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# Hoppin' Down the Bunny Trail: Behind the Banishment of Walt Disney's Song of the South in search of Uncle Remus

Michael Galiano  
*University of New Orleans*

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Hoppin' Down the Bunny Trail:  
Behind the Banishment of Walt Disney's *Song of the South*  
in search of Uncle Remus

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in  
Film, Theater, and Communication Arts

by

Michael Galiano

B.A. Mississippi State University, 2001  
M.A. University of New Orleans, 2006

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## ABSTRACT

This study is an informative discussion on the history behind Walt Disney's film, *Song of the South*, based on the Uncle Remus tales originally written by Joel Chandler Harris, which will be addressed in Chapter One. Chapter Two elaborates on the methods within the vehicles of two distinct media versions in two different time periods as the problematic source of perception. Chapter Three relates why this is due to cultural sensitivities pertaining to the film and the suggested media guidelines by minority organizations that have gained power since the Civil Rights movement. Chapter Four discusses the historical data showing the transition of folklore that was not indigenous to North America, but an oral tradition carried from the heart of Africa. Chapter Five will present the Analysis and Discussion of the cultural and economic ramifications surrounding this particular folklore to be followed by a review of the information in the conclusion.

## INTRODUCTION

Throughout the course of time, cultures have passed down stories of cautionary tales, fables, morals, and religious beliefs in order to guide its members down the straight and narrow path. These legends may have not always been especially pleasant, or the most ethical religious ideas, but the moral of the story is the matter of concern embedded in the assorted lessons of every cultural heritage. Parents and elders warn their children on how to avoid and approach certain situations in life or how to conduct themselves just for their personal self interest. A cautionary tale tends to foreshadow a looming danger in its plot. It was a mistake for Little Red Riding Hood to relay information to the Big Bad Wolf. Of course, the story must have its purpose, so she proceeds to do it anyway, thus enabling the tale to teach others about learning from one's mistakes and reducing the potential naivety of trusting in strangers. There is a valid reason for this; for the Big Bad Wolf is not a complete fabrication. He does exist indeed. There are Big Bad Wolves the world over, waiting behind trees for any young and innocent Red Riding Hood to cross their paths.

This classic European tale has many adult connotations to it, and this story is just one of many that were brought to North America and survived through the spread of knowledge on the continent. America, due to its short history as a culture, has borrowed many old European legends, folk tales, and superstitions which are told to children for their entertainment and education, stretching across generations. As Americans, most of our native legends and myths are stories of heroism and honor featuring early political figures and their bravery in carving out the nation in which we live. George Washington

could not lie to his father about chopping down the cherry tree. Abe Lincoln walked for miles through harsh weather to return a penny to the shopkeeper who had accidentally given him more change than necessary. These yarns are planted in our heads when we are youngsters in order to instill a sense of patriotism and duty. However, the stories such as “Red Riding Hood,” “Jack and the Beanstalk,” “Rapunzel,” and “The Golden Goose” are told to us for different reasons...for the coming of age and the gathering of wisdom to prepare oneself in the school of hard knocks that life will inevitably test on all individuals.

There are other cautionary myths that entered upon the American stage. Native Americans told stories to their younger ones before the appearance of other foreign legends. Africans, when taken from various tribes for slave trade operations, were regrouped and dispersed throughout the Middle East and the Americas. Africans were intermingled and herded into various locations in North America, but mainly through the South for free labor on agricultural plantations. By the Civil War era, first to third generation African slaves inhabited portions of the South, slaves that still retained their cultural heritage, tribal commonalities, and mythological folklore about their ancestry, Earth’s creation and universal place, and especially stories about animals or *animal spirits*.

Animal spirits are a major common link among different cultures around the globe, and one we should not ignore. Animals have been used quite often for several millennia for personification in stories involving characters on eventful journeys, missions, and in small anecdotes. What is it that attracts us and especially children to animals and their adventures? Perhaps it is a mystery that will never be completely



solved, but it is purely evident that this communicative phenomenon has existed and still survives within our psyche, our oral, and our written culture.

Of course, the twentieth century offered another medium with which to relate these stories to the public...film. This new medium inevitably reshaped our perceptions of not only history, but folklore itself, illuminating certain concepts and images into the public mind about life's conditions prior to our existence at the current time. Many films, television shows, documentaries, and photographs have been molded into features trying to express the historical portrayal of life, people, and conditions in the Old American South, a time period from which nobody is alive to remember.

Be that as it may, cultural history has a way of surviving *so long as we care to preserve it*. Five centuries ago, Guttenberg is credited for giving the West the ability to preserve language, literature, and communication, thereby dissolving the sole reliance upon oratory and curing a long, massive plague of illiteracy. In strikingly similar fashion to the current growth of the Internet, this historical cycle could not be circumvented or contained despite the efforts to obstruct and hinder its progress from various power holders. The spread of knowledge, myth, culture, history, philosophy, science, religion, and all else became available for many commoners, which was a monumental milestone in self education and mental development. Even a reawakening of the old Greco-Roman "taboos" of creation, religion, epic stories, and wisdom resurfaced with this new technology of mass printing. The Renaissance era enabled the West to preserve precisely whatever it desired, whether by order of the local reigning prince or not.

It still survives with us today. Print is *not* dead, not by a long shot yet, and this was especially true in the 1800s for every functioning literate member of society. Just as

the stenographer records testimony in a transcript in court, so did many individuals of the Civil War era attempt to record events of the war, its participants, economics, and more. Some post Civil War literature, fiction and nonfiction, was not so bold, and grandiose. Some of it was less complex per se. It intended to convey alternate meanings outside the prevalent forces of the cultural mentality that existed during that time. There were authors, even then, that cared deeply about humanity in general, objective views on the country, and the preservation of folklore within Southern heritage that did not “shine in white,” so to speak. One such author was Joel Chandler Harris.

As Americans, we have struggled with many hardships to practice what we preach according to the United States Constitution. The relations between black and white cultures in this country’s history are an important topic of American progress or the hindrance thereof. As this thesis will show, Joel Chandler Harris and his legacy of Uncle Remus tales about “critters” plans gone awry are pivotal examples of what can blossom under particular circumstances in time, when blacks and whites coexisted in the earlier days of this country’s history. The tales of B’rer Rabbit, B’rer Fox, B’rer Bear and other creatures in the plots are a timeless and honorable component of American children’s folklore. As the topic will examine, an error occurs in a different generational context of viewing ethnic relations in America, through a technologically altered form of media expression. The exploration and clarification of this topic will benefit the growth of learning from one another on a similar basis of experience and foresightedness in events that may trouble us in our lives. The Civil Rights movement was a time for African American culture to sweep away the “old demons” of prejudicial views, yet Harris and

Uncle Remus were caught in a whirlwind of misconception after the Disney version was released.

Joel Chandler Harris, a young, white, illegitimate child, became apprenticed to a plantation owner who also printed his own newspaper. Harris, in his off-work hours, began to spend time with the Negroes who worked on the plantation where he grew up. He recalls many of his best times sitting with them to listen to the elders of the group tell myths and fables about animals and occasionally people who got themselves in and out of ridiculous situations that could have been entirely avoided with enough foresight or plain common sense. These stories, as this project will demonstrate, are not the warped versions of racist anecdotes perceived by some today. They are extremely valuable tools of learning for children, and significant components of American-made folklore, Southern culture, and African American history.

It is impossible to thoroughly delve into this review without a look at the “offspring,” so to speak, of the narrator Harris created, “Uncle Remus.” In Chapter 1, a brief history of Harris and his life is essential to launching into the cultural development of this particular brand of folklore with an open mind. His personal life is a case uniquely linked to the literary ascension of the wise old Uncle Remus character, an elderly Negro in the Old South set in the mid 1800s. Uncle Remus is the storyteller of morals that are not unlike Aesop’s fables, involving indigenous animals of North America, three of which are the main players in the narrator’s stories, B’rer Rabbit, B’rer Fox, and B’rer Bear. The events in Harris’s early life are strongly reflective in his approach to children’s literature, and to our understanding of why a white man would so unusually use a black man as his main, superior, all knowing guru-like character in the

mid to late nineteenth and early twentieth century American South. It is essential that an understanding of Harris's background is laid out in order to conceptualize this marginal, non-stereotypical case that provided him with a deeper understanding of life, folklore, and culture as a whole. Excerpts from Harris's newspaper writings, Southern and Civil War literature, and primarily examples of the Uncle Remus stories will be provided for comparative and contrasting analysis against the film that Harris never saw coming...Walt Disney's *Song Of The South*.

Chapter 2 presents the transition of the Uncle Remus tales in the hands of the Disney Corporation. Disney's production of the adaptation of these tales into the cartoon feature, *Song of the South*, was first released in 1946. Viewing this film from the combined genre of Southern Film and Children's Film, we will explore the inherent stereotypes, images, and "flaws" that in the next few decades would become an issue of controversy during the Civil Rights Movement by African Americans and the NAACP. African American critics pointed out problematic representations among specific live action images in their review of the film, not so much the animated segments,

Chapter 3 discusses how the film would be viewed as misleading and too lax of a portrayal of the coexistence between blacks and whites during the latter half of the 1800s in the Old South. There is valid reasoning here behind Disney's tendency to sweeten old children's stories to the point of misrepresentation. Granted, this is a children's movie; but there are certain scenes within the film that touch upon 19<sup>th</sup> century life that even Harris left completely out of his scribblings. It appears that the problem occurred when the story was transferred from paper to film, as is this project's intent to exemplify. These two forms of media on the same subject conflicted with each other in unexpected

ways due to their differing, molded portrayals. However, due to Disney's chokehold on these stories, and their fear of doing anything which may be perceived as politically incorrect, the original tales are scarcely performed in any other cartoon feature, if at all. The Civil Rights era noticed this film, and paved the way for Disney's eventual locking it away. However, all large movements in history, from the standpoint of any culture, tend to be accompanied by a particular zeal to revise the history before it, hide it, or even eliminate it. This is where Harris becomes forgotten for what he was actually trying to accomplish, apparently due to the Disney portrayal.

Chapter 4 reviews the cultural heredity and its significance within this country's history. There is a strong possibility that these tales are fresher from Africa than seen at first glance. A chronological pattern within the American South's history will be presented to support this hypothesis. The African continent was, and still is in many respects, an oral culture.

Chapter 5 presents the analysis, and discussion sections. The analysis will be ascertained by three research questions. It will be discovered that there are peculiar similarities between the main character of the film and Harris, which will be dealt with in the first research question. The second question opens the discussion to the film's provocation of emotions. The contention is that what worked for Harris's Uncle Remus was unsuitable for Disney's Uncle Remus, after the test of 20<sup>th</sup> century America, ultimately leading to Harris being locked away with the film. The third research question probes the actual authenticity of the tales.

The conclusion will discuss the cultural heredity of folklore and its significance within this country's history. It will be necessary to compare samples from mythological

folklore outside of America from another time. Again, the use of “animal spirits” and the personification of animals in cultural folklore is a repetitive feature among various ethnic groups. An anthropological pattern of common sense, cultural heredity and knowledge, evidently surfaces when children are taught these stories of wisdom and self preservation and a common link between us all tends to emerge when examining these phenomena in the development and transition of all morality tales. All places and all tongues have contributed to this development, and this will be covered in a relative manner. Looking beyond our biases and prejudices, the Uncle Remus tales have provided us with more historically rich content than we may be aware of today. Further focus on the political and economic criteria surrounding this topic will also be discussed. What are the potential harmful effects of Disney’s withholding of releasing *Song of the South*? What are the benefits of doing so? The pros and cons shall be weighed on this topic. However, the overall objective will be to demonstrate that distortions and misunderstandings about the origin of these stories and their points have been made by all sides involved in the matter. Then, upon summarization, the issues at hand and their impact upon knowledgeable expression to children will also be discussed.

The tales we learned in our youth always seem to stick with us. They get passed on from generation to generation. Tales of morality, of good versus evil, or simply about common sense are prevalent throughout all the cultures in history. One only needs to look toward Walt Disney for such countless examples. Walt Disney’s tendency to sugarcoat the old tales that are told to children by their predecessors, have led to a love/hate relationship with the public. The remarkably talented artistic skills of Disney Studios tend to conflict with its constant need to tell the story in “a nice way,” where the

hero wins the girl and evil is defeated. This may be pleasant for American children; but it simultaneously subtracts much of the substance from the tale's original meaning. *Song of the South* is partially live and partially animated, yet it still carries that basic "Disney formula." Only three of the many tales Harris wrote are contained within the film; the rest are not so easy to locate in their original context. Current editions tend to be politically correct revisions if they are sold at all. One will face disappointment upon walking into a Barnes & Noble hoping to find a copy of the Uncle Remus tales.

