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A Comparative Analysis of the Trickster Figure in Africa, the Caribbean, and North America

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CHAPTER I
The Trickster

Nearly every society or ethnic group on the planet possesses a literary culture uniquely tied to the customs of that group. Additionally, each of these literary cultures has a folk tale tradition that encompasses parables, songs, praise poetry, didactic stories, and many other characteristics of oral literature. One of the more engaging sub genres of the folk tale is the trickster tale. Some of the most famous (and loveable) literary figures who seem to transcend generational gaps are trickster figures. Hermes, the Greek god of thieves, Huck Finn, and even Dobby, the loveable house elf from J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, are just a few of the trickster figures that are well known to many societies across the globe.

This thesis specifically focuses on three distinct trickster figures: Ajapa, a tortoise popular in Yoruba culture in Nigeria; Ananse, a spider whose exploits attempt to undermine the social order of the Akan ethnic group and has also been transplanted into the Caribbean due to the trans-Atlantic slave trade; and Brer Rabbit, the wily trickster of Joel Chandler Harris's famous Uncle Remus stories in the United States. While these tricksters are similar in several aspects, this thesis seeks to explore the factors that differentiate them. The factors which will primarily be explored are the reception and portrayal of each trickster within their own culture, the egregiousness of the tricksters' pranks, and the overall success rate of their wily behaviors.

UNDERSTANDING ORALITY

Ropo Sekoni, an African scholar, gives very detailed explanations of the aspects of oral literature. Oral literature combines the elements of folk tales, parables, and myths with the art of story-telling through such techniques as call-and-response. The influence of the venerated storyteller is widely recognized, but so is his or her responsibility. Sekoni writes that a narrator *must* possess the following three elements: a "good and charming voice . . . the language of narration and his ability to use his body" in order to evoke the appropriate responses from the audience (11). Story-telling is not a skill that any unpracticed individual could attempt, which is why talented story-tellers are so venerated in each of the African, Caribbean, and African-American societies. Sekoni continues to discuss that "the retention of audience attention is, however, only attainable through the performer's manipulation of the emotions of the audience" (13). The storyteller *must* have the skill of reading his or her audience members so that the story can be manipulated in such a way that the audience remains engaged.

WHO IS A TRICKSTER?

Many trickster tales are etiological—they offer explanations of why certain aspects of society are accepted and why others are rejected (e.g. Ajapa's Instant Pregnancy explaining why only women carry children). These etiological tales are another very prominent form of oral literature, according to scholar Harold Scheub, author of *Trickster and Hero* (7). The author describes how these etiological tales explain why and how humankind has progressed from the world of the cosmological and created

a tangible world with rules and regulations (Scheub 7). Trickster tales also provide an essence of relatability to audience members, allowing people to understand why certain aspects of society are considered acceptable. Sekoni writes that tricksters can be depicted either with sympathetic identification, in which audience members empathize with an underdog trickster constantly at war with his oppressive society, or unconditional rejection, which is meant to elicit feelings of hatred for the trickster who sadistically tries to overthrow the working order of the community (23). A trickster is typically male, possesses a quick wit and sharp tongue, and more often than not refuses to obey the understood laws and regulations of his society. However, in analyzing Ajapa, Ananse, and Brer Rabbit, one can see that each trickster plays a unique role within his culture, roles that will be elaborated in the following chapters.

CLASSIFYING A TRICKSTER – GENERAL DEFINITION

The first time that the word "trickster" was ever used was the eighteenth century, "not as an anthropological category, but to designate morally one who deceives or cheats" (Hynes 14). The recentness of the coinage of this very anglicized term may come as a surprise to some readers. However, one must remember that many of the societies in which trickster tales are prevalent did not write down their stories. Folk tales are just one of the key ingredients of the very strong oral traditions of the various African peoples. The Yoruba and Akan, which are both described more in depth in later chapters of this thesis, relied heavily on oral traditions, folk tales included, to preserve their culture throughout the generations. Thus, it is not very surprising that the very anglicized term of "trickster" was not used until the later 1700s.

One scholar, Roger Abrahams, writes that "Trickster is . . . the most paradoxical of all characters in Western narratives . . . for he combines the attributes of many other types that we tend to distinguish clearly. At various times he is clown, fool, jokester, initiate, culture hero, even ogre . . . He is the central character for what we consider many different types of folk narratives (Hynes 17). This thesis examines a few of these various classifications, attempting to include a very diverse focus group of stories. However, this Abrahams quote exemplifies one of the most frustrating aspects of trying to classify two or more tricksters with specific similarities, or even attempting to focus on one trickster and make his characteristics archetypal. Brer Rabbit in one story, for example, could be willing to help out one of his animal friends to no benefit of his own, and in the very next the sly rabbit might lead that same animal friend into a trap simply for pure amusement or entertainment.

One major drawback in attempting to classify the trickster figure is a belief that many modern scholars share that each trickster is so diverse and complex that it is simply impossible to group two or more together. Essayists and social scientists William Hynes and William Doty offer one possible explanation in *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticisms*. These two scholars suggest that the "trickster phenomena contain similar features in several societies (which) leads us to examine comparative social functions, psychological mechanisms, literary trace, relationships to religious systems, and ritual transformations" (Hynes 2). Folktales, and specifically trickster tales, can be used to determine much more about the societies in which they exist. The characteristics of a trickster, for example, could very easily shed light on religious ceremonies or even rituals that are considered sacred within that particular

society. For examples, an understanding of Yoruba custom of sacrificing a piece of food for a dead father's spirit is necessary whenever one attempts to understand the methods of the Ajapa tortoise. Conversely, Ananse reveals quite a bit about the intricate relationships between the Akan people and their gods and ancestors. A study of each trickster's culture of origin is paramount when trying to decipher the themes and motives of the individual tales. The uniqueness of each culture and society once again makes it difficult to create a generic definition of the trickster.

The obverse argument against classifying trickster figures as a connected group follows the ideas of pyschoanalyst Carl Jung, who claims that "there is a trickster figure that exists as a universal archetype to be encountered within each of us and in most belief systems" (Hynes 4). In this way, Jung believes that the trickster phenomenon is so similar between and among the various societies of the world that it can be considered an archetype. There are indeed a few very basic characteristics of the tricksters that draw them together as a collective group. However, these characteristics serve only to scratch the surface of each individual character's complexity. The characterization of these three tricksters can be much more developed than their simple 'tricky' qualities. In the same way that Africans, Afro-Caribbeans, and African-Americans are all similar in their physical appearance, they are distinguishable with respect to their unique cultures, traditions, history, and discourse.

Hynes and Doty continue to note that tricksters should be studied in two contexts: one a specific historical context, and the next within the context of general human cultural expression (3). This thesis focuses more on the first of these two contexts, all the while attempting to draw in the second context with each individual description. Any

connections that are drawn among our three trickster figures are social similarities, as the trickster is, understandably, a near social outcast who cannot be trusted by the rest of the characters. Each of the three tricksters obtained such social status as a result of their constant deceit rather than being born into a family that was automatically rejected by the masses. When we begin to dissect the various pranks of each trickster, we once again take notice of the uniqueness of each character. Not only do they enjoy various levels of success, they hold a particularly noteworthy position of power *after* each prank.

One of the more striking similarities between and among these three trickster figures (and most others that I happened upon in my research) is the fact that they are indeed male. While it should be noted that gender is a social construction, and it is not necessarily impossible for a female to be a trickster figure, I find it interesting that these tricksters are all males. Gender occasionally plays a vital role in the outcome of these stories as well (e.g. "Ajapa's Instant Pregnancy"). The three tricksters analyzed in this thesis are members of patriarchal societies, which gives reasoning for their male genders. Lewis Hyde, author of *Trickster Makes this World: Mischief, Myth, and Art*, remarks that "all standard tricksters are male . . . even in a matriarchal setting" (335). The trickster may not always be a venerable character, but one cannot deny that he typically is placed in a position of *power* almost always by his own actions or intellect. The gender of the trickster, in this way, can potentially reveal something else about the culture in which he or she thrives. There are only a handful of cases, Hyde continues, in which the trickster may be hermaphroditic (a word which comes from a combination of Hermes and Aphrodite) (336). However, these instances are extremely rare and do not take any focus away from the majority of the remaining tricksters who are wholly male.

THE PROBLEM OF THE TRICKSTER FIGURE

A common misconception for trickster figures is that any character who is sneaky or furtive, oftentimes a thief, can be classified as a trickster. Hynes and Doty write that a trickster is not merely someone who is tricksterish. Rather, there are certain characteristics of trickster figures that define, at least on the surface, what it means to be a trickster. For instance, an untrustworthy character, a sense of immortality, and their male gender unite each trickster in their common similarities. The authors give the example of the clown figures in the "shamanistic healing ceremonies of Sri Lanka . . . who performs in tricksterish manners," but is not explicitly a trickster figure (Hynes 24). It is not enough to act like a trickster by relying on deception or quick wit. Rather, trickster figures perform a much deeper and necessary role in literature. Trickster figures represent "the mythic hero who stands at the nexus of mortality and immortality, structure and antistructure, the individual and society" (24). In this way, the trickster serves as the glue that holds these societies together. Without him there would be chaos. One need only think of Ajapa to realize the validity of this statement. Ajapa, in his sneaky ways, has a reputation that precedes him everywhere he travels, a reputation that he never tries to combat. In this way, he is a well-known deviant, and all of his contemporaries can focus on him as a potential for wrongdoing. Ajapa gives these characters a common enemy—one they *know* could potentially deceive them. Without Ajapa, distrust between and among the characters would be rampant, and the society would not be able to function.

As mentioned before, this thesis will draw a few parallels between and among Ajapa, Ananse, and Brer Rabbit, while focusing on the unique classifications within and contributions to their individual cultures. The following chapters will give a brief

overview of each trickster figure, followed by explications of a handful of diverse stories. The final chapter of this thesis will provide explanations of how the trickster figure is used in more current times and contemporary literatures.

CHAPTER II
Ajapa: The Tortoise in Yoruba Tradition

As discussed in the previous chapter, the trickster figure spans a multiplicity of literatures and cultures all across the globe and throughout history. Nearly every culture, be it Chinese, Nordic Vikings, Native American, Indo-European, AfricanAmerican, or any number of the differing African ethnic groups, has its own unique trickster figure. Trickster tales usually include animal characters who have been anthropomorphized in their habits, attitudes, and speech. Popular trickster figures are the spider, the mouse, the hare and, in the case of the Yoruba culture, the tortoise. One can quickly recognize that these trickster figures are typically smaller animals who would immediately be at a distinct disadvantage were they to find themselves threatened by another animal character. As a result, these tricksters must oftentimes rely on their sharp wit and quick tongue to keep them out of trouble and safe from harm.

