African American Folk Tales

Storytelling is an important part of every culture and as natural as life itself. Long before there was writing, stories were passed on orally from one storyteller to another. The term folklore is used for the traditional songs, myths, legends, fables, folk tales, proverbs, and riddles composed by unknown authors and passed down from generation to generation. Folklore reveals a great deal about the culture that created it.

A rich tradition of storytelling existed for centuries in West Africa. This tradition, which the slaves brought with them, became the basis for storytelling on the American continent. Sharing a common cultural heritage from Africa, the slaves sought to make sense of their new environment and to find expression for their own conception of life and its meaning.

One kind of folk tale is the animal tale, also called the beast fable, in which human characteristics are attributed to animals. Brer Rabbit is the hero of many African American folk tales. (Brer, used before a name, means “brother.”) He is cunning and uses his wits in order to get the better of stronger animals. He does not live by the slave master’s code of right and wrong, but by an outlaw code. As one scholar has pointed out, “A man on short rations is bound to steal chickens. The only moral code he can afford to entertain is one that helps him to survive.” One of the most famous Brer Rabbit tales is the story of the briar patch. Brer Rabbit is trapped by Brer Fox, who considers different ways of killing his captive: burning, hanging, drowning, and skinning him. Brer Rabbit outwits Brer Fox by saying, whatever you do, don’t throw me in the briar patch. Naturally Brer Fox does exactly that and Brer Rabbit gains his freedom, shouting that he was born and bred in a briar patch.

Another kind of tale centers on the trickster, who is generally a slave called John or Jack. He is often caught by Ole Master in some lie or in some wrongdoing, and he tries to get out of trouble by outsmarting his owner. Sometimes he manages to avoid a whipping and even to gain his freedom. These tales often poke fun at the storytellers as well as at the slave masters.

Stories of exaggeration, sometimes called “lies,” give humorous explanations for the beginnings of things, for example, “why” the possum has no hair on his tail. Zora Neale Hurston later collected a number of these “lies” and published them in Mules and Men (1935).

There are a number of other kinds of folk tales, including conjure stories, preacher tales, and legends of various kinds.

The importance of the oral tradition to the survival of African American culture cannot be overestimated. The slaves were forbidden by law to learn how to read and write. Therefore, their culture had to be shared and preserved through word of mouth. The art of storytelling that evolved influenced the literature that was to come after emancipation and continues to influence literature today.
How Jack O'Lanterns Came to Be

It was slavery time, Zora., when Big Sixteen was a man. They called ‘im Sixteen ‘cause dat was de number of de shoe he wore. He was big and strong and Ole Massa looked to him to do everything.

One day Ole Massa said, “Big Sixteen, Ah b’lieve Ah want you to move dem sills Ah had hewed out down in de swamp.”

“I yassuh, Massa.”

Big Sixteen went down in de swamp and picked up dem 12 × 12’s and brought ‘em on up to de house and stack ‘em. No one man ain’t never tooted a 12 × 12 befo’ nor since.

So Ole Massa said one day, “Go fetch in de mules. Ah want to look ‘em over.”

Big Sixteen went on down to de pasture and caught dem mules by de bridle but they was contrary and balky and he tore de bridles to pieces pullin’ on ‘em, so he picked one of ‘em up under each arm and brought ‘em up to Old Massa.

He says, “Big Sixteen, if you kin tote a pair of balky mules, you kin do anything. You kin ketch de Devil.”

“Yassuh, Ah kin, if you git me a nine-pound hammer and a pick and shovel!”

Ole Massa got Sixteen de things he ast for and tole ‘im to go ahead and bring him de Devil.

Big Sixteen went out in front of de house and went to diggin’. He was diggin’ nearly a month befo’ he got where he wanted. Then he took his hammer and went and knocked on de Devil’s door. Devil answered de door hisself.

“Who dat out dere?”

“It’s Big Sixteen.”

“What you want?”

“Wanta have a word wid you for a min- ute.”

Soon as de Devil poked his head out de door, Sixteen lammed him over de head wid dat hammer and picked ‘im up and carried ‘im back to Old Massa.

Ole Massa looked at de dead Devil and hollered, “Take dat ugly thing ’way from here, quick! Ah didn’t think you’d ketch de Devil sho ’nuff.”

So Sixteen picked up de Devil and throwed ‘im back down de hole.

Way after while, Big Sixteen died and went up to Heben. But Peter looked at him and tole ‘im to g’wan ’way from dere. He was too powerful. He might git outa order and there wouldn’t be nobody to handle ‘im. But he had to go somewhere so he went on to hell.

Soon as he got to de gate de Devil’s chil-
dren was playin’ in de yard and they seen ‘im and run to de house, says, “Mama, mama! Dat man’s out dere kilt papa!”

So she called ‘im in de house and shet de door. When Sixteen got dere she handed ‘im a li’l piece of fire and said, “You ain’t comin’ in here. Here, take dis hot coal and g’wan off and start you a hell uh yo’ own.”

So when you see a Jack O’Lantern in de woods at night you know it’s Big Sixteen wid his piece of fire lookin’ for a place to go.

**How the Snake Got Poison**

Well, when God made de snake he put him in de bushes to ornament de ground. But things didn’t suit de snake so one day he got on de ladder and went up to see God.

“Good mawnin’, God.”

“How do you do, Snake?”

“Ah ain’t so many, God, you put me down there on my belly in de dust and everything trods upon me and kills off my generations. Ah ain’t got no kind of protection at all.”

