I’ll do the gruntin’,’ sezee.” (45-46). Grunts and moans, “blams” and “comes,” punctuate his moves. He finishes, laughing in his brier patch, having fooled her into thinking *he* was sick so she “tuck down de road like de dogs wuz atter her,” still wanting to rejoin and not “diskommerdate” him (46, 43). She runs, he laughs, and if the “dogs” in Remus’s simile connote lecherous, indiscriminate paramours, they hungrily scent her reputation. Mammies seemingly serve their own instincts, which men easily manipulate, dodge responsibility for and blame on women instead. While the cow looms disproportionately large in the first two images, in a third she reciprocates readers’ looks alluringly, as if she winks in Frost’s last image if not in Harris’s last words (*Figure 9*). We are implicitly asked where *we* stand within her sights, reciprocating her wink, receiving her milk, seeing ourselves as accomplices in her exploitation or asking ourselves of her lasting image, how much of her story *did* we get?



Figure 9

Two images, potentially labeled “before” and “after,” include and omit the operative appendage in “How Mr. Rabbit Lost His Fine Bushy Tale.” He struts off the margin in one picture, peacock-like. (*Figure 10*). He

pantomimes surprise at finding he *lacks* a tail in a second (*Figure 11*). An accentuated bottle off-sets the visual balance, protruding upwardly as his tail no longer can. Shading obscures what goes on beneath the water's surface, whatever agent takes his tail. Screens within the images never become transparent in betraying underwater agents as the story similarly sticks with symbolic suggestion, opaque double-entendre that Remus hints to the uncomprehending boy. Under the surfaces of the water and the illustrated tale, something persists even after the disappearance of the illustrated *tail*.

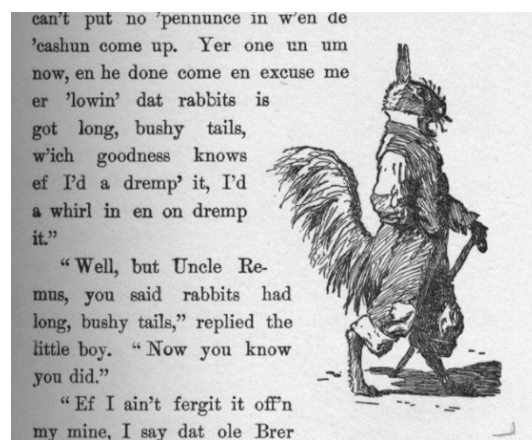


Figure 10

The tale again hints at a frisky protagonist's nature as "ole man Rabbit" proceeded along, "shakin' his long, bushy tail, en feelin' mighty biggity" (120). Remus has to repeat himself to have the boy notice the tail's incongruity and the boy still misses the rabbit's boasts. Readers understand the egotism when they find out, along Baptizing Creek, "by just dangling his tail in the water," the rabbit "can draw up a whole armful er fishes"—"minners," swarming around any lustrous tail a "biggity" beast dips in (123). Our protagonist "sot dar" and eventually "day come, en dar he wuz" (123). What happens while the hare was "dar" sails over the boy's head as first, a sexual rhythm—"He make a pull, en he feel like he comin' in two, en he

fetch nudder jerk”—and then, castration anxiety: “en lo en beholes, whar wuz his tail?” (123). In the story and the frame narration, “There was a long pause” (123). Reciters also ponder the question. The boy, too young to invest in an answer, asks, “Did it come off, Uncle Remus?” (123).

“She did dat!,” he answers, though the boy had asked about “it,” the tail, not about her or “she” (123). If Remus responds directly, then “it,” the phallic tail, came off. If he responds in a way he knows will exceed the boy’s grasp, he leaves antecedents of “she” and “dat”—whatever “she” did underwater—undefined. “She did dat,” gets reiterated, “and dat w’at make all deze yer bob-tail rabbits w’at you see hoppin’ en skaddlin’ thoo de woods” (123). Rabbits, proverbial procreators, multiply because “she did dat.” He stuck his tail so often into swarms of “minners” it came off; or she (or several minnows like “her”) “did dat” so often, implicitly sexual interactions set many rabbit generations “skaddlin’” through those woods.

This cover-story makes more sense than delivering-storks or proverbial birds and bees. The rabbit, lacking his former tail as a sign of virility also has no overt sign of present paternity. The watery screen obscures agency that may once have been part of himself. Stories covered for what went on clandestinely, whenever “she did dat,” whoever “she” was, whenever, for innocent, child listeners, dialect pronouns could go judiciously unexplained. Remus times the story to distract the child with animal creatures’ allegories, as images obscure behind screens but also latently answer the child’s natural question: where did I come from?