These stories contain valuable lessons for children, much like Aesop's fables. They are distinctly, "good versus evil," but more along the lines of natural, good, old fashioned horse sense. It is imperative that we do not lose this part of our cultural history. These stories must be reviewed again for their specific meanings. The goal of this study is to provide a historical, cultural analysis on the development of this piece of forgotten and hushed children's entertainment. The differences between the written tales and the movie tales were caught in the alternate contexts and the cultural criticisms that befell two distinct centuries. After presenting various facets of the Uncle Remus tales, and *Song of the South*, it will be argued that this film should be released if we are to truly or idealistically believe that as Americans, we are entitled to draw our own conclusions about arts and culture, not have them withheld from us for fear that they may be culturally insensitive, which is a grand sweeping generalization. However the power of gargantuan corporations and politically motivated agencies are much more powerfully to make decisions before the average citizen can on the censure of public entertainment, whether it is in America or not.

## CHAPTER ONE:

### JOEL CHANDLER HARRIS AND HIS EARLY YEARS

This chapter examines the author's life and the sequence of events that shaped Joel Chandler Harris' mode of thinking, which suggests the original authentic intent of the Uncle Remus stories. Harris was exceptional within the overall consciousness that prevailed in a major portion of the South's mindset, one that, in our currently held imagery, portrays the white aristocracy, destitute whites, and African slaves as a scene from a bygone fairy tale land. Harris' descriptions of the old Southern environment travel along a different route in his use of characters. This chapter focuses upon young Harris' situation, his career development, and excerpts from some of the author's other works that reflect Harris' world view...writings that beheld the South's situation from a unique and unusual angle of intellect and nonconformity, all the while expressed in the most humble, polite, and yet, thought-provoking manner. Harris has been viewed as "condescending," or possibly just another racist profiting from the Negro of the Old South (Drimmer, 409.) This chapter will attempt to demonstrate a case otherwise, for any views held in such regard are held by those who are ignorant of his early years or those who have simply dismissed them altogether.

On December 9<sup>th</sup>, 1848, Joel Chandler Harris was born in Eatonton, Georgia in the county of Putnam. Brought into this world in rural and central Georgia near what is now the Oconee National Forest, he was the son of Mary Harris. Evidently, his father was an Irish day laborer who vanished from history quite soon after the child's birth.



Mary was the household employee of the Barnes family, the home where it is suspected that young Joel was born. Luckily, Mary was remembered as a charming lady with a keen mind and a healthy sense of humor by those who knew her. Due to the nature of her character, and according to Harris biographer, Paul M. Cousins, Mary was not totally abandoned and scorned by everyone in the community for having a bastard child, while it was still a very awkward position to be in during the South of the 1800s, white or not. The Barnes family and others in Putnam County aided her where they could in raising the boy. Mary was not so starry-eyed as to wait for his father to return someday, and took care to ensure the boy's schooling and upbringing with help from those to whom she was close, entirely without the absent dad. It was Mary's consistency in work and as much education as she could provide that contributed to young Joel's maturation. Cousins writes in his biography...

Out of concern for his religious training, she took him with her to the services of the Eatonton Methodist church of which she was a member. When he was nine, she gave him a bible, one which she must have purchased at some financial sacrifice, for it was a large and handsomely bound edition...She is known to have read Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* in the hearing of her young son, and it made an impression on him far beyond that of merely entertaining him...When the townspeople learned that Mary Harris was a good seamstress; they supplied her with all the tailoring work which she could turn out, thus able to provide the ordinary necessities for her family. (Cousins, 23-24)

With the help of other locals who knew her, Mary was able to pay for Joel's education. He was known to be extremely shy and quiet in school, especially around

girls. He was more open with boys, but apparently the young redhead's physique was somewhat unflattering for years until he matured. Even into his twenties, he was described by others as pale, freckled, and of a rather frail and feeble build along with a tendency to stammer. Behind this veil, however, he was by his own later admission mischievous and such a shrewd prank planner that the other boys would look to him for well developed schemes. He pursued his studies half-heartedly at that age except for English. The boy seemed to care only for the study of composition and rhetoric according to his own recollection and that of his teachers. Even more interestingly, Cousins informs us from an interview with one of Joel's schoolmates that, "When he failed to show up at the appointed time, they would go in search of him and frequently find him sitting quietly on the steps of a Negro cabin, listening intently to some old Negro man who was telling him a legendary tale of his race" (Cousins, 26).

One of Mary Harris' customers was an esquire with an Eatonton law office by the name of Joseph Addison Turner. Turner would provide the groundwork for Harris' career and quite possibly his psychological makeup from the environmental surroundings he would place the boy in. Harris and Turner became acquainted in Joel's younger years from Turner's comings and goings to deliver and retrieve tailoring work from Mary. During Joel's early to mid teens, Turner had placed the following ad at the local post office:

**WANTED**

ACTIVE INTELLIGENT WHITE BOY 14 OR 15 YEARS OF AGE

TO LEARN THE PRINTER'S TRADE

It was upon answering this ad that young Harris set up the course of his life. Turner, already familiar with the boy and his mother, took him in immediately.

### Life on the Plantation

Turner was the master of a 1,000 acre plantation called “Turnwold” where he had set up a newspaper entitled *The Countryman*. Turner, known to be somewhat of an eccentric by his contemporaries, was an avid fan of literature and an underdog against whatever cause blew overhead at the time. Cousins describes him, along with excerpts from Turner’s own writings, as a staunch supporter of the Union among talk of secession prior to the war and a solid Confederate during and after the war. He was pro-slavery and filled with the sentimental romance of the plantation life; yet evidence tends to support Turner as not being a typical slave owner. He freed many of the slaves and gave various others or free blacks financial incentives for yielding crops from plots Turner had leased or sold to them. One incident reported in Cousins’ biography involves the firing of a capable overseer who was “too rough on the field hands” (Cousins 42.) He invited them to Christmas day feasts, a day which he had mandated for no work. In addition, Turner had openly given permission for Joel to peruse his library and study the “great works” of literature.

During periods of leisure, of which there were many, young Harris would spend of his much time with the black folks on the plantation. In the Penguin Classics’ edition of *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*, Robert Hemmenway’s introduction provides a brief rundown from Harris’ personal story...

Harris's semiautobiographical account of his years at Turnwold, *On the Plantation*, reports that he befriended a runaway slave shortly after arriving, an act of kindness that caused Turnwold's black citizens to treat him with special respect...Two slaves in particular took him under their wing, "Uncle" George Terrell and "Old" Harbert shared with him their repertoire of folk tales. Terrell owned a Dutch oven in which he made ginger cakes each Saturday, then sold them to the children of planters. At twilight, by the light of the oven's fire, he told stories to the children and Joe Harris. (Hemmenway, 12-13.)

According to Cousins, Uncle George Terrell was in his seventies and lived in a cabin doing odd jobs around the area. Also, there was not only Old Harbert, but also Aunt Crissy, a "very superstitious" lady who told legends she had learned from the generations that preceded her. (Cousins, 45.) It was during this time that the character of Uncle Remus was in its embryonic stage. Harris spent an increasing amount of his free time with these individuals, along with the other children. With no genuine father, the boy's yearning to express himself through the pen, and the experiences surrounding him, young Joel began to formulate guidelines that he would maintain in his behavior and his conversation for the rest of his life. If it were not for Terrell, Harbert, and Crissy, and also Turner, Uncle Remus, as we know him, would never have come into existence, along with Walt Disney's *Song of the South* decades later.

In his attempt to train young Harris, Turner tried to mold the boy's vision of the metaphysical plantation atmosphere, an imaginary scene that Harris quietly did not come to entirely believe due to the problems that he witnessed Turner encounter, primarily such as the owner's incessant state of debt in trying to manage plantation affairs. Never-

theless, Turner saw the boy's natural talent, and instilled within him the skill of a printer and writer, correcting and guiding Harris on elements of prose and portrayal where he felt necessary, as he still continued to opine the romantic notions of Southern plantation life in conversation and in print.

### Reality Dawns in Creativity

All of this, which apparently young Joel had suspected of fragility, came crashing down when Federal soldiers occupied Turnwold in 1864. Humiliated and humbled by their authoritarian presence, Turner, the household, and the slaves tried to be as polite and make them as comfortable as possible, secretly hoping all the while that they would not burn the place to the ground, which they did not do. The name "Sherman" still makes Southerners here and there grimace today. From Atlanta to Savannah he made his mark as one of the most brilliant and bloodthirsty generals in history. Young Joel survived being directly in the middle of Sherman's devastating path, and watched as the South that he knew, but did not completely trust, fell apart before his very eyes. The lasting impression on him will never be measured or totally understood. Harris sharply observed how that dynastic ideal which men and women had dedicated themselves to simply became no longer feasible, and never would become so again. Years later for example, *On the Wing of Occasions* reveals Harris throwing himself into his fictional Civil War novel in the introduction to the chapter, "In the Order of Providence."

It is impossible for the present generation to realize the nature and extent of the wound inflicted on the Southern people of that day by the surrender of Lee's army in 1865; and assuredly it is beyond description. No historian will ever be able to

explain it or make its characteristics manifest to the modern mind. It is fortunate, perhaps, that this is so. A population can go through such an experience but once in history...The miracle of dissolution happened. The earthquake arose, shook itself, yawned and fell back into the abyss, carrying with it the whole structure and fabric of a newly formed government and the dearest hopes of those who had contributed to its upbuilding. Hundreds of men and women never recovered from the shock. Some of them pined away and died; others lived on, as it were, in a dream; while still others, cast in an adventurous mould, betook themselves into self-imposed exile. (Harris, 49-50)

Harris watched the crumbling of the social structure that he was born and raised in, but was always bothered by the thought of its stability to begin with. The attitude of the slaves who had stayed changed...not to a revolutionary status as Cousins describes, but a quiet and occasionally withdrawn one. Turner lost his “Yankee” connections in New York and New England, but pursued his stance of slavery as a domestic and foreign related economic base that was immediately subtracted from the South’s fiscal structure, his statements periodically bordering on or spilling over into what our time would popularly deem as bigotry. The North had taken charge and was already beginning its campaign of Reconstruction.

In 1866, a year after the war ended, Turner stopped publishing *The Countryman*, and Harris left for New Orleans to become secretary under William Evelyn, publisher of the *Crescent Monthly*. Eventually becoming homesick, he returned to Georgia after little more than half a year to the town of Forsyth to work at the *Monroe Advertiser*, a position that Turner had recommended for him through his connection to the publisher. Not only

was he working in print again, but he also supplied poems and comical anecdotes of his own. As they became known in circulation, the job offer of associate editor of the *Savannah Morning News* came to him in 1870, two years after the death of Turner...and to Savannah he went. His column, "Affairs in Georgia," was composed of short humorous paragraphs in the fashion of satirical community announcements or police reports. The column grew with success. During this time, Harris also put on some weight, and acquired a more handsome wardrobe. He was no longer dreadfully shy and gawky, and he became a known local figure throughout the city. In 1873, he married Esther LaRose, a French Canadian Catholic who was staying with her parents at the boarding house where Harris also resided. The two stayed together until death, had six children, and Harris converted to Catholicism shortly before he died, another indicator of Harris's journey outside of the Southern Protestant mainstream.

In the late summer of 1876, an eruption of yellow fever ran rampant through Savannah. The epidemic showed no signs of subsiding despite all the hopes that it would. Many were left with no other option but to evacuate, and many died from the plague's attack. Under these conditions, Harris and family left for Atlanta to escape into a higher and cooler climate. It was this move which led Harris on the path that was destined for him at the *Constitution*. The newspaper would not only become his job security, but also his outlet for expressing views that were contrary to public opinion on certain matters.

Julia Collier Harris, his daughter-in-law provides examples in her compilation, *Joel Chandler Harris: Editor and Essayist*. The *Atlanta Constitution* published Harris'

editorial in 1879 under the title, “The Future of the Negro.” The following is an excerpt...