The Yoruba ethnic group in Nigeria has its own unique history, customs, and traditions. Scholar Stephen Belcher, author of *African Myths of Origin*, describes that the Yoruba "compose one of the largest ethnolinguistic groups of Africa in terms of speakers," and they have extended well beyond the boundaries of Africa (308). Belcher then discusses Yoruba religious life as he mentions that the people "have numerous deities, or 'orisha', of whom Olorun is now considered the principle" (309). Olorun is the 'sky god', a position consistent with many other cultures' deities (like Nyame in the Akan tradition, which will be described in detail in the next chapter). There is also a

trickster god named Esu, another very important figure with regard to our Nigerian animal trickster. Ajapa actually never engages the divine trickster, as "a major theme in the etiological tale of Ajapa's connection with Esu is one of apprenticeship and the parting of ways between the two figures" (Sekoni 6). Thus, Ajapa can be treated as a wholly undeified character in each of his tales, a primary difference from Ananse, who seems to toe the line between mortal and divine.

The Yoruba are a very diverse ethnic group, as Belcher states that Yoruba culture was "never unitary: while united to some extent by language and customs, people were divided by geography, political systems, and religious practices" (308). Toyin Falola and Akanmu Adebayo, African scholars and authors of *Culture, Politics, and Money Among the Yoruba*, posit that Yoruba people "are neither ethnically nor politically homogenous . . . rather, they ha(ve) been, from time immemorial, organized into many states or kingdoms" (6). Indeed, the African Diaspora, including the Yoruba, extends far beyond the continent of Africa and into the Caribbean and the Americas. One fact is certain, however—the Yoruba were linked by a strong sense of nationalism. According to Ato Quayson, a Ghanaian scholar and author of *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing*, "the fashioning of what constitutes Yoruba culture can also be traced in the hundred years of vigorous and successful Yoruba cultural nationalism" and, additionally, the Yoruba are linked by their traditions and their stories (11).

Many African societies traditionally preserved their culture and their history through the utilization of oral traditions. Quayson mentions that the "processes of verbal recall, either in the form of paraphrasing, summarizing, rephrasing or oral commentary are a valued part of any literate culture" (14). The usage of fables, parables, and folktales

was both an entertaining and a memorable method for preserving the heritage of an ethnic group. Age was typically venerated in the various African societies and, not surprisingly, it was associated with wisdom. The elder storyteller held a position of honor, no matter which society one chooses to analyze. To analyze the Yoruba trickster folktales specifically, I will discuss the stories and the introduction to Oyekan Owomoyela's *Yoruba Trickster Tales*, as well as Ropo Sekoni's *Sociosemiotic Study of Yoruba Trickster Tales*. Owomoyela was born in Osogbo, Nigeria, and consistently references the stories that he remembers from his early childhood, while Sekoni analyzes the functions of the trickster tale discourse within the Yoruba culture.

Storytelling itself is an art form, often accompanied by performances "typically taking place after the last meal of the day" (Owomoyela ix). As described by Owomoyela, "nighttime outdoor activities are rare and after-dark public entertainment occurs only on special occasions" (ix). As a result, even though multiple villagers would sometimes take part in a storytelling performance during one of the village's traditional festivals (e.g. The Festival of the New Yam as described in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*), it is the responsibility of each household to find a way to pass the time on a typical evening. The beauty of these folktales, the trickster tale subgenre in particular, is the fact that each individual household can pick and choose which fables and stories to pass to the children. Sekoni mentions that "unlike myths or rituals, performed principally by official historians, . . . trickster tales are performed in the privacy of homes by grandmothers, elderly aunts, mothers, and sometimes grandfathers" (1). It is very important to note that Sekoni mentions primarily women as the keepers of these tales (though it is *not* a job reserved entirely for women), as they are the ones who are likely to

be in the house during the day, and each individual person has the autonomy to choose which stories to tell. There are literally hundreds of tales from which to choose solely with respect to the Ajapa. Other tricksters have stories with their own specific purposes, many of which are also didactic in nature. Many Ajapa stories are etiological, as they end with a very short aphorism that is meant to teach readers a valuable lesson. Additionally, Ajapa possesses many characteristics and qualities, some redeeming, most others weaknesses, of a human being.

Since the stories were passed down orally and were seldom written down, they have constantly evolved. In all likelihood, an elder would attempt to tell children the same stories that he or she was told in his or her childhood, stories he or she may not have heard in decades. However, the open-endedness of the oral tradition allows for each new telling to be unique to the storyteller. Given the sheer number of stories and the breadth of situations in which these anthropomorphized animals may find themselves, one can only assume that not only names of characters but also major plot points might be altered, or even lost, as a new generation attempts to adopt a particular folktale. Additionally, many stories are understandably very similar in context. There are definitely a finite number of possible situations in which our beloved trickster figure may find himself before the stories begin to become repetitive. Regardless, the alteration of even the slightest detail reinforces the fact that these oral traditions are constantly evolving, and the outcome of the story is completely at the disposal of each individual autonomous storyteller. In this way, one can see that each trickster has a unique place within his culture and society, regardless of the parallels and similarities that he shares with other cultures' tricksters. The multiplicity of character traits of Ajapa and the

situations in which he entangles himself make the tortoise a vastly different trickster than Ananse and Brer Rabbit, the other two trickster that will be analyzed in this thesis.

INTRODUCING AJAPA

For the African portion of this thesis, I have chosen to focus entirely on the aforementioned Ajapa, the tortoise trickster figure in the Yoruba culture from Nigeria. Ropo Sekoni claims that "on the average, three of every five fictive narratives told in Yoruba homes or gatherings are trickster tales", the most popular of which is Ajapa (1). The tortoise is an ideal candidate for being a trickster as he "impresses with (his) ageless look, (his) deliberate gait (suggesting the sagacity and dignity of a venerable elder), and portable armor" (Owomoyela ix-x). Ajapa is important not only for his entertainment appeal, but also for his breadth of influence in the Yoruba culture. According to Owomoyela, Ajapa reigns as trickster not only among the Yoruba of West Africa, most of whom are in Western Nigeria and the neighboring republic of Benin, but also among the dispersed Yoruba descendants in the New World, especially in Brazil and Cuba" (x). It is very important to note that this tortoise trickster figure transcends these geographic separations and reinforces the connectedness of the Yoruba people. The character of Ajapa is described with the epithet "The Master of Sundry Wiles", demonstrating that Ajapa is not only very wily and creative, but he is also very dynamic and multi-layered. While he is similar to both Ananse and Brer Rabbit in that they are all, for lack of a better term, 'trickish', Ajapa maintains a unique position within the Yoruba culture that affirms the fact that each society, whether Yoruba, Akan, or African-American, is inherently

different. While geographic separation plays a role in the differences, the multifaceted traditions and cultures make each ethnic group unique, regardless of physical similarities.

TALES OF NEGATION VS TALES OF AFFIRMATION

Ropo Sekoni divides trickster tales into two categories: tales of negation and tales of affirmation. Tales of negation involve the trickster as a "confronter, disrupter, and reorganizer of the social order" and suggest "an ever-present need for liberation and emancipation in the face of a social system of domination and inhibition" (Sekoni 30). In these stories, Ajapa, as the quintessential folk hero, attempts to undermine the social structure of his anthropomorphized culture, which is depicted as overbearing and oppressive. Most of these stories are political in context, as the subversive Ajapa attempts to undermine the traditional authority, the authority of animals that are much bigger and stronger than he. Conversely, tales of affirmation vilify Ajapa as a rascally and tricky character who performs his deeds solely for his own entertainment. Sekoni describes that "tales of affirmation are usually concerned with such subjects as honesty, hard work, modesty, pride, greed, sincerity, and other factors of interpersonal relations" (54). Tales of affirmation are further divided into tales of uncritical affirmation and tales of critical affirmation. The former category presents a trickster who is "overtly vilified," often using his trickiness to subjugate characters smaller than he (like a Snail or Baby Elephant) (57). The latter category is more of a middle ground between tales of negation and tales of uncritical affirmation. Tales of critical affirmation suggest that societal norms *can* be manipulated "under special circumstances" (68). Oftentimes, Ajapa's punishment in these tales of critical affirmation will be lessened from the typical death penalty which he

faces. For the purposes of this thesis, each tale discussed hereafter is a tale of affirmation, some uncritical, others critical, with the didactic relevance of each story vilifying Ajapa for his greed.

AJAPA'S WITTY WAYS

First and foremost, Ajapa is obviously a very sly character. Even though he is physically smaller and weaker than many of the animals in Yoruba folktales, especially the much larger jungle cats and baboons with which he consistently tussles, Ajapa relies on his furtive wit and sly actions to gain dominance over his animal companions. There is one particular story not for the faint of heart that involves Ajapa cunningly getting the better of both Inaki the Baboon and Ekun the Leopard.

The story begins by describing how Ajapa and Inaki are actually close friends with each other, a very surprising occurrence considering Inaki "enjoyed the reputation of being industrious, honest, and completely dependable" (Omowoyela 182). In this way, Ajapa is clearly a foil for Inaki. Ajapa greets his friend with the phrase "the spirits of our fathers will keep opportunistic troublemakers from our paths" (183). Rather than offer an Amen as a response, Inaki resorts to arguing. It is at this time that a reader should realize that Ajapa's ploy is entirely for his own amusement. Inaki has done nothing to wrong our trickster, but that fact does nothing to hamper Ajapa's eagerness for a prank. Ajapa leaves the argument at a point where Inaki could be considered the victor and goes home to concoct, literally and figuratively, the rest of his scheme. To elaborate, Ajapa cooks up a delicious morsel filled with peppers, tomatoes, and honey, wraps it in a broad leaf, and delivers it to another character, Ekun the Leopard. The next few paragraphs of the story

demonstrate Ajapa's very swift tongue and ability to deceive, as he feigns offense that his visit could arouse suspicion in the great jungle cat. Ekun reminds the reader that Ajapa is "never happier than when (he) makes others seem like imbeciles," illustrating once again that Ajapa's heinous actions are driven by nothing more than his own amusement (Owomoyela 186).

When Ekun smells the honey in Ajapa's gift, he understandably becomes drawn to the appealing present. To ensure that an offended Ajapa does not leave without bestowing the tantalizing delicacy upon him, Ekun invites the tortoise to make himself comfortable in his home. This simple gesture illustrates just how powerful Ajapa is as a trickster figure. Where most smaller animals would be terrified to not only venture into the home of a sleeping leopard but also to rouse him from this sleep, Ajapa knows that he is smart enough to avoid any danger. Eventually, Ekun is *allowed* to eat Ajapa's gift. The fact that Ajapa will allow this action to occur shows once again that he is in total control of the situation even though he is much smaller and weaker than the leopard. Moreover, this action is very important because of the setting of this part of the story. Ajapa is an interloper in Ekun's home, but he still manages to gain the position of power within the situation from the very beginning.

But Ajapa's prank is far from over at this point. He then convinces Ekun that the delicious morsel he had just consumed was actually the waste of Inaki. Ajapa then gives Ekun specific instructions on how to extract this waste from Inaki who, upon being petitioned for it, would undoubtedly feign ignorance as a mode of defense. Ekun is instructed to strike Inaki on the stomach via the Goldilocks method (not too hard, not too softly) in order to make the sweet-tasting honey-laden delicacy appear. One can imagine

the progression of the story as Ekun completes this task and, obviously, is disappointed and disgusted at the result. The importance of the conclusion of this story, however, is the fact that Ekun thought that he did not strike Inaki in the correct way and, therefore, blamed himself for the embarrassment. Ajapa then approaches his baboon friend and allows him to tell the story of what had taken place and, upon the completion of the story, Ajapa responds with his familiar phrase: "the spirits of our fathers will keep opportunistic troublemakers from your path" (Owomoyela 190). This time Inaki responds with copious Amens, which offers the possibility that Ajapa's prank is fueled by a bit of vindictiveness in addition to his own amusement.