A story about where races come from arrives late in the sequence and conspicuously without illustrations. It is the only one of the thirty-four “legends” the artists never visualize. If as Nodelman hypothesizes about pictures and texts, “each speaks about matters on which the other is silent,”¹⁸ this story handles implicitly what the boy should not talk with others about and what does not belong in children’s illustrations. Remus speaks about origins of races, symbolizes inter-racial mythos, breaks what society sees as unspeakable taboos. Frost is “silent” on what one would suppose Harris would also let pass. Neither the author nor the artist can

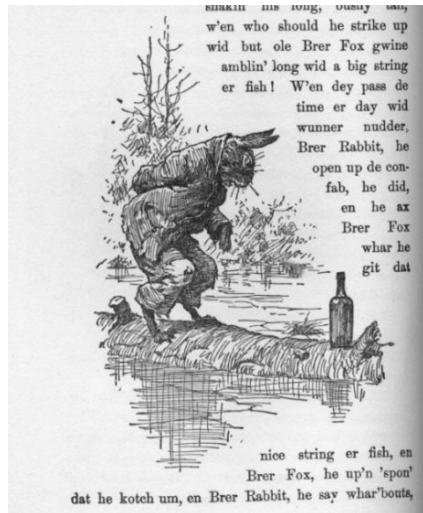


Figure 11

white-wash a story that takes white-washing as its mythic motif, leaving a lack of pictures and a visually *unaided* reader to contend with rising, equalizing tides (Figure 12).

In "Why The Negro Is Black," raconteur and listener touch hands and the boy first notices the man's palm is white, leading him to inquire whence races come. The corporeal note of contact and the whitish skin Remus now has in the game personalize the story, which Remus tells in human and not zoological terms. "Fokes dunner w'at bin yit," he opens ominously, "let 'lone w'at gwinter be." "[D]e time wuz," he recalls, unlike as we are now, "w'en we 'uz all niggers tergedder" (163). If readers react against the epithet, wonder who "we" "wuz," or ask whom he includes in these origins, the boy wants to know when this togetherness transpired. "Way back yander," a magically whitening pond appeared. Importantly, African American life before that event roughly equals current lives: folks get along "'bout ez well in dem days," as now (163). Genteel "town gals" were around, available for comparison with figures whitened by the waters. Remus knows this from old annals or "'counts," and so the "we" that originally sounded inclusive, gets

restrictive (163). Some people were white “town gals,” in a time when some of “us,” even Remus, were yet to be born.

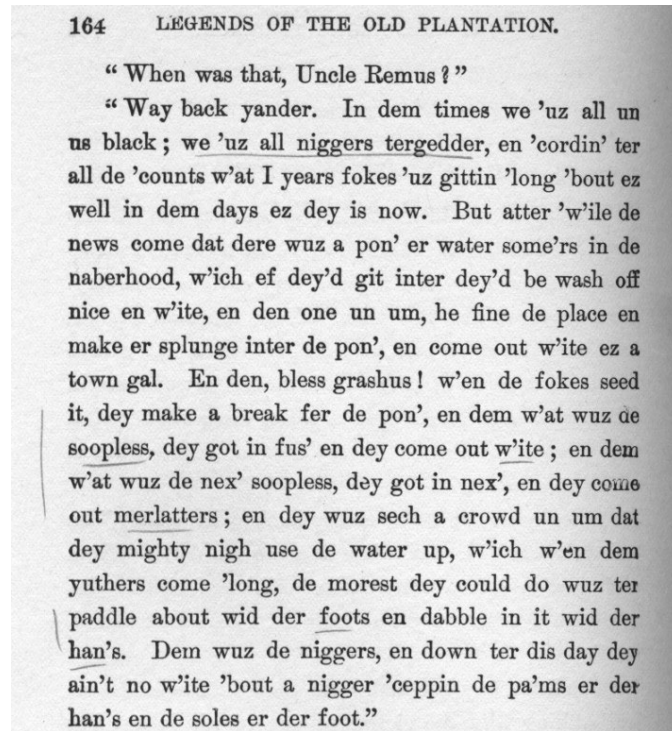


Figure 12

When word gets out, whole neighborhoods dive in the pond, splashing toward degrees of immersion in whitening waters. Subversive folk imagery awards success to the “soopless,” those who are “supplest,” most at ease in this “soup” (164). Before long, splashing crowds deplete the pond. All bathers could do “wuz ter paddle about wid der foots en dabble in it”—the diminishing water—“wid der han’s” (164). Those who were out of luck were never dyed, “‘ceppin de pa’m’s er der han’s en de soles er der foot” (164). Rare white spots bring readers back to Remus’s

white palm, a glimpse of which first sparks the story. "Harris not only violates the ultimate taboo of Old South racial codes," as Cochran argues, "but presents the violation in positive terms, as a tranquil domestic scene," and Cochran's most salient example is this "vast crowd of 'merlatters' [who] generalize this state of affairs on 'Why the Negro is Black,'" and invoke "the mythic origin story" of common, Black humanity.¹⁹ The story symbolizes plantation racial politics: third- and fourth- generation offspring could appear physiologically paler from parents' submersions in masters' bodies (of water). The story resists attributing blame: some agent in the "soup," not some politically or sexually motivated master in the home, bleaches anyone quick enough to reach it. The story subverts nativity and authenticity: whites are the ones concealing complexions, performing inauthentically, and de-facing original appearances.