The Edict of Emancipation stranded the Blacks upon a shore bleak and strange and barren, and it is not to be wondered at that hundreds and thousands succumbed to the desolation of poverty...dazzled and dazed by the freedom which had come upon them so suddenly. They flocked to the cities and larger towns in vast numbers, and then helpless and forlorn, fell easy prey to disease and wretchedness of their condition...This condition was, however, abnormal and preliminary. (Harris, 100-101.)

The daughter in law adds her input:

He never faltered in his belief that the Negro would adopt himself to the changed conditions and rise materially and morally if given the full chance. Indeed he constantly sought reliable evidences of the upward march of the blacks upon which to base editorials realizing that the *Constitution* was steadily gaining public attention throughout the country. (Harris, 101-102.)

On May 11<sup>th</sup>, 1883, this excerpt from “The Negro Question” editorial was published...

“There is no reason why any Southern man, woman, or child should have any prejudice against the Negro race. There is no ground for it, there is no excuse for it...with the full knowledge of all the circumstances (of the Civil War...) More pathetic than this is the fact that the Negro has been a creature of circumstances over which he has had no control. He has been a leaf in a storm. He is not responsible for his slavery and his freedom, nor is he responsible for the problem of which he is one of the factors...” (Harris, 104-105.)



Harris held European colonialism in no highly romanticized regard. Spain, which was also notoriously involved in the slave trade, is one example he uses more than once. Two key allusions allow the opportunity for this observation which he let slip by his own admission, in fact. For instance, he briefly injects his views on Spain's projection upon the West in much of a letter to his daughter Lillian dated March 27<sup>th</sup> 1898, on the eve of the Spanish-American War. *In Dearest Chums and Partners; A Domestic Biography*, Hugh T. Keenan has edited a collection of letters to his children that explain many facets about life and all of its topics at hand.

There may be no war with Spain after all. On the other hand, war may be declared before you get this letter. Whatever is done must be done quickly. A war means the ruin of Spain, though for the matter of that it is ruined now. The Cuban revolution was brought about by the oppressive taxes levied by the Spanish government. The Cubans were taxed on everything. This was unjust, and yet Spain was obliged to raise money to pay the interests on its bonds and carry on its government. The Spaniards are out of date with the times. Once they laid claim to this whole continent, and actually held a large part of it. They held Mexico and all of South America. And all has been lost to them by reason of their pride and folly...I cannot tell you how long the war will last if it comes. War is one of the demons that is hard to pacify when once they break loose. We cannot wipe out the Spanish navy in a day – or we couldn't if their ships were manned by real men instead of pompous mannikins. I have never liked any of the Spaniards except for Don Quixote and Sancho Panza – and the first was crazy, the second a clown. (pp. 182-183).

In the opening tale, *A Search For Treasure*, from his children's history book, *Stories of Georgia*, tells of De Soto's expedition and his dealings with the Native American Indians.

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March, 1540, De Soto's army...seized from the Indians a large supply of maize...They made slaves of the Indians, treating them with more severity than they treated their beasts of burden. It is no wonder, therefore, that the Indians, discovering the greed of the Spaniards for gold, should have spread rumors that large quantities of the yellow metal could be found farther north... (Harris, 9-10.) Many times during the march the Spaniards were on the point of starvation, and the account of their sufferings as set forth in the history of the expedition is intended to be quite pathetic. We need not pause to shed any tears over these things, for the sufferings of the Spaniards endured were nothing compared to the sufferings they inflicted upon the Indians. (Harris, 12.)

Young Harris's early years set him on a path that he could not nor would not deter from for the rest of his days. His teachers were a collage of upper and working class whites, free Negroes, and slaves. Harris, in retrospect, simply cannot be accused of being a rambling, narrowly close minded, stereotypical redneck. He has been called "moderate" by some, but it is quite plausible to place Harris as a visionary, or at least a beacon of a very small, yet noticeable civil rights stance. Through the examples above, it is clear that Harris saw the South, national, and international politics from a uniquely positioned perspective of the time.

He was trying to capture a moment in literature in the best way that he could while expressing a politically objective and progressive viewpoint throughout his life.

The stories used by Disney in *Song of the South* will be reviewed against Harris' recorded narratives of the Uncle Remus tales. His life in Atlanta would be the birthplace of Remus in print; but it can be asserted that he was actually born in the oral presentations young Joel listened to attentively in the cabins of Uncle George Terrell, Old Harbert, and the kitchen of Aunt Crissy, all of whom dwelt on Turner's dreamland of Turnwold. If Harris was the average white stuffed shirt of the time, he would not have cared so much about preserving the dialect and much more importantly, *the lessons* that the black folks had taught him. Harris was indeed trying to lock onto a moment in time that not just the South, but basically the rest of the country expressed very little concern over, that is until B'rer Rabbit, B'rer Fox, and B'rer Bear came to the national stage to deliver the messages of the slaves through the composite Uncle Remus.

#### Life Unfolds for Harris

There are apologist defenses of Harris which have been scorned by the opposition as "psycho babbling sympathetic drivel," but the plain and simple evidence strongly supports he was not a bigoted demon. How must we not expect that one outcome of the situation was that Joel Chandler Harris was not affected by this rich, ancient wisdom? Evidently, he was dedicated to casting the dice on issues that were on the back burner if at all present. Arguably, Harris is the "baby that was thrown out with the bathwater." Well after his own death, he became guilty by association with Disney's portrayal, (over which he had absolutely no control,) and almost forgotten completely during the discussions of perceptions and analyses of racism in the media since the Civil Rights era. When Harris is examined in his youth, it becomes increasingly difficult to believe that he

grew into the Southern white male who looks down upon others as inferiors with an air of self-inflated superiority. Harris, in all pragmatism, delivered recollections of what he knew and learned provided in a package that worked successfully with the public.

In the North too the tales which had been written merely to fill a newspaper corner attracted attention, the New York Evening Post welcoming them as a true creation. Soon, a New York publisher induced the author to gather them together as *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings* (1880). The popularity of the book was immediate and prolonged. A second volume, *Nights With Uncle Remus* (1883) placed the unpretentious newspaper paragrapher among the leading literary men of the country. (Miles, et. al, 324-325.)

Of course, Harris had the advantage of having white skin, and although he was occasionally sympathetic in his writings to Southern notions of Romanticism and economy, he continued to pursue and clarify to the rest of the nation that this unique folklore and culture existed in a special world. It is highly improbable that Harris' sole dedication was monetary gain and laughter at the expense of the black race through the success of the Uncle Remus tales. It was from memory that he assembled this construct, as is exemplified in the fascinating article, "Reading, Intimacy, and the Role of Uncle Remus in White Southern Social Memory."

That Harris had gained access to a hidden transcript is obvious. That he knew what he was doing also seems clear. 'It was night, and impossible to take notes,' he explained, 'but the fact was not to be regretted. The darkness gave greater scope and freedom to the narratives of the Negroes, and but for this friendly curtain it is doubtful if the conditions would have been favorable to storytelling.'

Harris was not simply romanticizing the darkness; instead, his awareness that he could not take notes while blacks were talking...indicated that he knew he was hearing something that African Americans did not normally allow white adults to hear. As his comments on a volume of South African folklore...he also understood that informants were capable of 'cook[ing]' their narratives to suit their audience. (Ritterhouse, p.602.)

The course of his career began with the evacuation from Savannah. He acquired employment and eventually promotional recognition when he found newspaper work at the *Constitution* during what he believed would be temporary displacement, which became permanent since the yellow fever epidemic showed no signs of diminishment for months. As Cousins explains, it awakened itself into Joel's consciousness around his time as associate editor, approximately twenty years shy of 1900.

Harris said that in reading an issue of *Lippincott's Magazine* some time in the 1870's he had come across an article dealing with Southern Negro Folklore. "This article," he said, gave me my cue, and the legends told by Uncle Remus are the result." The legends themselves were not new to him, for he said that he had heard them in Putnam County when he was a boy but he had had no idea of their literary value until he read the *Lippincott* article...When the various aspects of the story had fallen into harmonious relationship in Harris' mind, he wrote "The Story of Mr. Rabbit and Mr. Fox as told by Uncle Remus," and the *Constitution* published it on the editorial page of its issue for July 20, 1879. (104-105.)

Harris published many Uncle Remus tales, but what stands foremost in his memory is the dialect in which he wrote in his style of recreating the Old Southern black

accent. The debate is infinite, but Harris' careful placement of punctuation marks in his attempt to recreate the speech from the memory in his ear, obviously took some tedious work on his part. Reading these stories in the style which Harris formulated is not a simple process; it takes time to digest the sentence from the dialect he tried to replicate, opposite the notion that he did it to belittle the audible black Southern accent. His innate shyness, and the conflicting determination to produce something that very few others cared to undertake at that time, eventually made him tired of the demand for the stories. He may have even felt that they had not accomplished what they were supposed to do. Yet he persisted in his voice of humble, safeguarded wisdom. Harris died on July 8, 1908, leaving behind him the legacy from his pen in the hands of a large family. What he did not encounter nor ever conceive of was the mess that would eventually occur from his attempt to show the nation a small part of the Georgia that he knew and reminisced over. Harris's vehicle worked in the nineteenth century and into part of the twentieth. The new vehicle, created in the mid twentieth, would work for a short period until a tremendous cultural clash would envelope it.

## CHAPTER TWO: METHODS

Four qualitative measurements comprise the analysis for this study. The first consists of the previous selections from biographical material on Joel Chandler Harris, including specific passages from his personal works of literature that indicate his social views, and portions of the editorials published throughout his newspaper career. The biographical material above also includes passages that chronologically explain Harris's birth, youth, maturation, environmental surroundings, and career beginnings. The argument is specifically structured in order to present derivations of Harris's early social and psychological development. From his various works of literature outside the Uncle Remus tales, his skepticism on romantic notions of American history and the Old South, and the predominant contemporary views of his society are used to debunk the notion that he looked upon minorities as inferior. The chosen works from these segments of his editorials directly present several of his statements about the status of race relations in America, which contradict many modern generalizations about white southern males of the nineteenth century.

Second, the Walt Disney version of the Uncle Remus tales produced under the title, *Song of the South*, is summarized for the reader's benefit due to the lack of availability since Walt Disney studios removed it from circulation in 1986. "The Tar Baby" is used as the most illustrative, along with animated stills from the film for visual accompaniment due to widely varying interpretations of this particular story and scene. All animated stills were reproduced from websites with jpeg images and gif images for public domain, and also scanned in and pasted from a 1946 Disney publication of a

children's storybook version of *Song of the South*. A review of the major players in the film is also analyzed for examination of the social interaction that was portrayed in the film's plot. This is compared and contrasted with the information on Harris's life and his motivation behind writing the Uncle Remus tales. Disney's depiction presents various parallels as well as differences in the use of youthful characterization on the plantation.

Third, excerpts from African American critics, commentary from NAACP releases, loyal film supporters and objectionists, and follow up reports from The Disney Company are discussed about the film's imagery pertaining to life in the Old South. The Civil Rights movement is analyzed as a stage set for vocalization on issues long ignored. With these new statements, mainstream critics conclude that *Song of the South* as a media form that was artistically impressive, but culturally insulting. From the presentation of these findings, the financial motives of Disney's corporate endeavors in marketing and public relations stances are seemingly trumped by politically powerful influences. The debate over this topic has earned a position on the Internet rather than journals, major news media, and magazines or newspapers.

Last, the historical evidence gathered from anthropological knowledge of West-Central Africa leans in Harris's defense and the defense of critics who maintain similar positions. Tracing the roots of African folklore leads to early versions of the B'rer Rabbit caricature. He is not exactly a victor, but he is definitely a trickster. The use of this motif dates back ages to the heart of Africa and its people, as Chapter 5 will discuss. It will be shown that such character traits within the style of this folklore survived their transition to North America and were discovered by Harris in his youth as he listened to the tales told by Terrell, Old Harbert, and Aunt Crissy. Young Harris would become the



conductor of this transition. He would also be the only recorded source of this folklore for practically the first two centuries of United States history.