AJAPA'S MISERLINESS AND REPUTATION

While tricksters are sometimes lovable characters like Brer Rabbit, we are reminded that they are terrible role models in a very good portion of their stories. Ajapa himself has a reputation among the other characters in his stories, even and especially among the denizens of other towns and villages. Ajapa has several character flaws of his own, chief among them being incredible laziness and insatiable greed, especially for food. In fact, Ajapa is so lazy that he will not work even to make a living and, in times of both scarcity and plenty, he relies on trickery and "the reluctant generosity of some friend or neighbor to obtain food" (Owomoyela xi). Ajapa's tightfisted greed seemingly knows no bounds as he constantly refuses to share *any*thing that falls into his hands. Ajapa's miserliness is the predominant characteristic that provides the conflict for most of his tales. One story in particular illustrates this concept very well.

The story of Ajapa and the Dawn Bird begins with Ajapa following a beautiful young woman back to her town. Because a town's reputation depends quite a bit on its treatment of strangers, Ajapa is allowed to stay the night, even though his own reputation as a despicable trickster precedes him. Ajapa is allowed a room in the home of the Dawn Bird who, Ajapa is warned, greets the night at regular intervals with his song. The only rule Ajapa must follow is that nobody is allowed to respond when the Dawn Bird calls to the night. A reader would not be surprised, therefore, to hear that Ajapa does not follow this simple rule. The Dawn Bird tells Ajapa that he must pay with his life and moves to kill the tortoise, but Ajapa's quick tongue once again saves him. Ajapa asks that they pick a different setting in which to fight so that they do not rouse the rest of the inhabitants of the household, to which the Dawn Bird agrees. Since the new setting is the swamps on the outskirts of town, Ajapa manages to overpower his much larger and stronger adversary when the Dawn Bird's head gets stuck in the mud. Ajapa then roasts and eats his dead opponent and returns to the town. Obviously, Ajapa is the prime suspect in the murder of the Dawn Bird since he had just arrived at the town the previous night. The epigram, the presence of which is another key characteristic of oral traditions, "a witch announces its presence and a child dies mysteriously the next day; what more evidence does one need to prove that the death is the doing of the witch?" explains Ajapa's accusation of the heinous deed (Owomoyela 64). Ajapa defends himself by pointing out that he is much too small and weak to overcome the large Dawn Bird, which is enough to allow for other suspects to be apprehended. Each suspect is then required to drink a full cup of boiling oil, and innocence will be marked by survival. Ajapa again cunningly fills his cup and proceeds to show it to each individual person in the common area until it

feels cool enough to drink. Since Ajapa clearly survives, the town immediately searches for a way to placate their guest, because, once again, the reputation of a town is largely indicative of how it treats a stranger. The townspeople make a large pot of Ajapa's favorite meal, ebe, or yam pottage, and send him on his way.

Ajapa, as one can expect, does not wait to get home to eat his parting gift. Instead, he stops about half way home and devours the yam pottage. However, he does set aside a piece for his dead father's spirit, who aided him in his victory over the Dawn Bird, a piece for his dead mother's spirit, and a piece for the spirit of the rock on which he was allowed to sit and find a bit of respite on his long journey home. Our trickster then tries to take a nap, but the three remaining portions of ebe keep his eyes open. The story mentions that Ajapa's belly was entirely full, but he still manages to convince himself that the three spirits to which he paid homage would not have accompanied him had he been defeated by the Dawn Bird. Thus, Ajapa's intense greed drives him to devour the last three morsels and fill his belly beyond capacity. Finally, the tortoise is able to fall asleep, but upon his awakening, he finds that he is stuck to the rock on which he had stopped to rest. Ajapa then calls out to the spirits of his dead father and mother for help and, when all the other animals in the forest come to see what has happened, Ajapa decides it is more important to save face and feign ignorance as to the origination of the cries. Eventually, the animals see through this plot and our familiar leopard, Ekun, assists Ajapa in removing himself from the rock amidst laughter and derision from all the other animals, obviously hurting Ajapa's reputation. While Brer Rabbit never fails and Ananse almost always fails, Ajapa follows a *via media* with his success rate. This statistic actually makes Ajapa stories more fun to hear, as audience members should have no idea

whether or not the tortoise will succeed or fail. In this particular story with the Dawn Bird, the didactic effect is obvious: greed is unwarranted. Yes, Ajapa's appetite is always insatiable and drives the majority of his dastardly deeds, but greed obviously leads to failure, or in this case, humiliation.

Another important facet of trickster stories, or folktales in general, is the etiological explanation at the end of the story. For example, though Ajapa is free to run home, a piece of his skin was left stuck to the rock, a detail that explains why Ajapa's shell is so rough. Many folktales will have the final sentence elaborate on why something is the way it is or how something receives its name. Oftentimes, the title of the story itself will be "How X Became Y" or "How Z got its name", alluding once again to the fact that these stories were shared orally long before they were written down. Etiological tales are common in almost every culture and can be traced back to Greco-Roman times. When one considers the fact that children are the primary audience of these tales, the didactic lessons and etiological explanations are expected at the culmination of each story.

INABILITY TO QUIT

Ajapa's vanity also keeps him from quitting, even when he may be fighting a losing battle. Ajapa and the Playful Children is a prime example of such a case. The story involves three youthful boys boasting about feats that they do not necessarily know if they can accomplish, a taboo in their town which, if proven inaccurate, is punishable by beheading. Ajapa overhears these playful boasts and immediately runs to tell the chief, or oba, of the town of the boys' grievous faults. Ajapa, who obviously seeks the death of these boys for nothing other than his mere amusement, then has many opportunities to

escape the town and be on his way. However, he stays and watches each boy thrice attempt his challenge, for on the third and final attempt each boy succeeds in conquering his superhuman feat. However, Ajapa waits around to see the results of the festivities. Rather than leaving at the first opportunity before the boys attempt their challenges *or* even cutting his losses and fleeing when each boy succeeds, Ajapa decides to remain in the town and witness the resulting celebration of the new heroes. The oba then, understandably, sentences Ajapa to death for being solely motivated by the potential deaths of the boys, illustrating that Ajapa's inability to quit while he was ahead led once again to his ultimate demise. Didactically speaking, the author clearly derides Ajapa for not only being motivated by greed, but also for being unwilling to give up a lost cause. Ajapa could have cut his losses and escaped at any point throughout the story, but his vanity refused to allow him to do so. Thus, the moral of the story is the very simple and oft repeated aphorism: "quit while you are ahead".

AJAPA'S IMMORTALITY

One of the more notable characteristics of the trickster figure in the Yoruba literary culture is that of Ajapa's immortality. Regardless of the outcome of each individual story, in several of which Ajapa does indeed die, our beloved trickster figure is always resurrected for the next story in order to resume his wily and sneaky ways. The didactic function of resurrecting the trickster after each foiled deed illustrates that life is full of second chances and that it is always possible to recover from a mistake. While our trickster may make mistakes like a human, he is resurrected to fight another day in the very next tale. One of the greatest examples of such a death is evident in Ajapa's Instant

Pregnancy. This is a very short story in comparison to most other Ajapa tales, and it is one that once again demonstrates Ajapa's greatest weakness—his insatiable appetite. Ajapa's paramour, Yannibo, who is only seldomly mentioned in a few stories, and very briefly at that, are unable to bear a child together despite the tortoise's greatest efforts. Ultimately, he seeks the council of a notorious medicine man called the babalawo. The babalawo is moved by Ajapa's pleas for a child, so he concocts a stew and bestows multiple warnings upon our beloved trickster that the formula will impregnate *anyone* who eats it. Ajapa's appetite proves unquenchable on the journey home and, when coupled with his vain thinking that nobody could outsmart him, he tastes the stew. Naturally, Ajapa becomes pregnant and, realizing that his demise is very near, he "walked despondently into the bush to await the death that was inevitable" (Owomoyela 79). Ajapa was eventually overcome with pain and died in the bushes alone and friendless, etiologically revealing why only women can have children. However, he is resurrected in the very next story ready to dominate his fellow animal companions. Didactically speaking, this tale reveals not only that insatiable greed will lead to one's demise, but also that it is impossible to argue with divinities. The babalawo, essentially a deified character, could represent the Yoruba customs and traditions which our trickster attempts to overthrow in this story.

AJAPA AS A MUSICIAN

One of the final qualities that sets Ajapa apart from the other trickster figures of the world is his musicianship. *The Yoruba Diaspora in the Atlantic World,* a work by Toyin Falola and Matt Childs, suggests that "the role of music in shaping diasporic

identities and culture has long been recognized by scholars" (11). The Yoruba are no exception to this rule. Ajapa is a gifted singer, a talent which aids him in his ignominious deeds. Owomoyela writes that "in many tales his scheme is carried by his singing, which casts a powerful spell on individuals and whole communities, even on other-worldly beings, so that they forget themselves and their present purpose, abandoning themselves to the rhythm of his songs" (Owomoyela xiii). One could pick a story at random from the entire book and likely find a song that Ajapa attempts to use to his advantage. In the aforementioned story of the Dawn Bird, for example, Ajapa uses his own song to compete with the song of his adversary and draw him out to a fight. However, Ajapa's singing does not always yield positive results for our trickster. For example, in the story of his instant pregnancy, Ajapa tries to sing an excuse to the medicine man:

> *Babalawo, please heed my plea and relieve me.*
> *The medicine you gave me a short while back,*
> *Warning me to keep my hands off my mouth,*
> *Warning me I must not trip—*
> *Well, a wayward root tripped me,*
> *I slipped, I fell,*
> *My hands touched the earth and touched my mouth.*
> *I looked at my stomach, it looked distended.*
> *Babalawo, please heed my plea and relieve me!* (Owomoyela 79).

The babalawo, who is essentially a deified character, obviously sees through this ploy and leaves Ajapa to his painful demise. Thus, it is clear once again that our beloved trickster figure, much like a human, is unfortunately not infallible.

Ajapa is a very solid middle ground for one to follow when comparing him with Ananse and Brer Rabbit. Like the other two, Ajapa is very tricky, but he is neither as good-natured as Brer Rabbit nor as vicious as Ananse. Ajapa perfectly fulfills the recognizable trickster characteristics while still managing to remain unique to his culture.

The most prominent aspect that separates Ajapa from the others is his insatiable appetite, which is understandable when one considers how important crop rotations are to the Yoruba in Africa. Once again, think of the Festival of the New Yam in *Things Fall Apart*.