Serving Remus's legitimacy, the story says he can point to the white palm of his hand and attest to its truth. Left prophetic, the story never answers the remark, "Fokes dunner w'at bin yit, let 'lone w'at gwinter be" (163). It conveys mythic origins and ominous prophecies in acceptable, child's terms. The boy asks how the story applies to Asians. He accepts as truth the racial politics and ambiguous forecasts of a sanitizing origin story. Unillustrated, "Why the Negro is Black" only appears as Harris's typewritten prose. As Rorschach inkblots, the letters, like the Tar-Baby, like Remus, retain integrity—unlike other, currently white deceivers, dishonestly *disappearing*. If we read the page against the story's symbolism, it seemingly starts out black, growing whiter as within subversive subtexts someone keeps telling lies. If bedtime reciters finish the page, find no illustrations to display and sense their own faces left literally and figuratively uncovered, they may find they "have some explaining to do."

The "Legends of the Old Plantation" span from the second story, featuring four pictures (*Figures 5-7*) and a protagonist inextricably stuck in a tarry blackness to the second-to-*last* story, with zero pictures and a narrator, retaining color as characters first rise from primordial waters (*Figure 12*). Malleable blackness informs visual, illustrative and prose,

typographical mediums. Magical blackness waxes and wanes, indelibly stains yet washes away in primordial “soup.” A notable absence—of black fathers, savior’s Arks, formerly phallic tails, female Rabbit or Brer Bull spouses, mother’s milk to give, fathers’ skin pigments to take, someone present to eavesdrop, someone else able to stay awake—alternates mediums. Pictures present tails tales must omit. Graphics are “silent” as stories symbolize. Stories secrete the “sex” the boy does not know characters are having and subvert the “sex,” the “he-,” “she-” and “it-” statuses the boy does not notice they are switching. Neither the inherited nor the constructed racial identities, the complementary visual nor the symbolic verbal medium, the racially inflected dialect nor the Standard English idiom, the teller of the tales nor his listening ingénue—*none of the above* has final authority over tales that readers accept and reject, believe and question, receive within verbal and visual vernaculars the same subversive, tarry ink informs.

Informed—past tense: modern readers now apprehend Remus’s truths in deaccessioned pictures. Reading Harris’s prose today, we miss Frost’s images. Disrupting the timing of the illustrations, we lose the visual vernaculars. We risk confusing Remus’s characters with subsequent, vaudeville or cinematic imitations, but if the Remus images suppress “adult” subtexts out of children’s imagery, our acts of deaccessioning them infantilize *us* from confronting systemic racism, sexism, and “speciesism” in the nation’s past. We erase but do not replace or innovate flawed but shared, asymmetrical but commiserative visions. We mute the dialect, having never learned from the dialectic. We deaccession the moment we are admonished, “Fokes dunner w’at bin yit,” and then told prophetically, “let ’lone w’at gwinter be” (163).

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Notes

¹ While writer Julius Lester and illustrator Jerry Pinkney have recently recreated Remus imagery, most editions rarely reprint the original illustrations, leaving later generations encountering Remus in prose-only paperbacks and unillustrated anthologies. For critical debate over paternalism, representation and illustration for Uncle Remus, see especially Hugh Keenan, "Joel Chandler Harris and the Legitimacy of the Reteller of Folktales," in *Sitting at the Feet of the Past: Retelling the North American Folktale for Children*, ed. Gary D. Schmidt and Donald R. Hettinga (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992, 81-92); Keenan, "Twisted Tales, Propaganda in Uncle Remus's The Tar-Baby," *Southern Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Winter 1984), 55-75; and Anthony L. Manna, "Br'er Rabbit Redux," in Schmidt and Hettinga, eds. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992), 93-107.

² John Strausbaugh, *Black Like You: Blackface, Whiteface, Insult, and Imitation in American Popular Culture* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 176.

³ Joel Chandler Harris, *Uncle Remus, His Songs and His Sayings* (D. Appleton-Century, 1937), cited parenthetically hereafter.

⁴ Robert Bone, *Down Home: A History of Afro-American Short Fiction from Its Beginnings to the End of the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Putnam, 1975), 30.

⁵ Robert Hemenway, "Introduction" *Uncle Remus, His Songs and His Sayings* (New York: Penguin, 1982).

⁶ Robert Cochran, "The Black Father: The Subversive Achievement of Joel Chandler Harris," *African American Review*, Vol. 38, No.1 (2004), 21- 34, 27.

⁷ Joseph H. Schwarcz, *Ways of the Illustrator, Visual Communication in Children's Literature* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1982), 14.

⁸ Perry Nodelman. *Words about Pictures: Narrative Art of Children's Picture Books* (University of Georgia Press, 1990), 192.

⁹ Schwarcz, 41, 51.

¹⁰ Nodelman, 167

¹¹ Strausbaugh, 169.

¹² Bryan Wagner, *The Tar-Baby: A Global History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), Unpaginated.

¹³ Keenan, "Twisted Tales," 57.

¹⁴ Wagner.

¹⁵ Wagner.

¹⁶ Qtd Nodelman, 2.

¹⁷ Albert Bigelow Paine, *Thomas Nast: His Period and His Pictures*. 1904 (Princeton: The Pyne Press. Facsimile edition), 300.

¹⁸ Nodelman, 167.

¹⁹ Cochran, 27.