### Disney Takes Control

America then endured World War I, The Roaring Twenties, The Great Depression, and World War II. One year after the war's end, Walt Disney Studios released their new live and animated action film, *Song of the South*. Disney would have been more than well familiar with Harris' tales when he was young. He was born in 1901 and was approximately six and a half years old when Harris himself died. Raised in Missouri with an inquisitive nature about animals, Walt would have had no trouble obtaining copies and familiarizing himself with the Harris' works. Later into his developed career, Disney acquired rights from the Harris estate to set about on his company's own production, and *Song of the South* arrived to the big screen in 1946. It appeared in theaters again in 1956, 1972, and 1981. 1986 would be the year of its last theatrical showing.

To summarize the highlights of the film, which is not widely available for examination, the picture begins with Johnny, played by the child actor Bobby Driscoll, who is approximately eight or nine years of age, his mother Sally (Ruth Warrick), his father (Eric Rolf), and Aunt Tempy, (Hattie McDaniel), traveling by coach wagon to the grandmother's plantation in rural Georgia. There is some obvious tension between the couple, as the father is obligated to return to Atlanta to work for the newspaper he writes for, all to the emotional detriment of Johnny who wails at his departure. From the dialogue, we gather that the father's writings are unpopular or perhaps too modern in

comparison to Old Southern views. Johnny befriends Toby, (another generic old name for young black males, played by Glenn Leedy), the young black boy of the same age who hangs around the house with seemingly few responsibilities. Toby's only real chore seems to be hanging out with little Johnny. At an early point in the film, Toby advises Johnny to stay clear of the bull's pasture and especially within the perimeter of the beast's wooden rail fence. During the course of Johnny's arrival, he receives cues and hints in the conversations among other characters about a man named "Uncle Remus," who is a marvelous local storyteller, respected by both blacks and whites.

Late into his first night, Johnny devises a plan to escape with the intent of rejoining his father in Atlanta. As he sneaks past the more overgrown outskirts of the plantation, he encounters the slaves or freed slaves (the precise time period is still a little sketchy as to whether it is post or pre-Civil War, despite the controversy, for it is never specifically indicated outright in the film.) They all appear to be having an absolutely joyous spiritual singing and chanting about Uncle Remus, (played by James Baskett.) Curious as to what is happening; Johnny is drawn toward an elderly black man's voice coming from beyond some small shrubs and trees. The camera closes in as Johnny slyly takes a glimpse through an opening in the vegetation at the Uncle Remus he has heard so much about, telling seated black children the story of how "B'rer Rabbit Lost His Tail." Enchanted, Johnny lingers on as Uncle Remus catches him watching with a glance, and proceeds to tell the children how "Miss Sally" used to come and listen to him when she was little. When Aunt Tempy and another young black woman arrive in their aprons to angrily inquire as to where Johnny is since he is missing from the house, the younger

female scolds Toby, who is also present with the other children, for not keeping a tighter watch on Johnny.

Now in what seems to be an almost shocking display of character, demand of respect, and authority, Remus instructs the two women to inform Miss Sally and company that the boy is with him, and that should be the end of it, and so the women depart with inquisitive expressions. He finds very distraught little Johnny in the woods, discovers what is ailing the lad, and assures him they will go to Atlanta together after he eats and packs some things back at the cabin. Johnny is game for it, and goes back with Uncle Remus, where he asks him about the B'rer Rabbit stories, of which Uncle Remus eventually tells him with glee. He proceeds to tell the story of when B'rer Rabbit tried to leave home to run away from his troubles, and of course...one cannot.

This is where the famous or infamous "Zip-a-dee-doo-dah" song breaks out. The artistry in *Song of the South* has been recognized by others, but the sweetened portrayal of certain contents remains problematic. In this animated portion, the first of the three tales used entirely in cartoon form in the film, B'rer Rabbit finds himself caught in B'rer Fox's trip rope. B'rer Bear, the quintessential, happy-go-lucky, village idiot, lumbers on by and strikes up a conversation as to what he's doing hanging up in the tree's rope. B'rer Rabbit cons him into thinking that he is employed to do it, and offers him the job. B'rer Bear gratefully switches places with him immediately before B'rer Fox arrives with an axe, and is stunned to see that B'rer Rabbit escaped. B'rer Fox tells the bear he has been fooled by the rabbit, and the two get into a quarrel as B'rer Rabbit dashes off to his hole in the briar patch, proving Uncle Remus in his point about how, "you can't run away from trouble."

In comparison, what becomes prevalent in this picturesque scene is the connection between Johnny and Uncle Remus. If Disney was trying to honestly do any good, he and his crew must have researched who Joel Chandler Harris was. If the character, “Johnny,” is analyzed subjectively, he forms a fancifully polished version of Harris as a young boy. He is the white boy introduced into a new environment, and makes friends with the wisest of the slaves for companionship. The lessons they teach him surface in his consciousness and behavior. In contrast however, Harris did not arrive at the plantation until he was a young adolescent. His parents were not around, and he certainly did not spring from wealth. These hardships of life are fashioned into happier and more extravagant images of stereotypical sentimentality.

Johnny is so swept in by Uncle Remus’ welcome warmth that he changes his mind about leaving, which of course was the wise intention of the old storyteller. Johnny sticks around and dodges his nervous, demanding, and overbearing mother whenever he can, who dresses him daily in rather noticeably wealthy attire of the Little Lord Fauntleroy line. Johnny also meets Ginny, (played by Luanna Patten), who is the youngest of a poor white family. She has two mean older brothers, neither of whom appear to be over the age of eleven. They antagonize her, Johnny, and Toby at random until Johnny, who begins to apply the teachings of Uncle Remus to the events in his life, tricks them in the same manner B’rer Rabbit would. By using the lessons of the second tale, he causes Ginny’s two brothers to get themselves in trouble with their mother, trouble that leads to their punishment.

B’rer Rabbit’s “Laffin’ Place” is the third and final cartoon segment used in the film. B’rer Rabbit, caught and tied up by B’rer Fox and B’rer Bear, is about to be

prepared for dinner when he convinces the bear that he has a special laughing place that he goes to, which the fox knows is a lie. B'rer Bear, while certainly not as intelligent, wins over B'rer Fox by virtue of his brute strength, and demands that they go to the laughing place. Forced to trek to the "Laffin' Place" by the B'rer Bear's incredulity, B'rer Fox is miserable as he and the bear are led astray into the woods by the captured B'rer Rabbit who is ripe with energy and joyful anticipation. Upon reaching their destination, the rabbit points out that it is in a small overgrown area in front of them, into which B'rer Bear blindly runs. Of course, the laughing place turns out to be a thicket full of bees, which attack the bear and the fox, while B'rer Rabbit escapes, laughing all the way.

It is the second tale which stands out as the most memorable, whether in a positive or negative manner. The replication of Harris's accentual dialect in the dialogue of the animated characters, and the combined imagery of the story has remained one of the most debated portions of the film and the Uncle Remus tales to this day. There is more to this story than meets the eye. It dates back to a time period well before Disney portrayed it in his cartoon fashion, and quite possibly before the entrance of the European into North America at all. It is a tale that can be applied at so many levels, from minding your own business to nations avoiding war. The point of this tale has been fogged by the quick assumption that it is automatically racial in connotation. Various persons may have misused it as such a term, but the originality behind it is something to be treasured and remembered. It is a fine point which hits home for everyone, for the meaning, the symbolism, and the significance is eternal in its imagery.

## The Tar Baby



“The Tar Baby” is the archetypal centerpiece of Harris’ memories. While it can be argued for and against its derogatory and allegedly racist tone, it thrusts home the big taboo about involving oneself in a situation that could have just as well totally avoided. This lesson can be applied endlessly in our lives, moments when we should have turned our heads and remained quiet. “The Tar Baby,” children’s folk tale or not, balances out simplistically and evenly with Nietzsche’s “when you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes into you.” How many times have we acted like B’rer Rabbit, diving headfirst into



areas unknown to us? Then, in a fit of desperation, we use our last ditch intellectual efforts to free ourselves from a bind we suddenly discover to be unappealing?

The story goes as follows: B’rer Fox with the company of B’rer Bear, molds a large glob of tar in a



cauldron, seats it on a log, and shapes the formation into a body and a head. The fox gives it a jacket, a hat, two buttons for eyes, and the bowl of a pipe for a nose. The

objective is that when B'rer Rabbit passes down the road, he will become curious about



the Tar Baby and accidentally get stuck in it.

The two tricksters set the log down on the side of a dirt road immediately before the rabbit comes hopping down the path. Upon seeing the tar baby, B'rer Rabbit gives him a friendly Southern greeting of "Howdy!" Of course,

the tar baby offers no response. B'rer Rabbit, confused by the inaction of common courtesy, attempts to greet him again, with the same failed result. B'rer Rabbit, assuming that the tar baby is just being an obnoxiously rude snob, threatens to punch him if he does not return the greeting. B'rer Fox and B'rer Bear are anxiously waiting in the woods nearby as they watch the rabbit count to three before he punches the tar baby. The rabbit lands his fist into the tar baby's face, which immediately devours his arm into an inescapable sticky blob. In an attempt to free his arm, he throws the other one into its face, which also seizes his arm. B'rer Fox and B'rer Bear watch gleefully as the rabbit kicks and squirms in a frenzied attempt to free himself, only to end up trapped in a tar ball.

B'rer Rabbit finds himself in a very awkward and dangerous position as he watches helplessly as B'rer Bear and B'rer Fox approach him in his tar baby trap, for now they have got him for certain. B'rer Fox relishes in his crafty handiwork in catching the rabbit, and removes



him from the tar to contemplate with big B'rer Bear on just how to kill the rabbit in order



to prepare him for dinner. As B'rer Fox ponders several various methods of punishment like hanging, skinning, and such, B'rer Rabbit notices the old Briar Patch nearby. He begs

and pleads with B'rer Fox to do anything except throw him in the briar patch, which is full of thorns.

When B'rer Fox sees the briar patch, the sharp frightening thorns, catch his eye. Assuming the rabbit will be skewered on the thorny branches, B'rer Fox hurls him into the middle of the wild growth, where B'rer Rabbit disappears into it faking screams of agony with a grin on his face. He pops up to see B'rer Fox and B'rer Bear and reminds them cheerfully that he was “born and bred in a briar patch.” B'rer Bear and B'rer Fox are humiliated as the bunny hops away to freedom along a split rail fence.

Uncle Remus tells us that “B'rer Rabbit bein' little,” has to use “his head instead of his foots.” He managed to get away this time, but the “poor little critter...he learned a powerful





lesson that day...but it just goes to show ya' what happens when ya' mix up wit' something ya' got no business wit' in the first place...and don't cha' never forget it.

The Tar Baby has been viewed from a wide range of perception as racially insulting in its appearance, (and a term occasionally used in derogatory connotation, although tar itself actually is black,) to the extent of B'rer Rabbit as the entire



personification of the white man getting himself involved in the institution of slavery. This is neither here nor there in terms of race; what is significant is the moral of the story. One *should not* involve oneself in a situation that one has no reason

to participate in. This is the nature of all the stories within the Harris collection. Uncle Remus is the light tower of wisdom and experience in a world where people frequently act before they think. The Tar Baby is a major metaphorical illustration of this type of human behavior. Everyday we are led into thinking about or acting upon things that we have no control over. In the process, we also run the risk of becoming entrenched in the “tar babies” of life.

The camera captures the overlapping fade-in and fade-out of the animated sequence in transitional return to live action of the Johnny and Toby listening quietly to Uncle



Remus, hanging on the edge of every word the old man tells them. Each story the elder

entertainer tells Johnny becomes more personal for the boy. A special bond strengthens between the two throughout the film.

### Conflict and Resolution

Unfortunately, not all the characters smile upon the relationship. Johnny's mother, Miss Sally, eventually tires of Uncle Remus being so involved in Johnny's life. She concludes that he is the source of Johnny's new found, independent self-image, and mistakenly and rashly orders him to cease all communication and interaction with the boy, upon which Uncle Remus obeys reluctantly. When Remus decides that the best thing to do is leave, and Johnny discovers that he is doing so, the boy races after the coach wagon Uncle Remus departs on. Johnny attempts to intercept Uncle Remus by cutting through the bull's pasture (in a little red suit, no less,) provoking the bull to charge headlong into him. Johnny is then taken into the house injured and suffering delusions. The family, including his father who is called back for the emergency, the black house servants, and the black field hands outside the home place gather in vigil, set by the mood and tone of their hymnal singing. Johnny calls out repeatedly for Uncle Remus, who returns and tells him stories of the brother critters until he returns to consciousness, thankfully tearful of seeing Uncle Remus and his family back together. Uncle Remus has saved the day. It is at this juncture which the film ends on the happiest of notes, along with Uncle Remus and the kids skipping off into the sunset with the animated characters while they all cheerfully sing "Zip-a-dee-doo-dah." The film resolves with the usual metaphysical happy ending for which Disney is so well known. This is what was played to earlier audiences, and what the white majority expected in

1946. It was the practice for many black actors and actresses to be placed in stereotypical roles of subservience, comic relief, and in possession of a love for their employers. Of course, mainstream children's films tend to ignore content that may be too politically persuasive. Yet by the same token, they also make points about morality or simply, "doing the right thing." Depending on the plot, the right thing to do may come in multiple forms within unforeseen situations.