CHAPTER III
Ananse: The Spider in Akan and Caribbean Traditions

One of the more complex trickster figures can be found at the heart of the Akan ethnic group now numbering roughly two million people in present-day Ghana, according to Christopher Vescey, author of the article "The Exception Who Proves the Rules: Ananse the Akan Trickster" (107). The Akan belong to the Ashanti kingdom, which developed to regulate European trade of ivory, kola nuts, and many other items indigenous to western Africa (Belcher 326). However, most people who have heard of the Ananse know him as a Jamaican (or otherwise Caribbean) character. The African Diaspora is quite strong, so this confusion of the origin of the trickster is not surprising. This trickster is known as Ananse (AKA Anansi/Anancy)[1], widely considered the second most prominent trickster figure in western Africa, second of course to Ajapa (Owomoyela xi). Ananse has popped up all over the world, but this chapter is devoted to what the spider figure means to the denizens of the Caribbean, specifically of the island of Jamaica.

As with many aspects of African culture, Anancy finds himself ingrained within the Caribbean culture of Jamaica through the slave trade. Scholar Emily Marshall, author of *Anansi's Journey: A Story of Jamaican Cultural Resistance*, states that "the first enforced migration of slaves to Jamaica . . . were mainly of made up of Africans of Akan-Asante origin" (42). The African Diaspora, again, stretches far beyond the borders of the

[1] The variation of the spelling is attributed to the spider's movement from one culture in Africa to a new culture in Jamaica

continent, and Anancy/Anansi is very prevalent in the Jamaican literary culture. Anancy/Anansi represents resistance in Jamaica. According to scholar Babacar M'Baye, author of *The Trickster Comes West: Pan-African Influence in Early Black Diasporan Narratives*, this resistance is "apparent in Anancy's resistance tactics, language, worldviews, and search for an African community that mirrors (the) fight against racism in (the Caribbean)" (179). Essentially, Ananse refuses to succumb to the general rules of society because he could represent the oppressed Africans who were forcibly displaced in Jamaica and around the rest of the Caribbean. However, the differences in Jamaican Anancy/Anansi and Akan Ananse illustrate that these individuals who are now located in a new setting are trying to start again, recreating a new culture and tradition unique to them. We will analyze the differences between Akan Ananse and Jamaican Anancy/Anansi later in this chapter.

When one considers the characteristics of a trickster figure mentioned in Chapter I, one can easily discern why a spider would be a perfect candidate for such a role in a folktale. Spiders are usually small and can remain undetected if they so choose. Spiders have eight legs, allowing them to escape danger quickly or, should they lose one limb, recover quickly enough to escape the danger. Additionally, spiders are clearly very crafty. The fact that they have the ability to spin a web each and every night that serves not only as shelter but as a means to gather food is a gift that no other animal shares in this type of folklore.

Before focusing on specific tales of Ananse's escapades, I shall first describe exactly what Ananse means to the Akan people in a greater, more cultural spectrum. The professional story teller will begin the tale with the disclaimer that the story is not true,

which gives the audience the chance simply to be entertained and to make their own assessments of Ananse's behavior, rather than expend time and energy relating Ananse's deeds to situations in their own lives.

INTRODUCTION OF THE AKAN PEOPLE

The Akan people believe in a supreme being who answers to several names, chief among those being "Nyame" (Vescey 108). We see Nyame's characteristics parallel many other societies that believe in an overarching supreme being, as Nyame acts as sky god, creator, and master of life and death. The Akan people worship Nyame via household shrines, a practice not uncommon in African societies. Offerings are typically placed on these shrines for Nyame, and there are also said to be "specialists within the compounds of chiefs who perform the cult for a village or state" (109).

Underneath Nyame, there are many nature spirits and smaller divinities or demigods known as abosom, all of whom possess certain powers for particular circumstances. For example, one abosom may have the ability to make it rain while another may be able to ensure a bountiful harvest. Each abosom has its own priesthood and its own shrine through which Akan individuals may plead or communicate. Scholars have divided the abosom into four distinct categories: ethnic-wide (the abosom responsible for all Akan people), town, family, and personal (109). The levels of responsibility are obvious for the latter three categories.

The next level below the abosom is the ancestor spirit, and it is very clear to scholars that the Akan are ancestor-worshipers. The rituals involved in pleasing the Akan ancestors are some of the more ostentatious and visible of all the rituals, as we have more

commentary on these rituals than others. Ancestors actually own all of the Akan land, as scholars have noted that "the living can pass on to their children," but the ancestors are the ones who own and sustain it (110). There are four specific ceremonies in which the Akan people communicate with their ancestors:

> **The Adae:** ceremony at which ancestors are recalled and honored, and at which the community aspect of the entire village is emphasized.
>
> **The Baya:** ceremony at which specific thanks for bountiful rice crops and pleas for future bountiful rice crops are made.
>
> **The Afahye:** ceremony where people make offerings of the first of crops from the new season.
>
> **The Odwera:** a cleansing ceremony that is, once again, for the entire Akan society. (Vescey 110)

The Akan are clearly a very spiritual group, and their Ananse tales certainly reflect that spirituality. The tales I discovered demonstrate many elements of the supernatural, much like our Ajapa and Brer Rabbit tales.

ANANSE AND NYAME

What makes Ananse so special to the Akan people? First and foremost, Ananse is very closely linked to Nyame, who is often referred to as "Ananse Kokuroko, or the 'Great Spider'" (Vescey 112). There is actually an ancient Ashanti myth that suggests that Ananse was the supreme being who fashioned man, but Nyame is the supreme being who was charged with the task of giving man life (112). Christopher Vescey makes a great argument that "Ananse and Nyame are related by blood, action, and characteristics,

yet they are definitely two separate entities. Nyame is the object of veneration, Ananse is not; Nyame's actions inspire ritual, Ananse's do not. Nyame is considered the provider for the nations; Ananse is not" (112). However, what I want to focus on is the fact that Ananse is not a character to be venerated. Just like the other tricksters mentioned in this thesis, Ananse walks a fine line between morality and looking out for his own wellbeing, and morality will almost always take a backseat to the latter.

Ananse is one of the greedier tricksters I have encountered in my research. While Ajapa may be excessively greedy with his food and Brer Rabbit likes to pull a few pranks, Ananse is incessantly greedy for the purpose of boosting his own image when it comes to his relationship with Nyame. There is a popular folktale in which Ananse wants to claim all stories that belong to Nyame as his own. In short, he wants the stories to be about him instead of Nyame. Thus, he makes an agreement with the supreme being in which he offers to trade a number of wild animals, better understood to be something like nature spirits, for the rights to these stories. Ananse captures a number of wild animals using his web-making skills, including a leopard, a python, and a number of other very large, strong, and potentially threatening animals. As a result, all stories in the Akan folktale tradition are called 'Anansesem' instead of Nyame's stories, as they feature the escapades of the trickster (Belcher 107).

ANANSE AS MASTER OF DEATH

It is very clear that Ananse has the desire to achieve dominance over death and, tangentially, become the master of all life. Nyame, as the supreme being, is said to be the master of life and death, which means that Ananse's desires once again try to usurp

Nyame. Ananse often takes death into his own hands, using trickery and deceit to replace his own potential demise with that of another animal or character, actions which defiantly mock the powers and influence of Nyame. In one particular story, Ananse tells all of his family members to bury him on his farm with all of his eating and cooking utensils, hoping to feign his own death. He then instructs his family not to visit his gravesite for a very long time (during which time he survives by eating all of the crops as they ripen). The primary motive for Ananse's actions is that he simply wants to retire to his farm, which would seemingly be an easy task. However, the fact that it is an Ananse tale proves that some kind of deceit or trickery *must* be employed, so our trickster fakes his own death. (Belcher 114). However, Ananse's wife notices that all of the crops are disappearing, so she suspects thieves. She then creates a life-size statue out of sticky gum and leaves it in the garden where Ananse subsequently finds it. Naturally, Ananse is infuriated that a stranger is interloping in his garden and attempts to attack it, thereby becoming stuck in a perfectly parallel story to the "tar baby" episode of Brer Rabbit. Ananse's family finds him in the morning and, entirely ashamed, our trickster again resorts to deceit as he claims that he has been sent back from the land of the dead because the abosom declared him not ready for death. Of course, The family believes him and the trickster returns to his normal life (Jones 1).

There is another story that is particularly noteworthy for Ananse because of its classical parallels. In this tale, Ananse travels to the land of the dead, a place from which no living person may return. Many classical heroes have visited the metaphorical underworld and even had conversations with Hades, the Greek god of death. Hercules, Odysseus, Aeneas, and Orpheus all were said to brave the dangers of entering the

underworld, and they all escaped unharmed. This feat of conquering or mastering death, or at least not following the traditional rules of death, is one of the defining characteristics of being an *epic hero*. However, all of these individuals had a very strong motive for entering the underworld. Orpheus was attempting to retrieve the soul of the love of his life. Aeneas was searching for information that was vital to his founding the city of Rome. However, Ananse does not appear to have *any* sort of heroic or admirable motives for entering the land of the dead. In fact, our trickster manages to trick Death into giving him a golden broom and gold sandals with which he subsequently escapes. (Vescey 114). In this way, Ananse has proven to be a much more devious trickster than either Ajapa or Brer Rabbit. However, Ananse is not *always* a master over death. Another story, entitled "Ananse and Brother Dead," involves Ananse trying to steal meat from Death personified while the latter is in the process of barbequing. Ananse approaches Death on three separate days, all the while claiming that he will take (rather than asking nicely) the meat from Death. Eventually, Ananse is struck down and lies in the dirt, an explanation for why spiders are now forced to crawl on the ground (Doran 1).

While Ajapa and Brer Rabbit often appear to happen upon an opportunity for trickery, Ananse actively seems to seek out new chances for deceit, all because of his giant ego. In this way, it is actually a popular myth that Ananse is responsible for bringing Death into contact with humans. Formerly, Death only destroyed and ravaged animals, but Ananse's consistent disrespect led the spirit to find humans as well. In this vein, it is clear that Ananse is much more of a true *trickster* in the Akan society than Ajapa is to the Yoruba or Brer Rabbit is to the African American. The fact that the Akan blame Ananse for Death's anger towards humans suggests a possible boogie-man role

that Ananse might play in the Akan society. While the other two tricksters are primarily for entertainment, as well as the chance to impart life lessons, Ananse seems to be that ultimate trickster figure that Akan children were taught never to emulate, venerate, or imitate.

ANANSE AND THE ABOSOM

Given the lack of respect that Ananse has shown for Nyame and for Death, it is not surprising that our trickster shows no respect for the abosom as well. Where most are awed by their presence, Ananse attempts to bully them and use them for his own benefit. Once again we see Ananse's ego come into play as he even tries to compete with the abosom occasionally. One particular tale involves Ananse and Efu, a hunchback abosom. Efu uses his power to provide Ananse with rain for his crops, but Ananse, never satisfied, beats Efu to death in order to gain even more rain. While on the surface it could appear that Ananse was trying to look after his crops, it is very clear that Ananse's beating death of Efu was an egregious display of dominance. Ananse wanted to prove that he can handle any foe and would not be deterred from getting whatever he wants, even if it means taking another life. In a similar story, when an old woman abosom of the earth gives food to Ananse's son, Ananse tries to take more from her (Vescey 115). Ananse never seems to be truly satiated. Not only does he want all attention to be on him, he also has proven he will not be satisfied with gifts if there is even an inkling in his mind that he could potentially get more. It appears that Ananse is far too proud an individual to respect the abosom.

