



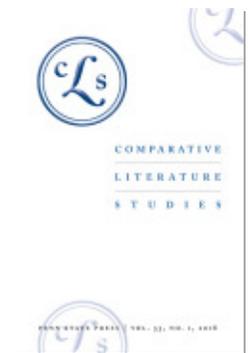
PROJECT MUSE®

Brer Rabbit and the Destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem:
The Double Voice in Literatures of Exile

Rachel S. Mikva

Comparative Literature Studies, Volume 53, Number 1, 2016, pp. 1-27 (Article)

Published by Penn State University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/612871>

BRER RABBIT AND THE DESTRUCTION OF THE
TEMPLE IN JERUSALEM: THE DOUBLE VOICE
IN LITERATURES OF EXILE

Rachel S. Mikva

ABSTRACT

The connection between Brer Rabbit and the story of the Jewish community after 70 CE is that both are recorded in literatures of exile. As a result, they share a significant quality—the double voice—deployed as one of many literary strategies for survival under oppression. Using passages from Brer Rabbit and *Lamentations Rabba*, this article focuses on riddles and trickster tales because they present an especially striking witness of the double voice as expounded within African-American literary theory. These genres appear in the folklore of most cultures, but their encoding enables a unique inversion of cultural meaning for subaltern and dispersed peoples, which gives the tales remarkable power to fashion and sustain identities, and to articulate the complexity of their experience. They absorb the imagery and language of the dominant culture, yet re-signify their meaning in the process of assimilation. Both elements of this voice—the adoption and the inversion—are essential representations of the authors or redactors. Separated by time, space, language, culture, and context, the tales of Brer Rabbit and the Palestinian rabbinic midrash speak to each other through this strategic polyphony.

KEYWORDS: Rabbinic midrash, African-American literary theory, Brer Rabbit, *Lamentations Rabba*, postcolonial theory

These fragments I have shored up against my ruins
—T. S. Eliot, “The Waste Land” (What the Thunder Said)

Brer Rabbit has never been documented scampering about in the ruins of ancient Jerusalem. The connection between his story and that of the Jewish community after 70 CE is that they both are recorded in literatures of exile. As a result, they share a significant quality—the double voice—deployed as one of many literary strategies for survival under oppression.

The evidence is found in literary artifacts, redacted texts of traditions that continued to circulate orally as well as in writing.¹ Brer Rabbit tales were adapted from African folklore² and transmitted as oral literature among the slave population in the United States before they were published by Joel Chandler Harris, a white Southern journalist (and later transformed into children's stories). The rabbinic texts under study are part of *Lamentations Rabba*, a midrash on the Book of Lamentations redacted in the fifth century in Roman-occupied Palestine, by which time the Jews had lived under imperial rule without political autonomy or Temple for over three hundred fifty years. The last century had been especially oppressive, as Christianization of the empire compounded theological and political discrimination. The rabbinic Patriarchate was abolished by Theodosius II in 425 CE, and legislation increasingly circumscribed civic and religious freedoms.³

This article focuses on riddles and trickster tales because they present an especially striking witness of the double voice. These genres appear in the folklore of most cultures, but their encoding enables a unique inversion of cultural meaning for subaltern and dispersed peoples that gives the tales remarkable power to fashion and sustain identities, heal psychic wounds, voice pain, and nurture hope. They absorb the imagery and language of the dominant culture, yet they reverse their power in the process of assimilation. Both elements of this voice—the adoption and the inversion—are essential representations of the authors or redactors.

Scholars sometimes suggest that such expression of the voice under domination is encoded rebellion, presented in the public sphere but “disguised, muted and veiled for safety’s sake.”⁴ This article presumes instead that the tales take shape as part of an inner-directed discourse, and sees them as profound literary portraits of the hybrid identities of subjugated peoples. *Double voice articulates their complex realities, shaped by the dominant culture and in rebellion against it, seeing and speaking of themselves through the perspective of the Other (or at least as they imagine they are seen/heard), and also in their own voice.* With riddles and trickster tales, authors can diffuse the external gaze to reveal the dreams and fears of their own community. Separated by time, space, language, culture, and context, the tales of Brer

Rabbit and the Palestinian rabbinic midrash speak to each other through this strategic polyphony.