Disney's mistakes stem from the imagery of slaves and field hands singing a happy tune as they stroll away from what is obviously a back-breaking day of agricultural labor. They generally frolic to and fro singing, dancing, and are obediently or cautiously looking out for their white "superiors." Why this behavior was placed in interval portions throughout the film is puzzling, for it does not accurately portray the everyday life in the Old South and it was actually quite unnecessary. The only obvious reason is to portray it romantically. The film could have placed even more emphasis on the relationship between Johnny and Uncle Remus, and also used more than three animated stories to do it. Uncle Remus always honors "Miss Sally's" wishes, even though she does not comprehend how valuable Uncle Remus is in Johnny's life. It is coincidental that Johnny's role, with alternate elements of wealth and youth, parallels Harris's years at Turnwold. In retrospect, the historical evidence surrounding the boy bolsters the claim that this character was compromised. Why was Johnny not set in the role of an illegitimate white boy from a single parent, working class household? Would the negation and skirting of the film have produced different results if Johnny's character had been cast and written closer to the actuality in Harris's life? Was it the film's intent to set poles of society at so great a distance?

With all the commentary over this film, another artist's lost performance from the past is Hattie McDaniel's role in the film. Hattie McDaniel was the African American to win an Oscar, which was for her role as "Mammie" in *Gone with the Wind* (1939). *Gone with the Wind* would not be the same were it not for the talent of this incredible lady. She had been repeatedly placed in stereotypical roles of the house servant, in old and modern settings, but continually displayed her talent, her precision of wit, and her ability to compete with other Golden Age actors and actresses that shared the staging of the screen. While she is in the aforementioned typecast role in *Song of the South*, she also has a supporting role in which she disciplines and helps raise young Johnny. Here is another possible parallel between young Harris and Aunt Crissy. One curious scene unfolds when he enters the kitchen, and she sings to James Baskett (in the role of Uncle Remus) who also won an Oscar for his performance. This scene is particularly interesting, for the two give each other hauntingly, intimately familiar smiles as McDaniel sings, "*Sooner or later ya' gonna' be hangin' around...*" as if they have known each other's nature for a very long time. It comes dangerously close to sexual in nature just by the facial expressions and mannerisms, but safely moves on. Baskett and McDaniel both carried this film through with natural ease and skill. Ironically, the black players were not allowed in the theater for the 1946 premiere in Atlanta. On the other hand, losing this film is equivalent to losing a piece of them in our cinema past.

## CHAPTER THREE

### A POLITICALLY INCORRECT SITUATION

#### A New View Sweeps In

This is a significant part of our history which has been skewed in its representation and misplaced. We have reoccurring facts surrounding Joel Chandler Harris and his beginnings. Furthermore, despite the stereotypes, it would be erroneous to assume that *Song of the South* has nothing to offer. It offers an open door to the knowledge of a relationship so contrary to the images that the film has washed us in, one which political correctness subsequently muted. The author of the original stories, the points he stressed, and his psychological structure have all been usurped by this film which, while it attempted to illustrate it, may have simultaneously destroyed it. As Wadsworth so succinctly put it ...“We murder to dissect.”

The Civil Rights Movement did its utmost to sweep away the old prejudices that pursued relations between black and white Americans. It is a moment in U. S. history that will stand out for as long as we remember its purposefulness. In the process, accomplishments were made, new perspectives established, and alternate viewpoints expressed through the media and into the country. With all great movements in history, consequently, there are issues which are simply cleared *per se*. Sugarcoated representations of the past and all of its clinging spider webs tend to be reanalyzed, reinterpreted, or even renounced. This tends to be the tangential accompaniment of action that rides alongside the reawakening of all shifting national mindsets in human

activity; such movements bring revisions or the entire erasure of past elements. There was no place for *Song of the South* anymore. Curiously, *Gone with the Wind* still remains untouched, perhaps because of its cinematic power, a much larger fan club, or its derivation from a more in-depth source of literature. It became too contradictory and condescending of a painful reminder that African Americans of the Civil Rights Era had learned from stories passed down by their ancestors.

There is very little information in periodicals on the specificity of this matter between Disney and the NAACP on this particular film, but an overwhelmingly healthy amount of Internet blogging, commentary, and petitions, on the situation. While many are the popular outcries and opinions of the pros and cons over the film, there are a select few that, while sometimes pushing in favor one way or another, provide basic factual information on the status of the film itself and its status of going to market today. One of the more objective websites, Jim Hill Media, offers the article by Wade Sampson, “Wednesdays with Wade.” Sampson offers an insightful overview of how the Hays office, in conjunction with the NAACP received wind of the movie’s production. The Hays office advised Disney to gather feedback from black observations before theatrical release...

Walter White, the executive secretary of the NAACP, telegraphed major newspapers around the country with the following statement:

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People recognizes in 'Song of the South' remarkable artistic merit in the music and in the combination of living actors and the cartoon technique. It regrets, however, that in an effort neither to offend audiences in the north or south, the production helps to

perpetuate a dangerously glorified picture of slavery. Making use of the beautiful Uncle Remus folklore, 'Song of the South' unfortunately gives the impression of an idyllic master-slave relationship which is a distortion of the facts. (Sampson, 3.)

The “snopes.com” website offers a valuable excerpt from Patricia Turner’s book, *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies*. Turner’s writings are an almost a damning indictment in the perception of Disney’s *laissez-faire* attitude toward the film...

Disney's 20th century re-creation of Harris's frame story is much more heinous than the original. The days on the plantation ...begin and end with unsupervised Blacks singing songs about their wonderful home as they march to and from the fields. Disney and company made no attempt to render the music in the style of the spirituals and work songs that would have been sung during this era. They provided no indication regarding the status of the Blacks on the plantation. Joel Chandler Harris set his stories in the post-slavery era, but Disney's version seems to take place during a surreal time when Blacks lived in slave quarters on a plantation, worked diligently for no visible reward and considered Atlanta a viable place for an old Black man to set out for. Kind old Uncle Remus caters to the needs of the young white boy whose father has inexplicably left him and his mother at the plantation. An obviously ill-kept Black child of the same age named Toby is assigned to look after the white boy, Johnny. Although Toby makes one reference to his "ma," his parents are nowhere to be seen. The African-American adults in the film pay attention to him only when he neglects his responsibilities as Johnny's playmate-keeper...Thus; Blacks on the plantation are seen as

willingly subservient to the whites to the extent that they overlook the needs of their own children. When Johnny's mother threatens to keep her son away from the old gentleman's cabin, Uncle Remus is so hurt that he starts to run away. In the world that Disney made, the Blacks sublimate their own lives in order to be better servants to the white family. If Disney had truly understood the message of the tales he animated so delightfully, he would have realized the extent of distortion of the frame story. (Turner, 114.)

What is Disney to Do?

The spirits of the Old South never truly go away, they are just hiding out. Cast into molds through media outlets, we see these stereotypes of what the Old South was supposed to be and who people seemingly were, when the actual time and culture truly is, “gone with the wind,” as Margaret Mitchell put it. Despite demand for the film’s release, the fact that it sells on the shelves overseas, and the recent rumors that a 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition would be released this year, Disney will not budge. These whispers about the picture began to bloom when Michael Eisner, blamed for shaky relations between Disney and Pixar, stepped down as CEO, and Robert Iger accepted the position in 2005.

“Collectorz.com” explains further in this byte from a question and answer period (pp.1-2).

Um... we've discussed this a lot. We believe it's actually an opportunity from a financial perspective to put *Song of the South* out. I screened it fairly recently because I hadn't seen it since I was a child, and I have to tell you after I watched it, even considering the context that it was made, I had some concerns about it



because of what it depicted. And ...thought it's quite possible that people wouldn't consider it in the context that it was made, and ...there were some... [long pause] depictions that I mentioned earlier in the film that I think would be bothersome to a lot of people. And so, owing to the sensitivity that exists in our culture, balancing it with the desire to, uh, maybe increase our earnings a bit, but never putting that in front of what we thought were our ethics and our integrity, we made the decision not to rerelease it. Not a decision that is made forever, I imagine this is gonna continue to come up, but for now we simply don't have plans to bring it back because of the sensitivities that I mentioned. Sorry. (1)

This statement translates to, “Although it’s another potential cash cow for us, we wouldn’t dare release it in America again.” Thus forth, *Song of the South* is shelved once again for an undetermined amount of time. Disney simply will not take the chance of a media circus accusing it of a politically incorrect exhibition over a film that was made six decades before in a different cultural time period long ago and far away. What remains is the question of Disney’s intention. Walt Disney, himself, had a tighter grip over film production in 1946; it was not loosed into the arena of corporate investors, board members, and business professionals of the same nature that exists today. It is unlikely that Disney deliberately set out to insult African Americans. What is more probable is that this is simply what was popularly, critically, and financially safe to release in 1946 to major audiences, as heartbreaking and ridiculous as it is that persons such as Baskett and McDaniel were not allowed to sit with their white counterparts during the show’s premiere to enjoy the fruits of their labor.

The misconception falls back upon Harris however, and it is time for modern scholarship to take further serious looks at this writer. Harris, while caught in the river of the time, and having to adapt to his surroundings, repeatedly promoted a stance that was contrary to the contemporary dominant views. Harris was not pressured to write such articles and stories in reference to the political and economic fiascos the black race was thrown into. He could have flown with the tide of general racism which stemmed from the South's humiliation, especially from Reconstruction. In his own rite, Harris saw the dawning of the Civil Rights movement for African Americans from a greater distance before it actually came underway. "As a child and an adolescent, Harris had been on the periphery of conventional Southern society. As a man, his nostalgia was more for a black world than a white one. Harris's ambivalence toward the white South caused him to engage only rarely in glorifying the Lost Cause of the Confederacy..." (Mixon, 459.) Nevertheless, it has been surreptitiously presumed that the original creator behind the stories and characters that Disney released, must have been a racist himself; and there is too much historical data to refute such an assumption, and that he may have smiled upon the concept of the Civil Rights era with a sigh of relief.

During the course of wading through the vagueness surrounding the film's containment, an attempt was successful to go directly to the horse's mouth on the subject. This researcher contacted the Walt Disney World switchboard in Florida. An introduction was established and a polite request was made as to what department or personnel member could discuss the situation. Transference to the Library and Research Center then followed where it was explained that this department was not equipped with a knowledgeable staff that could answer those types of questions, but dealt primarily with

employee affairs. The representative was kind enough to shed some light on who could possibly answer such an inquiry; Consumer Relations and the Walt Disney Archives in Burbank, California. Consumer relations would have to get back on those questions, but the Archives department did respond promptly. A representative stated that the questions would have to be emailed to a Dave Smith so they could be reviewed first. Abiding by their instructions, the following email was composed and sent to Mr. Smith...

1) "Why is Walt Disney's "Song of the South" released on home video and/or theaters in Europe and the Far East, but not in the United States, when the origin of the Uncle Remus stories and the setting occur in the United States?"

2) "Why does the Walt Disney World ride, "Splash Mountain" present no direct visible indication of the film from which the concept was derived?"

Soon afterward the following reply was returned...

"There is sensitivity to the treatment of the African Americans in *Song of the South* in certain quarters in the U.S., so the company has not released the film here since 1986, and at present there are no plans to do so. "Political correctness" regarding the film has not been an issue in Europe or Japan. With regards to the Splash Mountain attractions, since the film has not been released in 20 years, kids of today have no point of reference regarding the characters having been in a film."