However, one must not think that Ananse never feels repercussions for his heinous actions as the abosom, and Nyame for that matter, do indeed punish our trickster for his disrespectful deeds. In this way, Ananse is very different from either Brer Rabbit (who *always* seems to escape punishment) and Ajapa (who only occasionally fails in a prank). Nyame displays his power over Ananse by withdrawing all water from our trickster after his terrible treatment of Efu. Additionally, Ananse suffers from sores and scabs after he disrespects the earth abosom and even suffers physical deformities on other occasions. Ananse also meets a fatal end sometimes when he crosses certain abosom. A stone abosom kills him when he asks it the wrong question, and a witch's sword kills him when he is unable to control it effectively. Thus we see that our trickster is indeed immortal, much like Ajapa. No matter what end he meets, he always lives on to inhabit the next tale. However, these tales in which our trickster is unsuccessful are just as important, if not more so, than the stories in which he successfully attains his goals. These fatal stories are likely sprinkled in with the rest of the trickster tales to illustrate to the young Akan that deceit and trickery do not always end well. These particular stories impart valuable lessons, either directly or indirectly, on morality. When trickery is sometimes met with death and Ananse does *not* always come out on top, an Akan child might realize the possible ramifications of deceit and, as a result, be less likely to imitate the spider trickster's actions. Therefore, by attempting to undermine the authority of the abosom, and by being punished, Ananse actually reinforces the authority of these ancestors, as well as the authority of Nyame.

Ananse and the Corncob

This story is a very good one with which to begin because it is one of the few examples of Ananse not only remaining alive at the end of the tale, but also remaining in a position of power. Ananse requests a singular corncob from Nyame, claiming to have the ability to trade the corncob for one hundred slaves for the sky god. Through a series of ridiculous barters, Ananse eventually accomplishes the feat and delivers the one hundred slaves to Nyame, boasting about it quite a bit. Nyame, who quickly grows tired of Ananse's boasting, instructs Ananse to bring him the moon and the sun, thinking such a task impossible. However, Ananse accomplishes the feat yet again, revealing the moon first to Nyame's court before blinding everyone around him with the sun. Ananse is obviously very vindictive in this story, believing that not even the sky god himself should have the right to claim dominance over him (Belcher 111-116).

ANANSI IN JAMAICA[2]

Ananse is important to many distinct Caribbean cultures (Belize, Haiti, et al), but he is especially noteworthy in Jamaica. Jamaica was a European colony for a time, at first claimed by the Spanish and later the British before receiving its independence. Thus, the history of Jamaica is one filled with strife and turmoil. Emily Marshall notes that "it was in this kind of colonial society in Jamaica that the role of Anansi was transformed" (Marshall 47). Jamaica was replete with slaves forcibly working plantations, and Anansi eventually came to be a symbol for resistance. In Jamaica, Anansi does not always reinforce societal or community rules with his actions. Rather, "in his plantation setting,

[2] The tales selected for this portion of the thesis come primarily from an online bank of Jamaican Anansi stories, where tales are submitted by individual authors

Anansi could invert the social order without paradoxically upholding it . . . Anansi had the potential (to) destroy an enforced and abhorrent social system rather than just test the boundaries of a West African society with compliant members" (Marshall 48). Furthermore, "Jamaican Anansi tales resonated with the ambiguity and contradictions that lay at the heart of the plantation environment" (48). Plantation life was extremely fierce for the displaced Africans, and these Anansi tales symbolized their potential resistance against the institution of slavery on their island.

It is also evident that through language the Jamaican slave culture has been heavily influenced by its Akan counterparts. Marshall writes that "the presence of Asante Twi words in the language of the Jamaican slaves and Jamaican Creole and the continued use of Asante day-names for slave children, as well as the continued telling of Anansi tales" reaffirms the connection between Jamaica and the Akan (44). In this regard, there are copious Jamaican Anansi tales that focus on language and naming. Marshall continues to write that "African descendants in Jamaica, deprived of their mother tongue and forced into the adoption of a new language, were compelled to tell tales which mediated on the power of words" (58). The difference in African language and Native language in Jamaica is quite obvious in these trickster tales, and such a difference is very important to each culture.

The Jamaican Anansi tales are also different from their Akan counterparts with regard to content. First and foremost, Jamaican Anansi typically walks with a limp, maintains a lisp, and has a high falsetto voice; his form is "that of both a spider and a man" (Marshall 62). However, the exact species of spider is much debated, a logical debate when one remembers that Anansi is a shape shifter. Secondly, the Jamaican

Anansi's actions "became even more violent and remorseless than those of the Asante Anansi" (Marshall 49). These escalations of violence can once again be attributed to the plantation setting in which these tales take place. We also notice a differentiation of characters. Many of the Jamaican Anansi tales replace the large jungle animals of the Akan tradition with Jamaican mammals, reptiles, and insects (e.g. "Anansi an Ticks"). Another difference between the Akan and Jamaican Anansi is the lack of information about Jamaican Anansi's family. Very little information is given regarding Anansi's family in Jamaica, while we have already noted a story in which his Akan wife, Aso, plays a key role. Finally, the two Anansi characters are different because of their inherent religious symbolism. Emily Marshall states Anansi "shifted from being assimilated into the sacred world of the Asante to become a representative of the Jamaican slaves' human condition" (Marshall 55). That is not to say that Anansi's tie to the supernatural dies completely with his transformation in Jamaica, but overall he becomes a much more secular figure.

Most of the Ananse stories we have in North America have been Anglicized with their diction and are solely reserved for children. For instance, "Anansi and the Magic Stick" or "Anansi and the Moss Covered Rock," stories written by Eric Kimmel, are told and illustrated as children's books. These stories incorporate happy endings and wonderful cliché morals that serve as teaching methods for our children. In this way, Anansi has become westernized. However, the stories from Jamaica are slightly more complex and add a more sinister dynamic to our spider trickster. Most of the following Jamaican stories are very short, some as small as two paragraphs, and plot seems to be a secondary element to dialogue. It is through Anansi's words that we catch glimpses into

his true character in Jamaican culture, and it is quite clear that he is not afraid to resort to killing other characters. Didactically speaking, "the tales in which (Anansi) wins show the benefits of cunning and intelligence, (and) the tales in which he loses can act as a warning against stupidity and greed" (Marshall 51).

Anancy an Ticks

Louise Bennett brings us the story of "Anancy an Ticks," another example of Anancy using deceit to dominate one of his fellows. In this particular story, Anancy reads that a certain gentleman wants to hire someone who owns a cow, so he kills his own pet goat and places his head in the bushes that divide his property with that of his neighbor, Ticks. Anancy then exclaims that his goat is stuck in the bush, and he asks Ticks to help him free the poor animal. Naturally, when Ticks pulls on the goat's head, it comes right out, which allows Anancy to charge Ticks with killing his pet. Anancy then forces Ticks to hire his cow, since Ticks owned a pet cow while Anancy only had a goat, to the gentleman and to give Anancy all the money as penance (Bennett 47-48). We witness, once again, the lengths to which Anancy will go in deceitful pranks all due to his greed. We realize now that Anancy is, for lack of a better term, vicious. Anancy will clearly stop at nothing in order to subjugate or humiliate one of his fellow characters. A strong contrast can be drawn between Anancy and our other two tricksters, who typically will not go to such lengths solely for entertainment. There are, of course, a few exceptions to this generalization.

Horse and Anansi

“Horse and Anansi” is an example of Anansi failing at one of his pranks. Anansi and Brother Horse spend a full day collecting plantains, but they did not have any timber with which to strike a fire. Anansi then tells Brother Horse to go collect such timber for kindling while planning to use his hidden timber to roast the plantains while Brother Horse is out collecting materials. Anansi roasts and eats all but four plantains, blaming an unnamed man for taking the rest of their supper. Brother Horse, none the wiser, offers to split the final four plantains with Anansi. Brother Goat happens to witness the entire scene from behind a bush, so when Anansi tries the same ploy on Brother Goat the next day, he is met with an unfortunate result. Brother Goat leaves when Anansi asks him to fetch the timber, but he immediately hides in the bushes, all the while waiting for Anansi to roast the plantains. When he sees that the plantains are ready, Brother Goat swoops in and takes all of the plantains for himself, leaving Anansi hungry for the remainder of the day (Archibald 1). Didactically speaking, one can learn that there are ways to collect evidence to prove a suspicion. Brother Goat realizes that Ananci could be up to no good, so he hides in the bushes and waits for his suspicions to be confirmed before revealing himself. Rather than engaging in a verbal argument or simply taking the plantains for himself, Brother Goat decides to catch Ananci in his deceitful act.

Anansi in Monkey Country

This story, much like the last one, is included in this focus group of tales because it once again describes Anansi’s plan backfiring. Anansi plays a very sick and morbid game with a group of monkeys in which they take turns getting into a pot of water and waiting for it to get too hot. Naturally, Anansi goes first and exclaims “Bunya” when it

becomes too hot for him, so the monkeys take him out of the water (Hilton). When the monkeys take their turn in the pot, they follow suit and use their code word for help, but Anansi leaves the helpless monkeys in the boiling water, eventually eating them. One monkey, however, manages to escape to the next town. Thus, when Anansi reaches that next town, the monkey agrees to play the game again, this time refusing to take the tricky spider out of the pot when it begins to boil. Thus we see that Anansi does not always get what he wants. In fact, Anansi is very rarely successful in his ploys, especially in Jamaican culture. Oftentimes, Anansi is portrayed as the type of character that *nobody* should ever try to emulate, as his pranks almost certainly backfire with fatal consequences.

Bredda Anancy and the Jerk Fowl

I decided to include this rather interesting story because it is one of the *only* stories I found in which Anancy is friends with another character. In this tale, Anancy and Brother Lion are anthropormphized so much that they can actually drive a car with a talking (and intelligent) GPS system. Joelle "Wendy" Wright describes Anancy and Brother Lion's quest to get to the new Island Grill for a jerk chicken dish. On the way there they are nearly sidetracked by multiple other possible eating establishments, but the GPS system keeps them steadfast on their quest for the Island Grill. However, Anancy's and Brother Lion's noses get the better of them as they eventually stop at Brother Dog's stand for a jerk fowl dish only to learn later that they actually consumed one of their other friends. We must also consider the implications for modernity present within this story. As technology has advanced through the years, so have our trickster tales evolved to accommodate these modernizations. The fact that Anancy has the ability to drive a car

with an intelligent GPS is no accident. Rather, we now see that these stories can and will always evolve in order to function within any society. This particular story does not really have a moral nor does it provide any insight into the character or demeanor of Anancy himself. Rather, this story serves the basest of all trickster tale functions: pure entertainment. However, this entertainment is much more innocent than, say, "Anansi an Ticks." Rather than displaying vicious and vindictive behavior, Anancy in this story unknowingly consumed one of his friends. We are not privy to Anancy's reaction, but we are left to consider Brother Dog as the real antagonist of the tale rather than Anancy, as is typically the case in Akan stories.