God looked off towards immensity and thought about de subject for awhile, then he said, “Ah didn’t mean for nothin’ to be stompin’ you snakes lak dat. You got to have some kind of a protection. Here, take dis poison and put it in yo’ mouf and when they tromps on you, protect yo’ self.”

So de snake took de poison in his mouf and went on back.

So after awhile all de other varmints went up to God.

“Good evenin’, God.”

“How you makin’ it, varmints?”

“God, please do somethin’ bout dat snake. He’s layin’ in de bushes there wid poison in his mouf and he’s strikin’ everything dat shakes de bush. He’s killin’ up our genera-

tions. Wese skeered to walk de earth.”

So God sent for de snake and tole him:

“Snake, when Ah give you dat poison, Ah didn’t mean for you to be hittin’ and killin’ everything dat shake de bush. I give you dat poison and tole you to protect yo’self when they tromples on you. But you killin’ everything dat moves. Ah didn’t mean for you to do dat.”

De snake say, “Lawd, you know Ah’m down here in de dust. Ah ain’t got no claws to fight wid, and Ah ain’t got no feet to git me out de way. All Ah kin see is feets comin’ to tromple me. Ah can’t tell who my enemy is and who is my friend. You gimme dis protection in my mouf and Ah uses it.”

God thought it over for a while then he says:

“Well, snake, I don’t want yo’ generations all stomped out and I don’t want you killin’ everything else dat moves. Here take dis bell and tie it to yo’ tail. When you hear feets comin’ you ring yo’ bell and if it’s yo’ friend, he’ll be keerful. If it’s yo’ enemy, it’s you and him.”

So dat’s how de snake got his poison and dat’s how come he got rattles.

Biddy, biddy, bend my story is end.

Turn loose de rooster and hold de hen.

**How the Possum Lost the Hair off His Tail**

Yes, he did have hair on his tail one time. Yes, indeed. De possum had a bushy tail wid long silk hair on it. Why, it useter be one of de prettiest sights you ever seen. De possum struttin’ ’round wid his great big ole plumey tail. Dat was ’way back in de olden times before de big flood.

But de possum was lazy—jus’ like he is
today. He sleep too much. You see Ole Nora had a son named Ham and he loved to be playin’ music all de time. He had a banjo and a fiddle and maybe a guitar too. But de rain come up so sudden he didn’t have time to put ’em on de ark. So when rain kept comin’ down he fretted a lot ‘cause he didn’t have nothin’ to play. So he found a ole cigar box and made hisself a banjo, but he didn’t have no strings for it. So he seen de possum stretched out sleeping wid his tail all spread round. So Ham slipped up and shaved de possum’s tail and made de strings for his banjo out de hairs. When dat possum woke up from his nap, Ham was playin’ his tail hairs down to de bricks and dat’s why de possum ain’t got no hair on his tail today. Losin’ his pretty tail sorta broke de possum’s spirit too. He ain’t never been de same since. Dat’s how he always actin’ shame-faced. He know his tail ain’t whut it useter be; and de possum feel mighty bad about it.

1. Old Nora: Noah was ordered to build an ark so that he and his family might survive the flood (Genesis 6–9).

How the ’Gator Got Black

Ah’m tellin’ dis lie on de ’gator. Well, de ’gator was a pretty white varmint wid coal black eyes. He useter swim in de water, but he never did bog up in de mud lak he do now. When he come out de water he useter lay up on de clean grass so he wouldn’t dirty hisself all up.

So one day he was layin’ up on de grass in a marsh sunnin’ hisself and sleepin’ when Brer Rabbit come bustin’ cross de marsh and run right over Brer ’Gator before he stopped. Brer ’Gator woke up and seen who it was trompin’ all over him and trackin’ up his pretty white hide. So he seen Brer Rabbit, so he ast him, “Brer Rabbit, what you mean by runnin’ all cross me and messin’ up my clothes lak dis?”

Brer Rabbit was up behind a clump of bushes peerin’ out to see what was after him. So he tole de ’gator, says: “Ah ain’t got time to see what Ah’m runnin’ over nor under. Ah got trouble behind me.”

’Gator ast, “Whut is trouble? Ah ain’t never heard tell of dat befo’.”

Brer Rabbit says, “You ain’t never heard tell of trouble?”

Brer ’Gator tole him, “No.”

Rabbit says: “All right, you jus’ stay right where you at and Ah’ll show you whut trouble is.”

He peered ’round to see if de coast was clear and loped off, and Brer ’Gator washed Brer Rabbit’s foot tracks off his hide and went on back to sleep agin.

Brer Rabbit went on off and lit him a li’dard knot and come on back. He set dat marsh afire on every side. All around Brer ’Gator de fire was burnin’ in flames of fire. De ’gator woke up and pitched out to run, but every which a way he run de fire met him.

He seen Brer Rabbit sittin’ up on de high ground jus’ killin’ hisself laughin’. So he hol-lered and ast him:

“Brer Rabbit, whut’s all dis goin’ on?”

“Dat’s trouble, Brer ’Gator, dat’s trouble youse in.”

De ’gator run from side to side, round and round. Way after while he broke thru and hit de water “ker ploogum!” He got all cooled off but he had done got smoked all up befo’ he got to de water, and his eyes is all red from de smoke. And dat’s how come a ’gator is black today—cause de rabbit took advantage of him lak dat.

1. li’dard knot: a kind of wood used in torches.

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