Dave Smith

Chief Archivist

Walt Disney Archives

500 S. Buena Vista St.

Burbank, CA 91521-3040

Short, sweet, and to the point, the Disney Corporation officially closes the book on *Song of the South*. It appears that certain forms of media can indeed be withheld in America. Ideals and amendments regarding the freedom of expression are nice, so long as they conform to generational time periods. Corporations and politics ultimately control such issues. Even more amusingly, there is absolutely no legal case here to force the film out, which some misguided souls roaming the Internet believe. The threat of a lawsuit over racism and discrimination or even the remote possibility of Jesse Jackson showing up at the gates of Magic Kingdom to hold a press conference, and fact that the Disney Company is a veritable golden goose from which to feast upon in a court of law, is probably the very reason that Disney sits upon a film it has no intention or desire to thoroughly discuss with anyone. It could be said that perhaps it was just one of Walt's big stupid blunders, since the country has supposedly become so much more perceptive and intelligent now in the modern days of multiculturalism. The fact of the matter is that political correctness has little or nothing to do with this film on Disney's part, otherwise various other Disney films would have been ripped from the shelves years ago. This is a matter of the potential loss of capital and a public relations catastrophe. The NAACP or similar groups do not have to sue; they only need present themselves as having the *capability* to sue. Addressing such a matter in court in all the ideals of American constitutionalism, Disney should be protected under the First Amendment and win. However there are no guarantees in litigation; and why should Disney take such a risk

with its revenue, its image, and its fan base? On that note, Disney can temporarily satisfy part of the left, while they are randomly attacked by the Christian Coalition on the right.

*Song of the South*, whether offensive or not, is a valuable part of American culture if Americans truly believe in the values of expressional freedom. The real shame is that Oscar winning performances, an early experiment in film entertainment by combining animation with live action, and a major link to Harris's legacy has been almost totally snuffed out. The film fits into several genres such as children's film, Southern film, race, WWII era, are the four major categories. The main issue here is that it has cartoons. It was meant for children, originally from children's literature, not for political and cultural debate. There is nothing wrong with parents selecting what they allow their children to see. This is not the case with *Song of the South*. It has already been decided for the public. Censorship, whether it is done officially or not, is a touchy matter, and one that gives birth to many assumptions about what a society preaches as compared to how it acts.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### ANIMAL SPIRITS

#### A Very Old Motif

Examples of animals, animal spirits, and the personification of creatures in the mythologies of worldwide cultures is an occurrence that forms a common link between us all. Animals or human-animal combinations have appeared as gods, heroes, villains, and shrewd observers in character roles of legends, cautionary tales and religious persuasions since the days of ancient civilizations. The uses of these characters are endless such as in the legends from Greco-Roman, Hebrew, Babylonian, Hindu, and other mythologies. The most well known work of Western civilization contains many examples. In the Old Testament one can find Balaam's talking ass, Daniel in the lions' den, Jonah and the whale, and the Seraphim angels with four faces consisting of an ox, a lion, an eagle, and a man, just to name a few. In the New Testament, the parables of Jesus randomly make comparative references to animals and animal behavior. The Book of Revelations contains the threat of the great dragon or beast in the apocalyptic battle. These are but a few, for the Bible. Even now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Judaeo-Christian angel is still often portrayed as a winged human, giving it the quality of being a soaring creature that we can still physically identify with, although it possesses a knowledge we could not begin to fathom. While these symbols are deeply metaphorical in interpretation, they are meant to deliver important messages or heightened warnings usually regarding individual, societal, or even national behaviors. Aesop's fables are

almost entirely composed of animal characters performing dialogue and actions of right and wrong attributable to human conduct. In much of worldly folklore, animals and humans have conversations and pull pranks on each other. While having mixed Middle Eastern origin with European influences, *The Arabian Nights*, for one example, tells us about the Husband and the Parrot. The morals tend toward the same point depending on the storyline...“do or do not do as the animal characters have done.” This is precisely the same purpose that is contained for centuries or even millennia that arose within many of the Uncle Remus tales.

Science now tells us that the African continent is the birthplace of all human ancestry, and the East is the dawn of civilization. Various groups traveled, settled, and formed their own cultural habits. As generations progressed, these cultures formed customs, rules, guidelines, legends, and theologies of how the heavens, the earth, humans, and animals came to be. No culture is provably right or wrong, for the beliefs they came to hold were matters of their social and familial preservation, thus children, relatives, and friends would learn how to avoid the pitfalls in life and what various creatures in nature arbitrarily represent.

Commonalities are also mysteries. For example, ancient cultures of the Far East, South America, and Egypt, having virtually no established common linkage at the time other than an even earlier divergence from one another via the land bridge across Bering Strait, still devised the concept of the pyramid, with spiritual, theological, or royal attributions applied to the structures. While science (or pop-science) has projected theories of this particular trait among these three very different groups, there is still no commonly known grounded theory as to why this happened, not even one as closely

accepted and publicly known as the currently held “dinosaur extinction by asteroid” notion.

From Whence the Rabbit?

Harris, despite whatever criticisms came down the path, staunchly defended his belief and his stories as African in origin and not the collections of any other culture. However, in *Brer Rabbit Meets Coyote*, edited by Jonathan Brennan, David Elton Gay’s, “On the Interaction of Traditions: Southeastern Rabbit Tales as African-Native American Folklore” offers an interesting parallel between the Tar Baby story and a Cherokee version of it, from James Mooney’s, *Myths of the Cherokee*. The woodland creatures were working to store up water during a drought by digging a well. The rabbit neglected to help out by claiming that the dew was enough nourishment for him. After a while the animals begin to suspect the rabbit of depleting their water storage during the night. They decide to make a wolf out of tar and pine gum, which they place by the well. Lo and behold the rabbit becomes stuck in it in the same sequence of events that the B’rer Rabbit of Uncle Remus does by angrily striking it with one limb after another. As the animals surround the rabbit, who has been caught red handed, and prepare to avenge forest justice on him, the rabbit manages to loosen himself and escape. (Gay, 105-106)

Gay also refers to the tale from *Folklore of the Sea Islands*, South Carolina, edited by Elsie Clews Parsons, which involves the same version from the Uncle Remus tales of the Tar Baby substituting a wolf for a fox. (Gay, 107)

It is certainly not inconceivable that Africans and Native American Indians did not realize their shared position of status. The enemy of my enemy is my friend. In his



personal account, *Up From Slavery*, Booker T. Washington reflects upon the Hampton Institute and his stay in the last few decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

I took up residence in a building with about seventy five Indian youths. I was the only person in the building who was not a member of their race. At first I had a good deal of doubt about my ability to succeed. I knew that the average Indian felt himself above the white man, and of course, he felt himself far above the Negro, largely on account of the fact of the Negro having submitted himself to slavery—a thing which the Indian would never do. Aside from this, there was a general feeling that the attempt to educate and civilize the red men at Hampton would be a failure. All this made me proceed very cautiously...determined to succeed. It was not long before I had the complete confidence Indians...but I think I am safe in saying that I had their love and respect. I found that they were about like any other human being; they responded to kind treatment, and resented ill treatment. (Washington, 67)

There seems to be much debate in the chapters “Southeastern Rabbit Tales,” and “Brer Rabbit and his Cherokee Cousin” among folklorists over whether or not these rabbit stories lean more to the Native American or African origin, which leads to the perfect plausibility of both notions due to the evidence of (mostly unofficial) inter-marriage between Africans and Cherokee. (Gay 110) Africans and Native American Indians, and even whites mixed on sporadic levels across the entire South. However, what is most fascinating is his reference to George Lankford’s references to rabbit stories of the Bakongo, where interaction occurs between the antelope and the sneaky hare, with the antelope prevailing as the wiser of the two. These differences are

held as major argumentative points—namely, over the heroic position of the American rabbit.

The Bakongo is a synonym for the Kongo, “a group of Bantu speaking peoples related through language and culture,” as the Encyclopedia Britannica states, with the first national Kongo identity dating back six to seven centuries ago. In the Macropedia volume containing “African Arts,” the discussion of folklore begins, “the best known type of African folktale is the animal-trickster tale. In Bantu Africa (East, Central, and Southern Africa) and the western Sudan, the trickster is the hare...”(124) Regionally, “Central Africa,” is a gigantic section of this titanic continent, “consisting of the interior bowl of the Congo river basin and the intervening spaces that lie between it and the Atlantic Ocean...Burundi, the Central African Republic, Congo, Gabon, Rwanda, and Zaire...(612) along with several satellite islands.

Furthermore, one possible explanation for the dominating role of the antelope is explained in the Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology. “The antelope is of great significance to the hunting tribes of Africa and is frequently depicted on ritual objects.” (479) Carved figures of antelopes with their young have been utilized, “during fertility dances by members of the Guro tribe of the Western Sudan.” (479) There are significant cultural overlaps among the peoples of this massive stretch of Earth.

In *The River Flows On*, Walter C. Rucker gives a well detailed history of tribal dispersal during the slave trade by colonial powers among the North American continent, fully supported in his references to tables and percentages recorded by historical researchers. What possesses even more clarity is the introduction of West and Central

Africans into South Carolina and its immediate neighbor Georgia, which hit a peak during the early to mid 1700s. (Rucker, 96)

South Carolina planters seemingly preferred slaves from West-central Africa—an area which encompasses the coastal regions of the modern nations of Zaire, Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon, and Angola. Africans from this region represented the largest segment of the Atlantic Africa to South Carolina during the eighteenth century. Indeed...fully 70 percent of all slaves imported into the colony were West-central Africans, many of whom were likely from the kingdom of Kongo. (Rucker, 95)

It is suspected that the African hare became the American rabbit in the oral tradition, as a psychological steam valve for dealing with enslavement and maintaining the oral traditions of the cultures, and a quiet revolution against the institution of slavery on the whole. As opposed to the majesty of the antelope, the rabbit remains a trickster in its nature, but it also becomes a shrewd manipulator of situations and its persecutors. Figuratively, the rabbit and the antelope have said their goodbyes, and now is the age of the fox's and the bear's entrance.

...Africans had historically accepted the animal tricksters' characteristic actions as protecting their identity and values under certain types of situations...Although the principal actors tend to be animals, they characteristically act as humans...In many African cultural traditions, the animal trickster is believed to have once been a man or a god. (Roberts, 22)

When examining the Uncle Remus tales along this tangent, it becomes increasingly probable that Harris was indeed telling the truth. He was sincerely

defending what he wrote as not an absolute creation of his own, but of African creation. His use of dialect was an attempt to authenticate and bring to life the stories in the best way he could. Harris wrote these tales in a manner that he believed was culturally accurate and familiar. If Harris had completely stolen these tales without regard for their origin, then why provide a direct indication of their origin? “Uncle Remus as a narrator figure would have been greatly diminished had he talked like the little white boy to whom he addressed his philosophy and tales. (Courlander, 259) Keith Cartwright’s, *Reading Africa into American Literature*, is a splendid book on the matter of Creole, Gullah, African, and the Native American mix of folklore. Two chapters in particular, “Creole Self Fashioning” and “Searching For Spiritual Soil” deal particularly with Harris. Cartwright explains Harris’s development of the Uncle Remus character from his first publication to the next of the stories. His final paragraph in Chapter 5 speaks volumes.

That Joel Chandler Harris, a white Southerner, should be one of postbellum America’s most intensely Africa-informed writers should surprise no one...Many of the Remus plots are West African, often Senegambian. Codes and aesthetics of performance are also often strongly African. Motifs and means of trickery remain true to West African form...He enabled much that black writers would shape out of the vernacular. But his split identity wrought an Africanist art that was double-aimed... The South of creolizing agency would live (in cuisine, dance, language literature, religion, medicine, and especially music) alongside the Arcadian South of Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, *Gone With the Wind*, Disney’s *Song of the South*, and Bill Clinton’s *Hope, Arkansas*. (Cartwright, 129.)

## Beliefs Are Still Breathing

Even closer to home in North America, there are firm beliefs among rural dwellers which are as recent as the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century about how animals act. Superstitions and signs according to people of a certain area have taken hold on locals around the country. One fascinating book, *Ozark Magic and Folklore*, by Vance Randolph, is a compilation of certain views by the country people of Northwest Arkansas and Southwest Missouri. Based on personal interviews with local residents of these mountains, Randolph presents an overview of their views on the animals of the area, witches, marriage, weather patterns, and more.