ANANSE IN AKAN AND CARIBBEAN SOCIETIES

As mentioned before, Akan society is very structured, and the Akan people feel a very strong obligation to the social order. According to Vescey, "the Akan individual sees himself as a member of society before he sees himself as an individual" (118). There are strict laws in place to maintain order, and each individual has a very definite duty to accomplish for the betterment of the society as a whole. Any deviation from these laws or duties would result in banishment, the ultimate penalty and punishment, as it means a separation from what makes that person a human being. Ananse, however, always seems to break societal rules. It has been noted several times that Ananse really only looks out for himself, so this deviation is not surprising. However, the egregious disrespect that Ananse has for the societal structure of the Akan people lends the explanation for why children are taught never to venerate this trickster. Again, while our other two tricksters

appear to be just cunning individuals who occasionally take advantage of another character, Ananse seems to exist on a whole new misanthropic level.

However, Ananse is not the overarching dominant force included in Akan stories. Yes, it is true that most of the stories involve the antics of the spider, and it is also true that Ananse always attempts to undermine, and even destroy, Akan social order. However, the other characters in these stories all combine to be Ananse's foils. They all band together to maintain social order. When Ananse retires to his farm and tries to break the rules of society, it is his neighbors who obey those rules who keep society running smoothly. When Ananse creates doubt about the beliefs implanted in Akan faith, other characters reinforce those beliefs, which is why Nyame remains the supreme being even after the term "Anansesem" was coined to describe these stories (Vescey 119). As a result, it is very clear that the Akan use the possible doubt that Ananse raises in his actions to reaffirm their faith. They take this exception to the rule and create stronger arguments for *why* the rules are in place and must be followed. Thus, one can see that Ananse in all his degeneracy is actually an invaluable asset to Akan society. Children not only learn vital lessons from watching Ananse fail, but also have their own place in Akan society reaffirmed.

Jamaican Anansi, as mentioned before, becomes a symbol of resistance for the Jamaican slaves. He is described as "a resistance figure, (either) real (or) fictional, formed a part of a multitude of cultural resources used by slaves . . . in their struggle for freedom" (Marshall 94). By telling these Anansi tales, these slaves maintained their cultural heritage in a new environment into which they were forced. The mere telling of these tales, when coupled with the African names used for the characters, allows these

displaced persons to retain their history, culture, and traditions. Yes, the Jamaican Anansi tales are tweaked to make them unique in their new setting, but the parallels are undeniable. Didactically, and more practically, speaking, Marshall claims that these stories were "teaching techniques of survival and resistance that could be implemented within the confines of their enslavement or as escapees . . . and secret messages were communicated through instruments and song" (94). Thus, it is very clear that these Anansi tales served a much deeper purpose than pure entertainment. Culturally, historically, and even practically, Anansi is easily one of the most influential tricksters of the modern era.

CHAPTER IV
Brer Rabbit in African American Literature

When most people hear that this thesis's subject is the trickster figure in comparative black literatures, they typically ask for a follow-up explanation. It seems that practically no one has ever heard of Ajapa or Ananse, but nearly everyone has been able to recollect a few stories from their childhood involving the ever-famous Uncle Remus figure[3]. Joel Chandler Harris solidified his place in American literature over a century ago with his Uncle Remus tales, most of which revolve around the lovable little trickster Brer Rabbit. Harris also succeeds in capturing the voice of an entire culture: the African-American in the southeastern United States, specifically Georgia. The African-American culture in the southeastern United States is a unique culture within the spectrum of the comparatively young nation of America. Much like the African and Caribbean literatures, the "earliest literatures (of the African Americans) combined folktales and mythologies" (Brennan 17). Oral literature, especially with respect to folk tales, is an integral part of any culture, as most of the stories preserved through the generations were shared orally long before they were written down. The African-American literary culture is no different. The tales of Joel Chandler Harris are conveyed with similar oral traditions that we see in Ajapa and Ananse stories. Rather than just being a collection of stories, Harris's works include a storyteller figure named Uncle Remus who relays each story to a young male character. Each story's monotony is frequently interrupted by comments and

[3] The "fame" of these Uncle Remus stories is a relative term. His stories are famous with relation to Americans, especially those who've grown up in the south.

questions by the young boy. With regard to these stories-within-a-story, readers are almost like a voyeur, listening to all of the stories second-hand, a fact which preserves the authenticity of these oral tales.

Joel Chandler Harris, who lived in Georgia for the majority of his life, was very well versed in Southern tradition. Roy Johnson, author of *In the Old South*, writes that "animal lore—growing out of the frontier culture of colonial times—reached unprecedented popularity during the antebellum, or late plantation, period" (7). Johnson continues to describe that these animals were personified and "came to possess some of the cultural traits of the people," namely the African Americans (8). The diction that Harris employs in each narrative, though it may be difficult to follow or understand at times, adds a whole new depth to each of these trickster tales. Some of the wording is so difficult that there is a rather extensive and greatly beneficial glossary at the end of Harris's works that define many of the colloquialisms he consistently employs. It is evident that the dialect of the southern African-American is captured perfectly whenever a reader decides to read a tale aloud[2]. The fact that all of the characters are called *brother* (or *brer*) is no accident—rather, this language once again reflects the linguistic patterns of the southeastern African American. Each story is very short and often involves Brer Rabbit's overcoming one singular obstacle in a very short time frame. Brer Rabbit's quick wit and quicker tongue are consistent with both aforementioned trickster figures, but his stories are written with a different style than that of Ajapa or Ananse and involve unique situations. For instance, Brer Rabbit never loses a physical fight, nor is he outsmarted, which is a key difference in these North American trickster tales.

[2] The "authentic" language which Harris employs in his narrative represents the phonetic aspects of the words that he heard every day while growing up in Georgia.

The primary source from which I draw the tales for my analysis in this chapter is *The Complete Tales of Uncle Remus*. This collection of tales combines many different works written by Joel Chandler Harris and others between the years of 1883 and 1906. The four works are *Nights With Uncle Remus*, *Uncle Remus and His Friends*, *Told By Uncle Remus*, and *Uncle Remus and Brer Rabbit*. I have analyzed a great number of these short tales in order to draw my conclusions, but I have selected three individual tales from each of these four works by Harris that cover the expansive gamut of story plots and patterns. The criteria which were considered in the selections of these stories were the uniqueness of plot, Brer Rabbit's own personal characteristics, which can vary between and among tales, and the relationship of Brer Rabbit to the other characters involved.

NIGHTS WITH UNCLE REMUS (1881)

The first story for discussion in this small group of tales is "Brother Rabbit's Astonishing Prank." This tale features Brer Rabbit breaching several societal boundaries, first and foremost being his entering Brer B'ar (Brother Bear)'s home without invitation. Brer Rabbit watches Brer B'ar and his family leave their home unattended, which gives Brer Rabbit the chance to invade Brother Bear's privacy. Naturally, Brer Rabbit is drawn to the honey that Brer B'ar has stored, but Brer Rabbit clumsily drops the sticky delicacy all over himself. Realizing that he is literally covered in evidence, Brer Rabbit runs for the forest to rub the sticky substance off his body. Understandably, however, leaves, dirt, and other forest materials stick to Brer Rabbit's body which, in the end, makes the small creature look much more threatening.

Brer Rabbit begins to make his way home, but all of his neighbors, who obviously do not recognize him as a rabbit beneath his new armor, run away in fright. Brer Rabbit's vanity (a consistent motif for tricksters) leads him to test his disguise as he waits on the road for Brer B'ar and his family to come home. Brer B'ar is obviously much bigger and stronger than Brer Rabbit, but the disguise gives Brer Rabbit the upper hand. Brer B'ar and his family are so afraid of the unknown monster that they climb trees to seek refuge. Brer Rabbit, realizing his clear advantage, proceeds to frighten Brother Fox and Brother Wolf, Brer's Rabbit's nemeses, both of whom are physically stronger than Brer Rabbit. Ultimately, the disguise appeals to Brer Rabbit's vanity and allows him to test the limits of his newfound power. However, this story also illustrates that what a trickster figure lacks in brawn, he more than compensates for in wit. Regardless of his physical stature, Brer Rabbit's wit allows him to become the dominant character in this society filled with foxes, wolves, and even much larger bears.

The second tale in this collection displays the trickster's aversion to work and his ability to secure a prize far greater than any of his neighbors. "Brother Rabbit Secures a Mansion" depicts a very lazy Brer Rabbit character, but it also begs the question: *how gullible must the other characters of these stories be?* Uncle Remus describes that all of the animal characters come together to build a very grandiose two-storied house in which each of them could live in great comfort. Brer B'ar, Brer Wolf, and the others work together for the common goal of building this house, while Brer Rabbit only pretends to contribute. Brer Rabbit might measure an angle of a corner or the width of a shingle but, realistically, he does little more than watch the other animals intensely labor to build this mansion. Eventually, each animal has the opportunity to claim a room in the house that,

once again, was large enough for each of them to share in complete comfort. However, Brer Rabbit resorts to trickery behind the closed door of his room as he shoots a gun and a larger cannon to frighten the other residents away from the house and, eventually, the house is all his own. The idea that Brer Rabbit would go to such lengths to become the *only* resident of an entire mansion illustrates the common trickster theme of never quitting while ahead. It is not enough to con his way into a room at the mansion (the animals never seem to question Brer Rabbit's overt aversion for physical labor), Brer Rabbit must display his dominance over the rest of his animal contemporaries and become the *only* resident of the mansion. The moral of this story is difficult to decipher as it seems to applaud laziness. However, a deeper evaluation of the story suggests that the moral could be for the other animals and simply be—do not tolerate laziness. Audience members have the authority to respond to each tale differently, and a very valid initial response could be that the other animals are absolutely at fault for allowing Brer Rabbit to have his own room even after he does not contribute to the work.

The third and final selection from this collection of stories is "Brother Rabbit's Riddle," one of the predominant examples of Brer Rabbit's quick wit being too much for his companions to handle. Brer Fox, an aforementioned rival figure to our trickster, consistently tries to capture and eat Brer Rabbit. In this particular story, Brer Fox suggests that he and Brer Rabbit harvest a few peaches from the well-known peach tree in the area, believing that he can nab the rabbit as he later descends the tree. A frustrated reader might ask why Brer Fox does not simply capture or subdue Brer Rabbit before they arrive at the tree, but that conclusion would not fall in line with the traditional Harris

trickster tale. Instead, Brer Rabbit's keen senses alert him to his potential danger, and he manages to spout out the following riddle:

> 'De big bird rob en little bird sing;
> De big bee zoon en little bee sting,
> De little man lead en big hoss foller –
> Kin you tell w'at's good fer a head in a holler? (Harris 157)

The riddle piques Brer Fox's interest just enough that he allows Brer Rabbit to explain. Brer Rabbit then leads Brer Fox to Brer B'ar's "bee gum trees," most likely a type of sweet gum tree, where Brer Fox promptly gets his head stuck. Where Ajapa would likely have tried to fight his way of out the jam and Ananse would probably have been duped himself, Brer Rabbit manages to *embarrass* his nemesis. Brer Rabbit, once again, asserts not only a physical dominance over the compromised Brer Fox but, more importantly, he relies on the curiosity and gullibility of his companion. Brer Rabbit undoubtedly can escape Brer Fox if it comes down to sheer agility. However, Brer Rabbit's quick thinking allows him not only to escape, but also to humiliate his attempted captor in the process. Based on the characterizations of our three tricksters, they each would behave very differently when faced with similar situations.