Theoretical Background

Scholarship related to double voice usually invokes Mikhail Bakhtin:

Heteroglossia. . . is *another's speech in another's language*, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way. Such speech constitutes a special type of *double-voiced discourse*. It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author.⁵

Within this article, however, exploration of double voice relies more on African-American literary theory, which builds on W. E. B. Du Bois' earlier articulation of double consciousness and sees Bakhtin as a "discursive corollary" for expressing it.⁶ In this context, double voice is not wholly within authorial control; it transcends the linguistic foundation posited by Bakhtin. *Double voice is the ineluctable constitution of double consciousness*. These intersections become significant within postcolonial theory as well.⁷

While Du Bois considered the "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" as a crisis of identity that threatened to tear the self asunder, he suggested that this obstacle to true self-consciousness also gifted African Americans with second sight.⁸ "Du Bois's motivating—and deliberately age-old—metaphor of 'the veil' suggests that a position of social oppression has its compensations: what the subaltern lack in social power, they gain in knowledge." Unlike white people who belong to the hegemonic structures, they see that identity is socially imposed, that true knowledge of self is elusive, that whites cannot see the truth and cannot imagine that blacks have this special insight because they do not see the person, hidden by the veil.⁹

Some theorists magnified Du Bois' small consolation to establish double consciousness as the fertile ground of artistic creativity and empowerment in the African-American community. The gift of second sight reveals compelling truths, the status as outsider drives a relentless ingenuity, and expertise in forced self-translation yields a unique control over language.¹⁰ "In the hands of these critics, the dynamic that Du Bois diagnoses as a spiritual and

psychological burden becomes a powerful political and literary tool.” These scholars have been taken to task for minimizing the terrible anguish and disfigurement of internalizing oppression, while overstating its accidental benefits.¹¹ Living in two distinct discursive universes, negotiating two cultural patrimonies, sorting through the array of images thrust upon them, and navigating a plethora of social disabilities threaten a profound disjunction of self.

This article seeks to articulate a middle ground, one which affirms potential agency in the double voice to define oneself, to preserve self-respect, to transcend the limitations of subaltern voicelessness and reimagine the very subjectivity that calls it into being—without claiming power to challenge political realities or redeem subjugation. *The subversive capacity of the double voice is a powerful expression of suffering, not a resolution of it.* It is one critical strategy for survival in exile.

Without obscuring the unique suffering of African Americans or Jews, it is possible to recognize many congruencies with the long Jewish experience of oppression that make the literary theory applicable to both communities. There is a comparable debate among contemporary scholars of Judaism about the positive and negative consequences of living as a marginalized community for so long, but the basic facts of exile establish the most evident parallels.¹² Discrimination and persecution were regular disabilities. Dispersed and living as minorities in diverse lands, Jews were compelled to navigate conflicting cultures, and the external gaze inflicted upon them a double consciousness. For fifth-century rabbis in the Land of Israel, the degradation of Jews and Judaism that littered Christian literature and permeated the dominant cultural imagination must have had an impact.

Literary responses to these tensions also demonstrate interesting affinities between African-American and rabbinic cultures. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. fleshes out a theory deeply rooted in ideas of double voice, he speaks of African-American literature as a self-reflexive tradition exceptionally conscious of its history, necessitated by diaspora. Texts contain traces of a coherent literary system, but they reveal only fragments that must be reassembled.¹³ While foundational texts have complex formal antecedents, the most prevalent and significant intertexts are those found within the black canon. African-American writers “read each other, and seem intent on refiguring what we might think of as key canonical topoi and tropes received from the black tradition itself.”¹⁴

Rabbinic literature’s historical consciousness is expressed in a variety of ways, such as passages that relate moments of historical significance, a ubiquitous effort to make sense of the nation’s experience from a Divine perspective, the habit of citing teachings in the name(s) of their tradent(s), and the explicit claim that rabbinic knowledge traces back to Sinai through a reliable chain of

oral tradition (*m. Avot* 1:1)—thus legitimizing the rabbis' authority to fashion Jewish identity in exile. Fragments of Late Antique literary theory can be distilled from hermeneutical lists that guide exegesis, and from distinct (if frequently overlapping) genres of literature, for example, *Mishnah*, *Midrash*, *Talmud*, *Piyyut*.¹⁵ Yet its literary and philosophical foundations are diffused throughout a multi-vocal and organic body of literature, with pieces missing that were lost in the tumult and trauma of dispersion.¹⁶ Scholars must be conversant with Hellenistic culture in order to recognize the terms, rhetorical tropes, theological concepts, and other elements that impacted rabbinic thought and praxis.¹⁷ As with African-American literature, however, the most essential conversation in midrash is intercourse with its own texts and oral traditions. Intertextuality is a fundamental building block of rabbinic discourse.¹⁸