If a bird defecates on a girl's hat or bonnet, it is regarded as positive evidence that her parents are stingy; some say it's a sign that the parents don't approve of the girl's suitor. Buzzards are supposed to seek out and vomit upon persons guilty of incest. It is said that a certain man in Siloam Springs, Arkansas, never ventures out into the open if a buzzard is anywhere in sight. (Randolph, 245).

It does not stop with birds...

It is very bad luck to be photographed with a cat. I was at Rose O'Neill's place in Taney County, Missouri, when a photographer came out from St. Louis to make some pictures of Miss O'Neill and her house. He took one photo which showed a group of us in the O'Neill library, with the family cat crouching on the table...later published in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, and I showed the paper to one of the neighbors. 'God Almighty,' she shivered, 'I wouldn't have set in that there picture for a hundred acres o' land!' (Randolph, 76)

One such belief is quite reminiscent of the traditional European motifs within stories of animals preying on innocent families living in the woods. “Many of the old settlers believe that panthers or “painters” have a great appetite for human infants and will go to almost any length to obtain one. It is said that they locate babies by smelling the mother’s milk as the babe is fed.” (Randolph, 243) Another bears striking similarity to the famous “Elephant Graveyard” which no one has located to this day. This myth was probably invented so local kids would not go snooping around in the danger of the caves.

Marvel Cave, near Notch, Missouri, was regarded with superstitious awe by many of the old-timers, who used to warn tourists away from the place. A schoolteacher in Walnut Grove, declared that one subterranean room was literally full of the bones of panthers and bobcats. All of these animals for miles around, according to the old story, made their way into the caverns before they died, to leave their bodies with those of their ancestors in the “cat room.” (Randolph, 243)

How do these myths become beliefs? Did one man who had aberrant intimate knowledge with one of his close female relatives get puked on by a vulture in front of the community one day? Was there one incident of a panther bursting into the cabin of a woman who was nursing? Undocumented or not, odd and frightening occurrences tend to leave people with eerie impressions. The most educated and the most skeptical of American Ivy League universities would surely have extreme difficulty in the backwoods of this country without guidance from locals who know the area if they were to go exploring such territory. These impressions can only be signs from forces that are beyond the control of a human’s grasp. Chance encounters between humans and wild

creatures are significantly memorable, since undomesticated animals and people usually avoid each other; but it also serves for good storytelling. Although hard core science would explain to us how all these notions of biological activity are ludicrous, these are the impressions through which folk tales are born. Warnings for future generations, or peers in want of information, or even simple respected entertainment are the drives that turn these beliefs into myths. The point is that cultures, no matter what time and place they exist in, tend to develop beliefs about human behavior through the use of symbolic stories. These stories are not purely entertainment. They are grounded in the notions about how to avoid dangerous, unhealthy, and even unholy situations.

## CHAPTER FIVE: ANALYSIS

RQ1: Does the film's depiction of Johnny depart from the reality of the life of young Harris?

RQ2: What has Song of the South represented which seems irresolvable in its controversy?

RQ3: Are these tales Harris's own creation or borrowed from African heritage?

The answer to question one is based on Harris's personal history and the Disney representation of the character, Johnny. In response to RQ1, indeed, the film does part from the reality of Harris' life in his youth. While this is a children's film set in a literary and Southern genre with overflowing stereotypes of plantations, slaves or former slaves that work all day long for wealthy whites, poor whites, log cabins and whatnot, there is a glaringly evident, stark similarity between Johnny's situation in the film, and what we know about Harris. The absent father, the shyness, and the yearning desire to listen to more stories about the animal characters all become prevalent when first examining Harris' life, then Bobby Driscoll's character in the film. However, where the two tangents greatly diverge to cause skeptical and cynical critique does not lie so much in the representation of the races as it does in the representation of the *classes*. Harris came from a humbled background, born out of wedlock, and spent the rest of his life establishing his own financial cushioning through a career in media, not agriculture. He and his mother certainly could not have afforded the daily wardrobe we see adorning the white characters in the movie. He was not the privileged child of the old aristocratic



Southern gentry. Furthermore, his mother was not around when Harris was an apprentice on the plantation. This is the first historical inaccuracy in the film.

Second, the slaves are pictured as overly generous and appreciative of their surroundings. The mood at this time in American history for black culture was certainly not one of sheer happiness and joy. Civil War and Reconstruction brought Northern promises which were never completely fulfilled a century and a half later in terms of racial equality on a national basis. The Union did not supply banquets and perform parades for blacks in praise of their abolition, and the life and economics of the South were ironically more familiar for former slaves.

Although thousands of Georgia slaves did follow the Union force, thousands more did not—and for good reason. The welfare of southern blacks ranked near the bottom of William T. Sherman's list of priorities. Many of the men in his army shared that attitude, and some were outright Negrophobes. (Mixon, 469-470)

Prejudices based on archaic grudges, cultural misunderstandings, and a general form of capitalistic human greed successfully tossed stumbling blocks in our paths to coexistence. America is not as staunchly class conscious now as it was in the nineteenth century, but the stigmas still live on.

Third, the Disney production focuses on a situation which is emotionally sensitive for Americans more so now than in the 1940s. The scene is a place of enchantment, grace and charm, subtracting any hot topics that were circling overhead then; unlike *Gone With The Wind*, for instance, where the whole dreamland scenario crumbles apart. The closest the film comes to touching upon controversy is when Johnny asks why people

(including his mother) are mad at what “Daddy writes in the paper.” If we are to assume that this movie was targeted at youngsters, and it obviously was, why was this scene even in the film rather than left out completely? Apparently, Johnny’s father is writing on iconoclastic issues that anger the Southern majority right off the bat. Is the Disney version actually hinting at sociopolitical progressiveness?

The situational problems involved in Question two are ones that may never be resolved. In response to RQ2, the Disney version simply does not seem realistically digestible when viewed in scope, but was aptly feasible as a crowd pleaser in the mid 1940s. The reason it is just simply unacceptable for mass media distribution today is due to America’s perceptual change in mainstream culture. “...blacks and American Indians have gained little recognition or other recompense for the commodified evolution from the Brer Rabbit stories, to Joel Chandler Harris’s Uncle Remus stories, Disney’s Song of the South, and even Bugs Bunny.” (Brennan, Barringer, 115) The current, multicultural, mindset has grown increasingly intolerant of historical injustices and ethnic stereotypes in the guise of gleeful popular entertainment—case in point, three of Disney’s adaptations... *Pocahontas*, *Mulan*, and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. *Pocahontas* was basically beginning puberty at the time of her introduction to Western sexual conquest and she had very little to do with John Smith in her personal life, much less marriage. The real story of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* ends tragically, and the character of *Mulan* would certainly have faced a horrifying and humiliating death as a woman who sneaks into the early Chinese military only to be eventually discovered.

However, Disney is damned if they do and damned if they don’t. They face opposition and criticism from the left and the right. Nothing they produce is ever true

enough for one group or appropriately tactful for another. The use of Ellen DeGeneres in several Disney works faces flack from the Southern Baptist Coalition for reasons of her sexual orientation, while *Song of the South* remains a “racist” film among African American organizations. While Disney displays remarkable talent and skill for artistry and graphic design, they continuously water down old cautionary tales and fabricate new ones that are supposed to be from other lands and times, such as *The Lion King*. As long as evil is defeated, love conquers all, and people live happily ever after, the ideal of how life should be is consistently reinforced to young Disney audiences. This corporation is devoted to its business sense, its profit margins, and its pragmatic method of recycling old or “old sounding stories.” The Disney Corporation is not wholly what Walt originally intended anymore. It is less likely to see Lucifer or some such demon rise from the dark and eerie Earth to gather spirits in an orgiastic dance as in the *Night on a Bald Mountain* segment from *Fantasia*. Moreover, live action Disney family films have softened the inclusion of the realistic elements of life that can happen, such as shooting a loyal and lovable pet that goes irreversibly and uncontrollably rabid in *Old Yeller*.

Like Harris himself, Walter Disney also had to work his way up to achieve his goals. He was not handed the finest things in life from birth. Disney may have even been trying to establish a cultural awareness in his own mind by casting a black man as the smartest main character in a popular children’s film in 1946 of all years. Despite whatever critiques have come and gone, Uncle Remus, via Harris or Disney, remains the most intelligent, the wisest, and the shrewdest character of the stories he tells. He is more intellectually powerful not just over the other blacks, but the whites as well and tells the stories from his own special manner of observation. He knows better than to deliberately

insert himself into the same kind of analogous situations people encounter in their lives on a regular basis. He does not make quick assumptions and take rash actions. With his handmade cane, his scarecrow hat, and his thoroughly worn coat, Remus will always stand out as the portrait of the clever old genius and wisdom of the Southern Negro surrounded by forces of human nature which hardly faze him, forces that are equivalent to rabbits, foxes, and bears that operate on the silliness of their instinct, much in the same way that many people tend to act. This is an image which Disney set forth that will live on as the signified meaning of the plantation black man, despite the origin's obscuring.

With a movement to wartime cartoons by Disney and Warner Bros, many commercial endeavors had been devoted to patriotic propaganda during the Second World War. After the Western victory, 1946 seemed to be a safe bet to release the film, and it certainly would have cleared its overhead by introducing something rarely seen if ever imagined in the public...people and cartoons together in the same frame! This technical combination of live action and animated film is a painstaking process, not done on a routine basis, and was significantly difficult and tedious to get away with in the mid 1940s. Patience and skill form this imagery into whatever fashion the plot decides to take it. Before the age of computers, the classical method of cartoon imagery, “the cell technique in which various sections of the cartoon are drawn on separate transparent sheets (cells)”( Monaco, 107) was used to combine with live footage.

In traditional film animation, this process was done by drawing a number of “frames,” called *cels*, each showing the figures and/or background in a slightly advanced position from the previous one. To increase the frame density for slower motion, a great number of these cels had to be painted. For accelerated motion the

number of cells could be considerably reduced. This is one of the reasons for the rapid motion of cartoon characters. Eventually, this exaggerated speed became one of the aesthetic trademarks of cartoons. (Zettl, 259)

Disney had done this before in 1944 with *The Three Caballeros*. MGM studios pulled it off on a smaller scale in *Anchors Aweigh* only one year prior to *Song of the South* in a scene where Gene Kelly dances with Jerry the Mouse. (Coincidentally, Mickey Mouse was originally cast for the spot until Disney said “no.”) Recently, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1988) and *Cool World* (1992) are two such projects in which this type of action was captured through precision timing in all the facets of film editing and photography. This was a major selling point, and in the long run, it would be the essence of a “Tar Baby” for the Disney Company to hide from the American market years down the road. Perhaps the ghosts of Harris, Old Harbert, Aunt Crissy, and Uncle George Terrell did have the last laugh. The Disney Company will not reproduce these stereotypes again, as



was the case not just with this film but other incidents such as the Crows musical number in *Dumbo*, where they are cast in a black vernacular appearance, as they sing, *Did You Ever See an Elephant Fly?* The last thing this corporation wants to be perceived as is

culturally insensitive, since it has gone to great lengths to reach out to the world and show what a “beautiful place it is.” Individuals, despite whatever color they happen to be, have personal feelings on things; but lumping a race together in a cartoon image can

be risky, insulting, and degrading to audiences in a major commercial market. Disney will never portray the Old South in such glory again.

Question three is answerable on the basis of anthropological data. In response to RQ3, while it cannot be absolutely certain that B'rer Rabbit or the Tar Baby story is a story brought from Africa (in which North American creatures are replaced in the characterization;) by the same token, it cannot be disproved. There is strong evidence to indicate that Harris's stance of African originality is correct, based on the documented information pertaining to the Bakongo region and the West-central African presence in the Carolinas and Georgia. The folklore of the Bantus featuring the trickster hare supports Harris in his statements, even with the mix of Africans and Native Americans culture.