UNCLE REMUS AND HIS FRIENDS (1892)

The first selection from *Uncle Remus and His Friends* is "Brother Rabbit Has Fun at the Ferry." This story depicts a slightly more benevolent Brer Rabbit figure who actually uses his wit to benefit the familiar character of Brer B'ar, which neither Ajapa nor Ananse would dream of doing. In this tale, Brer B'ar operates a ferryboat, and, unfortunately, his new passenger has difficulty luring his mare onto the ferry. Brer Rabbit offers some assistance by telling the man to put the colt on the ferry first and the mare

will subsequently follow. The Man, while appreciative, believes that he can outsmart our beloved trickster, but Brer B'ar reminds readers that "'bout what er soon creetur Brer Rabbit is, dat nobody can't fool 'im, en nobody can't outdo 'im" (Harris 491). Upon his return, the Man brings two seemingly identical mules, one a mare and the other the colt. Brer Rabbit once again uses intellectual trickery, in this case a non-harmful form, to correctly determine which mule is the mare. Finally, the Man returns a third time holding a basket high up in the air and asks Brer Rabbit what it contains. Brer Rabbit responds that a sparrow would be able to tell him and, coincidentally, a sparrow occupies the basket. The second and third challenges that Brer Rabbit passes win Brer B'ar jars of honey which Brer Rabbit never tries to claim for himself, nor does he ask for even a morsel. However, when asked how Brer Rabbit knew a sparrow was in the basket, Uncle Remus responds that "Brer Rabbit wuz a mighty man fer luck" (Harris 494). Despite the quick wit of our trickster figures, sometimes they, just like humans, are forced to rely on a bit of luck to help them through their challenges. Luck is not something to take for granted. We have discussed how even our wily tricksters are not infallible and occasionally meet their demise. Of course, in this instance, Brer Rabbit is not lucky to escape danger but to obtain a prize for his friend. In relying on luck every now and again, Brer Rabbit is more relatable to the audience. We must keep in mind that the primary audience of these Brer Rabbit tales, at least when performed orally, were antebellum plantation African Americans who might be forced to rely on a bit of luck in their endeavors. Once again, though, we can see a major difference between Brer Rabbit and our other tricksters. Thus far, we have witnessed Ajapa's insatiable greed, especially with regard to his appetite, so we can safely assume he would never agree to help Brer B'ar

out of the goodness of his heart. Ananse, in the same context, is such a vicious character that he would *never* agree to help one of his fellow animal characters, even if they were divine beings.

The next story, "Brother Rabbit Frightens Brother Tiger," says enough in the title—Brer Rabbit manages to gain dominance over one of the most feared animals in the community. However, once again we see Brer Rabbit working in conjunction with another character, in this case Brer Elephant, in order to ultimately gain dominance. Brer Rabbit manages to cross a wide creek by swinging on a vine, a feat which proves impossible for Brer Tiger due to his size and weight. Brer Tiger, in his humiliation, warns Brer Rabbit that he will eat the trickster at their next meeting. In response, Brer Rabbit teams up with Brer Elephant to scare Brer Tiger out of the community entirely. The next time that Brer Tiger finds Brer Rabbit, our trickster, who has tied up Brer Elephant with a vine, acts as though he is skinning the large beast, though it is all merely a ploy concocted by both Brer Rabbit and Brer Elephant. Brer Tiger, who clearly knows he is physically larger and, one can assume, stronger, than Brer Rabbit, is nonetheless frightened away from the community for an indefinite amount of time. Didactically speaking, this story reveals that one should never be too proud to ask for help. Brer Tiger is much larger than Brer Rabbit, but Brer Rabbit joins the even more massive Brer Elephant in order to accomplish a common goal. In this story, Brer Rabbit does not rely on luck but rather on a pact with a friend in order to gain the upper hand. Once again we see a unique quality of Brer Rabbit tales – neither Ajapa nor Ananse would ever ask for help (e.g. Ajapa being stuck to the rock).

Finally, I have chosen "Brother Rabbit's Money Mint" as one of my primary examples. This story is a bit shorter than the previous two, as it involves only one conversation between Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox. Brer Rabbit once again deceives his nemesis, but this time he convinces a wary Brer Fox using tangible evidence. Brer Rabbit has a few coins in his pocket and, after some rather unwitting banter between the two characters, which ultimately reveals that Brer Fox is not the sharpest of characters, Brer Rabbit convinces his counterpart that the wagons which constantly pass through the community drop coins every time that, speaking colloquially, the larger back wheels overtake the smaller front wheels (Harris 544). The story ends rather abruptly with Brer Fox following the next wagon over miles upon miles of hills, waiting all the while for any amount of coins to drop. It is important to note that Brer Rabbit typically does not physically fight anyone, nor has any character been harmed beyond repair. Rather, Brer Rabbit gains dominance over his companions by using fear above all else. However, Brer Rabbit does not implement fear in order to *maintain* dominance over his companions as we progress from story to story. Each new tale provides a new and unique scenario for our trickster to use his cunning to gain the upper hand. Brer Rabbit oftentimes uses fear either to escape from his predators (Brer Wolf, Brer Fox, etc.) or simply to entertain himself, as is the case of "Brer Rabbit's Money Mint." Unlike Ananse, Brer Rabbit does not undermine the entire African American society via his tricks, nor does he truly threaten the natural social order of the anthropomorphized animal kingdom in which he lives. His tricks typically affect one, maybe two, other characters, the biggest and strongest characters are understandably at the top. The balance of the social order is restored by the beginning of the next story.

TOLD BY UNCLE REMUS: NEW STORIES OF THE OLD PLANTATION (1905)

The first story from this collection, "Brother Rabbit and the Chickens," is one of the few examples I found of Brer Rabbit actually stealing from another character in order to meet a certain end. Brer Rabbit typically has everything he needs and does not rely on stealing from others, though he will occasionally steal a snack, like in our first analyzed tale. In this story, Mr. Man has a collection of beautiful chickens, the likes over which Brer Rabbit, Brer Wolf, and Brer Fox literally drool. The setting is a time of mild famine, a common motif in these Brer Rabbit tales. Thus, Brer Rabbit furtively sneaks into Mr. Man's home one night, steals a bagful of chickens, and subsequently cooks and eats his prizes at home. To dispose of the evidence, Brer Rabbit bags the feathers of the chickens and sets out for the grinding mill, knowing full well that he will encounter Brer Fox at his home on the way. Brer Rabbit then convinces Brer Fox that his bag is filled with a certain weed that, when ground, turns a hefty profit at the market. Thus, Brer Rabbit relies on the greed of Brer Fox not only to relinquish the evidence of his crime temporarily, as Brer Fox offers to carry the load, but also permanently, as he allows the fox to keep the bag. Naturally, Brer Rabbit informs Mr. Man of Brer Fox's so-called crime and allows the story to unfold from there as Brer Rabbit witnesses Mr. Man's beating of Brer Fox. Didactically speaking, this tale does not punish stealing in a way that we might punish a thief in modern times. Brer Rabbit, rather, steals from the humans *and* disposes of the evidence in a way that implicates one of his primary predators for the deed. At this time, a reminder that these tricksters are not always the most benevolent role models is necessary, and sometimes they resort to actual crimes with no ramifications. In a similar

context, Ajapa is caught multiple times, especially when his appetite fuels his tricks. The tortoise's deeds are not always tolerated when they are meant to teach a lesson. This story ends with Brer Rabbit laughing at Brer Fox from afar, and with the young boy to whom Uncle Remus is telling the story angrily asking why Brer Rabbit is laughing. The moral of the story does not come within the actual tale; rather, the moral is implied within the young boy's reaction that deeply criticizes stealing.

It is a common theme in these trickster tales that Brer Rabbit will trick another character into performing a physical task for his lazy self (e.g. carrying the bag of feathers), but this story also focuses on our trickster's actual crime. Throughout the adventure, Brer Rabbit mentions that Mr. Man would most likely want him to check on his chickens or Mr. Man wouldn't want him to let the chickens sit there and freeze (Harris 616). Thus, Brer Rabbit consistently plays the victim in order to woo the reader as well as the other characters in the story. This loveable trickster always seems to escape culpability, as Uncle Remus claims that Brer Rabbit, as an animal, could never be guilty of stealing (Harris 617). Brer Rabbit is alone in this escapade. However, he still acts like he is performing a good deed and the chickens die by happenstance, a very crafty trick to entice the reader to agree with his actions.

"Brother Rabbit's Cradle" is a story whose very title sparks a bit of interest within a reader. The cradle to which the title refers is none other than a trap set by the aforementioned Mr. Man specifically for Brer Rabbit. Brer Rabbit is smart enough to recognize the potential danger, but that does not prove to be enough gratification for our trickster. Rather, he sits on a stump looking very dejected until Brer Wolf happens along his path. The sly trickster tells Brer Wolf that Mr. Man made him a cradle, but it is too

big for him to carry back home. Brer Wolf, in a somewhat unexpected kindhearted gesture, offers to help him carry the cradle (Harris 676). Naturally, the trap captures Brer Wolf instead, and Brer Rabbit does nothing to help his companion. This story exemplifies one of the most important characteristics of tricksters which I have mentioned before—they are not always benevolent role models. In this way, this tale actually hearkens to our Ananse and Ajapa stories but still remains true to Harris's unique storytelling. Brer Rabbit could easily avoid the trap, yet he still swindles Brer Wolf into captivity. Sometimes, unfortunately, the trickster's only motive for performing a prank is pure enjoyment or amusement. By performing tricky deeds, even if only for pure entertainment, these tricksters actually serve to reinforce the natural order of society. By giving all of the other characters someone who is not necessarily a common *enemy*, but at the very least a common nuisance, the ideals of society and what it means to be a proper functioning member of society are reinforced. Sometimes it is easier to teach someone a lesson by telling them what *not* to do rather than what to do. These trickster tales serve just such a purpose. Young listeners can learn how to use their wit to escape a dangerous situation, but they also have the chance to decipher for themselves the stories involving Brer Rabbit's deeds that are performed simply for the pleasure of being tricky. In these particular tales, Brer Rabbit may escape punishment, but his behavior is never lauded, reinforcing the idea that he is actually at fault in his deeds.