## Discussion

The debacle over this little film of children's literary genre, possessing cartoons, cute characters, good moral messages, and singing is inquisitively and disturbingly indicative of a much larger problem. All in all, the basic banishment of this film signifies that the bridge of race relations in the United States seems to be still under construction; and it is, even more embarrassingly, supervised by powerful organizations with political objectives and huge corporations that incessantly worry over their public relations stance, a stance which can adversely affect their bottom line. Does the fault lie with these agencies and companies; or does the fault lie with the American people? It begs the question of whether or not we have become so culturally squeamish that we simply cannot accept the details behind any situation. Are we in the business of dismissing

certain forms of media based on revisionist history? As Americans, are we completely incapable of opening our minds to the subjective and the objective based on fiery emotions of the past? Do the media and agencies of power dictate to us what is acceptable for our entertainment and what is not? In the process of studying this situation, one simply cannot logically conclude that it was absolutely impossible for any Southern white man to promote an elderly black character in the 1800s. It is also irrational that Harris should be perceived as simply making jokes for profit since his narrator, Uncle Remus, has intelligence, wisdom, and a worldly view that surpasses all other characters in the assorted cast, regardless of their race. It is Harris's promotion of this elderly black man who wants not, needs not, and sees things for what they truly are through his parables that strongly demonstrate how the author embraced and based his work on actual events in his life. His use of the vernacular was meant to be lifelike, not entirely insulting. The simple fact of the matter is that the reason there has been so much criticism of the manner in which he wrote was that research into his writings exploded on the scene in the peak of a completely different time and place. The chronological and cultural context had changed.

Disney's version is not so much deliberately evil as it is inappropriately altered in its presentation. We could even call the film, "Disney genre," as Joseph W. Reed indicated in his book, *American Scenarios: The Uses of Film Genre*. "Can a studio be a genre? ...studios (see Disney, for instance) were aces at giving the public what it wanted and at finding a way to do it within the confines of the money available..." (Reed, 266-267) When we see the film dummed down to the point of having subservient and happy obedient blacks, who put everything in their lives aside to help the white folks, it is

rightly annoying to see the Southern genre portrayed in such a way for those who know better historically. What adds fuel to the fire is the class gap is stretched even further in the film as with the “Harris as a boy” analogy. The major concern is over what children of all races in America will think is legitimate if one focuses solely on the annoyance of these images, although it is not a viable concern for Europe and the Far East. What becomes indirectly subtracted is the core of the film’s meaning in relation to the stories. Children of all ethnic backgrounds sitting at a campfire, or in the hearth of a cabin, oblivious to their surroundings because their imaginations are being swept away into another world, a world full of lessons that children understand through the interpretations of a man who possesses a rich and ancient knowledge of life, earth, and people based on universal principles that never change. Uncle Remus is well aware of the fascination kids have with animals, and certainly aware of the animalistic tendencies of adults. He tells these tales only for the children’s benefit, before they become hardened grownups, and he expects nothing in return but their curious smiles and laughter. This is the skillful presentation that was lost from *Song of the South*. The visual stimulation of watching Remus and the kids become part of the external, natural landscape. Remus is one with the creatures. He understands them and the animals understand him, simply because he is not like the others, and it is he who opens the gateway of this understanding to children, especially since it is too late for most adults. Along that tangent, the personification of the woodland creatures expands the minds of children to watch out for the mistakes people randomly make. The whole concept of the coexistence between humans and the natural world is made clear by two lines James Baskett delivers on the verge of telling Little Johnny and Toby the Tar Baby story...”I was just thinkin’ how the flowers and



critters is curious things; they can look in your heart 'n tell when it sings.”

Slavery is an offshoot of the capitalistic greed of human nature, and its practice has been conducted by and upon every single ethnic group in the recorded history of the world. It was unaccountably more cost-efficient to own serfs, slaves, and prisoners for labor then to actually pay or train people for their skills. It has been quite a long time since whites were in that position, but not that long for blacks. The perceptions of these various images of the Southern master and slave are reminders of what goes against our progressive ideals. However, things have changed since then. The Civil Rights era did indeed carve out new concepts of cultural awareness and steps in the direction of equality among people in the United States; but the review of the films and literature of old became subject to scrutiny in order to maintain these steps. Would Harris be considered in the same manner if *Song of the South* had never been produced; or would he be considered a pioneer of civil rights by his own standing if his background became more familiar to people? It is quite certain that we will never know, although it is almost clear that the debates, criticisms, articles, books, and researches into Southeastern folklore would not be as geared to include B’rer Rabbit and his origins if Harris had not introduced Uncle Remus to the world, his tribute to the best times of his youth that he admired and respected.

Nevertheless, Americans have a tendency to find what they “cannot have,” and Disney’s withholding of this film has certainly not stopped them. The unofficial ban of this movie has led to a free for all amount of bootlegging and black market distribution. One only needs to punch *Song of the South* into any Internet search engine to hit upon a wide availability of sales pitches for the film, which the seller has usually obtained from

overseas and begun to copy for distribution. While Europe uses a different format than America in its electronics, and the Eastern Hemisphere's version is in languages alien to the majority of Americans, there are plenty of ways around these obstacles for those who specialize in such work and amateurs that know quite well how to convert it into its original English speaking version. Trust becomes an issue, though. There is no guarantee that a purchaser will obtain the unedited, original film in its English speaking entirety, or if it was filmed from a home video camera aimed at the running of the film; yet, it is available. Even more interestingly enough, the Disney Company does not seem to be threatened in the least by this profiteering, and the NAACP could apparently care less, so long as a commercial promotion does not come about in this country, such as the rumored "60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition," which fell through.

Once again, the situation presents itself as that of a silenced censorship, one which worked rather well since there seems to be no forceful public demand. It is a forgotten children's film, along with Harris's works. These cartoons never meant to be a topic of controversy. The probability remains that Harris's literature, and the Disney film will "go underground." It is not illegal to obtain these items, but it is not a simple process either. Harris's works are not carried in the major bookstore dealers, and *Song of the South* will likely never be sold again, at least until a major cultural shift in perspective has come about that would appreciate its essential worth, or tolerate it with a higher degree of humility. As to when this shift will come about, if it ever does, is anyone's guess, including the Disney Company's.

## CONCLUSION

The use of animal spirits in storytelling passed through all cultures of the world. West and East have both formed their legends of morality, justice, or revenge many times with the use of animals in the plot or playing the character roles. The metaphors within folklore have merged the concept of spirits being equal on human and animal levels, or being somehow interconnected. Archaeology, theology, anthropology, history, and other branches of science offer an abundant supply of evidence on this topic. In Asia, Oceania, The Americas, Eurasia, The Middle East, and the vastness of Africa, the gods, heroes, villains, and other players in morality tales may quite possibly be half human, half animal, or animal altogether. These phenomenons have become even easier to analyze since globalization has sped the knowledge and interaction between all cultures that previously could not reach each other without difficulty. Not all, but some old barriers have been broken down by science, technology, and an emerging cultural awareness, mainly through mainstream media. Yet origins and evolutionary patterns within all cultures present visible commonalities.

What is even more fascinating is that this phenomenon sprang into folklore when most cultures had scant, if any, contact with one another. In the times of recording on stone, papyrus, or animal skin, it was exceedingly more difficult to go from Rome to Jerusalem than it is to get from New York to Tokyo today. Travel was a laborious and dangerous task, and usually done in matters of significant importance such as in religious praise, war, politics, and business or done out of reaction to an emergency such as famine, plague, drought, flood, or other type natural disaster. News of other lands,

nevertheless, traveled slowly along with their traditions behind them. It boomed in quantity after print became mass produced, but still had limited sources of information on the actual backgrounds of the other cultures, or little desire to understand them at all, if they could just simply overpower them and profit from it. Such is the case with the East India companies and the slave trade during the core of the second millennium. As Africa was plundered for slave labor, various individuals from selected tribes were sold and dispersed to various sections of the globe. They brought their cultural heritage and lessons from the school of hard knocks with them. In the Old South, many Africans practiced in secret, the rituals of their customs. Some tunes and hymns that were sung in the field as they worked or finished for the day were codes for confidential meetings later on that night. Christianity did not take an immediate and overwhelming grip in the course of one sermon or mass for these captured laborers who were thrust into a strange new environment. The teachings of African folklore, Native American mythology, and European legends gradually collided among strangers in a new land, and certainly must have opened minds on a minimal level at the very least. Our current mingled American generations carry a tendency to assume that the people of the past “just didn’t know back then” about the expected standards in life of which we have so assuredly convinced ourselves, despite its fragility and its fleeting glimpse in time. The fact of the matter is that they knew quite a lot...stories, survival tactics, crafts and tasks that we could not replicate or produce now if many of us were suddenly stranded upon a deserted island or in the wilderness.

The observation that these lessons were formulated into almost theoretical concepts of how the world is and the role one should play in it paved the way for religion,

philosophy, literature, history, ethics, performing arts—essentially a plethora of epistemological forms of expression and conduct. Through these ideas and views of why we are here to what one should do in a certain situation, all cultures grew in wisdom, experience, and intellect. Indeed, there is plenty of reasoning behind why B’rer Rabbit should have left the Tar Baby completely alone; it is only by his pure wiliness that he escaped from the clutches of B’rer Fox. Little Red Riding Hood should be made more than well aware of the Big Bad Wolves that lurk outside, and how to act upon encountering them. These tales, if we value them carefully, are designed not only to protect ourselves, but our children and future generations.

*Song of the South* reflects social positions, arts, and cultural topics we have not fully come to terms with despite the monumental achievements among various ethnic groups in America throughout the twentieth century. It represents the fight over what is objectionable and what is permissible. As Americans, do we assume that *Song of the South* is too old, too cornball, or too hot of a topic for children and adults; or do we conclude that the First Amendment means nothing in the face of political power, public relations, and financial gain? There is an emerging probability that this film will never be released on home video or shown in the theaters again in the United States, and that the Disney Corporation will stash this double-edged sword for as long as it likes. It does not have to lift a finger on anything concerning this film. After all, none of us have a “right” to this picture, and Disney is not legally or ethically responsible for anything regarding *Song of the South* so long as it does not attract attention by promoting it. If this film were to reappear in the public eye, does it promote turning back the clock to a time this country has marched so far away from, or does it offer the opportunity for all cultures to make

their own decisions and draw their own conclusions? Are we in the business of hiding things that are “offensive, insensitive,” and not historically accurate, or are we possibly committing the same sin the Disney Corporation makes by pretending that it is a great big wonderful world where all the bad elements get punished, hidden, or cease to exist? One can still ride “Splash Mountain” at Walt Disney World in Florida. This ride’s theme is from *Song of the South*, although Uncle Remus is never seen, and his image is replaced with silhouettes of B’rer Frog smoking a pipe and telling a story. The ride takes you on a “magical journey” through the Old South as all of its artificially manufactured critters that are indigenous to Southeastern North America sing to you with cheer. One then goes down a ramp in the “log” one is sitting in for the thrill of the speed and the splash into the “lake” below. How many children can we imagine asked their family, “What movie is this from?” This is a telling reminder of something deeper under its surface.

Additionally however, there is a new media product which has come into fruition. Universal Studios Productions has released its own version entitled, *The Adventures of Brer Rabbit*, with the voices of entertainers such as actor Danny Glover, comedienne Wanda Sykes, and former talk show host Wayne Brady. It is based, however, on “the complete tales as told by Julian Lester.” Julian Lester is an African American writer who has written a number of other publications. Originally a Methodist, he is a Judaic convert, who has rewritten the Uncle Remus tales in what he termed as a “more socially acceptable style today.” The advantage of this reopens the door for youngsters to learn these tales again, in what probably is much easier to decipher through our contemporary eyes and ears. The dialect is not as intricately phrased, but more common in form. On the flip side, this is surely indicative of the death of Joel Chandler Harris in mainstream

children's entertainment. Look for the original Uncle Remus only in the Mom and Pop bookstores, garage sales, or library sales. Searching for *Song of the South* may be even more tedious.

Must we accept the stories and lessons that others preserved for us only if they are written by those with the same pigment as ours? It is impossible for the average person to analyze that which may touch us emotionally on the surface? It is irrational and illogical to pass complete and total judgment on those who existed before us in a different time, with a different mindset, of a different generation and assume that the prevailing views recorded in the annals of history were the only views. To assume that all whites considered blacks inferior, and that all blacks just simply took it for a hundred or so years is ignorant. It is not mandatory or even expected that we unconditionally accept the words and actions of those who came before us, but it is admirable that we can extract from the previous generations the categories of wisdom that never change, such as the genuine meanings of the Uncle Remus tales.

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## VITA

Michael Galiano was born in New Orleans, Louisiana. He was raised in neighboring St. Bernard Parish, but also spent much of his youth in Northern Mississippi and Alabama. He received his B.A. from Mississippi State University. He currently resides in St. Tammany Parish in Louisiana.