Finally, the story of "Brer Rabbit and Miss Nancy" illustrates a situation in which Brer Rabbit interacts with a female. Uncle Remus tells the little boy that Brer Rabbit worked for a short spell on a farm for Mr. Man, one of the few recurring human figures of the narratives. In this story, Mr. Man has a daughter. Brer Rabbit works a few days for

Mr. Man and one day receives permission to go to the house for some bread. However, when Brer Rabbit arrives, he informs Miss Nancy, Mr. Man's daughter, that her father told him to go get $1.50 and some bread (Harris 711). Miss Nancy runs outside to confirm what she heard from her father, who impatiently tells her that everything Brer Rabbit says is valid. Thus, Brer Rabbit makes a few more trips throughout the story, eventually draining almost every penny from that family. Miss Nancy also has a male figure in her life, and Brer Rabbit manages to shift blame to that male figure, which leads Mr. Man to kick his own daughter out of the house. There is never a real romantic implication in the story, nor does Brer Rabbit appear to perform this dastardly deed out of jealousy, as he begins to rob the family before the boy is even introduced. Didactically speaking, however, this story is noteworthy because it illustrates that not even female characters are safe from the pranks of Harris's famous trickster.

UNCLE REMUS AND BRER RABBIT (1906)

The stories from this particular collection are much more elementary with their length and subject matter. The presence of seemingly immortal or deified figures suggests a tenuous connection to the Ajapa and Ananse tales from the previous chapters of this project. The plot line of each of the following three tales follows a similar pattern: exposition, a bit of rising action, climax and, finally, almost no falling action before the dénouement.

I have selected "Brer Rabbit's Frolic" because Brer Rabbit is illustrated as a musician in this tale. Much like the musically gifted Ajapa, Brer Rabbit possesses quite a bit of skill on the fiddle. As a small stringed instrument, the fiddle just seems like a

perfect instrument for a trickster, as great dexterity is required to master such an instrument. Brer Rabbit overhears the other animals plotting against him (a common theme in most of these stories) and manages to gain the upper hand by revealing to all the other animals that there is to be a party at Miss Meadows's house (Harris 734). Obviously, Brer Rabbit once again reigns victorious as he uses his fiddle playing to lure all of these animals to Miss Meadows's property, where she promptly runs them off for trespassing. This particular story not only demonstrates the power of music that our trickster manipulates but also didactically discusses the gullibility of each of Brer Rabbit's companions. All of the other animals know Brer Rabbit's reputation for being a trickster, yet time and time again they listen to what he says and, in this case, are forcibly removed from Miss Meadows's property. The moral of the story can be summed up in a very pithy statement: avoid gullibility.

The second of the three stories, "Brer Rabbit and the Gold Mine," demonstrates that our beloved trickster must sometimes rely on his quick legs rather than his quick wit. In this story, a wave of hunger has swept over all of the animals as a mild famine has occurred. Brer Rabbit, realizing a way to capitalize on the animals' weakened bodies and spirits, describes a hidden gold mine in the area, a secret passed down in his family for generations. Understandably, all of the characters begin to search for the hidden gold mine. When they ultimately realize that it is all a hoax, they try to capture the sly trickster. Brer Wolf lunges at Brer Rabbit, but Brer Rabbit is simply too quick for the larger weakened animal. Didactically speaking, the story reveals that sometimes even the quickest wit is forced to run away when he or she is outmanned and outmatched.

Finally, “Brer Rabbit Treats the Creeturs to a Race” employs the supernatural element that is common in trickster tales across the globe, as if it isn’t already supernatural to have entire communities of talking animals. Brer Rabbit approaches the Rainmaker one day and asks to stage a race between Brer Dust and Cousin Rain. The giant spectacle of a race is promoted among the animals as entertainment, and it appears like Brer Rabbit might be initiating the race for altruistic reasons. However, when Brer Dust combs over the animal spectators, followed by Cousin Rain, all of the animals are drenched in very thick coats of mud. Brer Rabbit, naturally, watches from a distance so that he can remain dry. However, it is simply not enough to watch safely from a distance. Rather, Brer Rabbit must rub it in his companions’ faces up close and they, slowed immensely by the mud, are unable to do anything about his vain behavior.

As we have noted in each of these stories, Brer Rabbit is indeed a trickster as he shares many of the same characteristics of Ajapa and Ananse (more with Ajapa than Ananse). However, Brer Rabbit is the least dangerous and threatening of our three tricksters. By relying on fear rather than physical abuse in order to gain dominance, Brer Rabbit proves that there are ways to accomplish a goal without brute force. At times, Brer Rabbit is as vicious as Ananse, as in the case of “Brother Rabbit and the Chickens,” but at other times he proves to be a functioning team player in the community of animals, as in “Brother Rabbit Has Fun at the Ferry.” Regardless of his evolving persona, Brer Rabbit is an *essential* part of his own society and of African-American culture. Brer Rabbit proves that anything can be accomplished with a sharp wit, a lesson that the southeastern African-American culture cherished in the antebellum plantation time period.

CHAPTER V
Conclusion

We have now explored in depth the functions of Ajapa, Brer Rabbit, and Ananse within their own cultural contexts. The purposes of this brief final chapter are to reinforce the uniqueness of each of these trickster figures while providing a more current and contemporary explanation of the usage of trickster figures. Tortoise, spider, and rabbit have been known to be the three most popular trickster figures in most societies, and these three specifically are the most widely recognized. We have examined what it is that makes them tricksters: they are incomparably cunning; they each have relationships with the supernatural; and, more often than not, they each refute the understood order of their societies. Tales are not consistent from one to another, and they rarely reference past deeds of the trickster. Therefore, each tale should be treated as an individual entity, which once again allows for the trickster to die in one tale and somehow appear in the next one as good as new. In some tales the trickster has a family (wife, children, best friends, etc.) only to have no mention of these loved ones in the next story, once again illustrating the lack of consistency between and among the tales.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AND AMONG OUR TRICKSTERS

As we move from Africa through the Caribbean and into North America, there is a distinct pattern we can see in which these tricksters have evolved. As we move further west, we can see that the trickster is somewhat tamed in a sense. Ajapa, which hails from

the Yoruba clan in Nigeria, may meet his end sometimes (like the story of his instant pregnancy), but he still seems to be fairly autonomous. As we move further west into the Caribbean, we see that Ananse is often met with failure in his ploys, or at least very severe ramifications and punishments from his trickery. As a result, the Akan people reveal that the trickster can indeed be held in check by superior beings. Finally, the Uncle Remus stories of Joel Chandler Harris suggest that Brer Rabbit may be the slyest of all the animals, but there is always the overarching figure of the farmer who has the ability to keep Brer Rabbit in check, as in the story of the farmer's chickens. Brer Rabbit may not always answer for his crimes, but he definitely has a fear of the farmer and of what the farmer is capable of doing to him should he be caught.

In a similar vein, we see the egregiousness of the various "crimes" of these tricksters vary from region to region. Ajapa is, obviously, always looking out for himself. However, most of his trickery and deceit involves food in some way, shape, or form, an understandable stance to take as droughts and famine were probably not uncommon in that portion of Africa. Brer Rabbit sometimes tries to gain the upper hand on his rivals, but he typically pulls his pranks merely for his own entertainment. Additionally, Brer Rabbit relies on instilling fear in others as his means of expressing his dominance rather than attempting to gain physical dominance. Ananse, however, is the special exception. Ananse, as discussed in Chapter IV, constantly tries to build his own ego. His insatiable vanity is never satisfied unless he is the top dog (or, rather, spider), and he will stop at nothing, not even beating an abosom to death, in order to remain superior.

The formations of the stories are very different with each region. The Ajapa stories follow a very linear path, often with very little dialogue, and end with an

aphorism. Ananse stories are a bit more difficult to find, but the translations of a few of them tend to follow the same pattern, minus the concluding aphorisms. Brer Rabbit stories are the exception to this rule as they vary vastly. Some stories seem to be more elementary than others, while some stories cover up to a dozen pages of extensive plot. Each of the tales are told from the vantage point of Uncle Remus, an elderly African-American gentlemen who is telling these stories to a young boy. The little boy often makes a comment about the story or asks a question, breaking the monotony of the challenging diction and giving the reader a brief respite from trying to decipher the words. The diction of these trickster tales understandably differs from region to region. Ananse stories typically employ a very Caribbeanized diction, and Brer Rabbit tales utilize very stereotypical antebellum African-American dialogue.

One final discrepancy among these three trickster figures is that of remorse. Ananse clearly has no remorse whenever he beats an abosom to death to try to take more rain. Ajapa also shows little remorse when he tattles on the three young boys. However, some could argue that he had some semblance of a right to do so as the boys did break their village's customs. On the other hand, Brer Rabbit never seems to do anything egregious enough to lead to the death, either of himself or of any of his animal companions. The worst that he does is convince the farmer to beat Brer Wolf for the supposed filching of the farmer's chickens. Brer Rabbit never seems to condone death as a means of punishment or as a weapon that he could wield. Obviously, one must consider the audience for these tales, and Brer Rabbit stories are definitely meant for younger readers, but the discrepancy in tales is still very apparent.

CONTEMPORARY TRICKSTERS

While each of our three analyzed societies possess their own unique literary customs and traditions, we must realize that the trickster figure has continued to evolve as time has progressed. As these tales have moved from solely oral traditions to the written word, we have witnessed constant changes in the themes of the trickster tales. Sometimes we are reminded of old trickster tales in contemporary works. For example, Chinua Achebe, the preeminent African writer, references the story of the "Tortoise and the Leopard" in his *Anthills of the Savannah*. In this tale, the wily Tortoise, having finally been caught by the big, strong Leopard, requests a moment to kick up the dust, making it seem as though a struggle had taken place. Achebe writes that this Tortoise story exemplifies that past generations may have been defeated, but they did not go down without a fight or a struggle (117). The story is used allegorically for the brutal civil conflicts occurring in Nigeria at the time in which the work is set. Tricksters can also change from being anthropomorphized animals to being "full-blooded human beings who are fully involved in an easily identifiable social reality" (Sekoni 96). For example, the story entitled "Trickster in Politics" involves an underdog in the government being manipulated but later sneakily undermining his superior. Anyone who has ever been treated unfairly in their profession, or at least thought they were, can identify with this trickster tale. Technology has also allowed for the evolution of the trickster figure. For instance, in some stories we keep the animal characters and add new technological advancements (e.g. Bredda Ananse and the Jerk Fowl with his ability to drive a car), which contributes once again to the modernity of the tale.

All in all, we have learned the importance of the trickster figure not just to his own respective society but to literature everywhere. Every culture and society has its own trickster figure with his own special and unique qualities and characteristics, as tricksters are the ones who reaffirm what it means to be a member of a certain society. As Ananse has proven to us, a trickster might try to break with tradition, law, or societal structure. We have examined how these tricksters are relatable figures to many potential audience members, and we have discussed the etiological reasons for these trickster tales. The trickster may be a deplorable character who has no respect for his particular society's understood rules, but he is also immensely important to the didactics of each society. The trickster is, for all intents and purposes, entirely vital to any and every society's folk literature, as he not only provides very entertaining pieces to read but also teaches valuable life lessons to the young and old alike.

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[i] *The Complete Tales of Uncle Remus* is comprised of multiple collections of stories, including but not limited to: *Nights With Uncle Remus*, *Uncle Remus and His Friends*, *Told By Uncle Remus*, and *Uncle Remus and Brer Rabbi*

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