Gates discusses a particularly useful technique of the double voice—signifyin(g). Challenging white hegemony over language and deliberately subverting the standard English term (signifying) that denotes a clearly intended meaning, signifyin(g) turns meaning on its head. “Signifyin(g). . . is the figurative difference between the literal and the metaphorical, between surface and latent meaning.” It “presupposes an ‘encoded’ intention to say one thing but to mean quite another.”¹⁹ Although the methods and contexts of signifyin(g) that Gates describes are particular to the black experience, Burton Visotzky discerns compelling parallels with rabbinic literature here as well. He associates the surface contextual meaning with *peshat*, and the metaphorical latent meaning with *derash*, two fundamental hermeneutics in rabbinic exegesis.²⁰ In both literatures, an expression can never be fully detached from its more literal signifier,²¹ yet there is great delight in the indeterminacy of meaning and in the speaker's ability to “riff or woof” on imaginative possibilities. The literatures tell and retell the same old stories, but always with a signal difference.²²

Particular aspects of the signifyin(g) trope combine this conscious rhetorical deployment of double voice with dramatic ways of expressing the divided self. It is here that African-American and rabbinic literatures both reveal the double consciousness that animates their discourse. Gates speaks of “chiasitic fantasies of reversal of power relationships” in tales of the Signifying Monkey;²³ they permeate the Brer Rabbit stories and rabbinic riddles as well. Messages are often encoded, or communicated through indirection.²⁴ As the texts superimpose different discursive universes, the reader/listener is expected to know something that certain characters in the text do not, and to decode the hidden meanings that upend hegemony. The special sight of the subaltern is exposed for (almost) all to see. Just as a resignified or midrashic text cannot fully dislodge the contextual meaning, however, the double voice also reveals a dual self and articulates the depth of its subjugation.

Despite these parallels, the utterly unique nature of each discourse demands that the passages first be analyzed independently, with comparisons drawn at the end.

Lamentations Rabba

The texts that launched this study are found in an anthology of midrashim on the Book of Lamentations. Unlike many such collections of midrash, the themes hew closely to the concerns of the biblical book itself, in this case the powerful laments of the widowed Jerusalem with savage expressions of the people's suffering and unanswered hopes for restoration. The midrash, called *Eicha Rabba* or *Lamentations Rabba*, faces the most disturbing elements of the biblical text and attempts to address them. If the Book of Lamentations embodies the necessity of lament when the experience of trauma is fresh, *Lamentations Rabba* labors to "breathe meaning into loss."²⁵

You might then expect the tone to be serious, perhaps hopeful but circumspect and contemplative. Many of the passages oblige. Yet in the middle of Chapter 1 sits a string of eleven riddles and trickster tales. What are they doing there? Galit Hasan-Rokem suggests "only readers who are totally oblivious to the playful dimension of aggadic Midrash could consider their presence here bizarre. . . . In their own playful way, they deal with the central issue of the Midrash, namely, with the question 'How?' (*Eicha*)."²⁶ How could this fate befall the covenanted nation?

Two riddles of the sequence will suffice to illustrate the unique expression of double voice:

ארבעה ירושלמיים אזלו לאתינס ואיתקבלו גבי חד בר נש, ברמשא עבד להון שירו, מן דאכלון ושתון מתקין להון ארבע ערסין, והוה חד מנייהו פחותה, בתר דאכלין ושתון, אמר שמע אנא דבני ירושלם חכימין סגיאיין, איעול ודמוך לי גביהון, לידע מה אינון אמרין, איתער חד מינייהו, [ההוא דדמיך על ערסא פחיתא], ואמר מה אתון סבירין דאנא דמיך על ערסא, לית אנא דמיך אלא אארעא, איתער תניינא ואמר על דא אתון תמהין אף בישראל דאכלינן מיניה טעם דכלבא הוה ליה, איתער תליתאה ואמר על דא אתון תמיהין אף חמרא דשתנינון הוה ביה טעם קבר, איתער רביעאה ואמר על דא אתון תמיהין אף הוא גברא [מריה דבייתא] לית בריה דאבוי. בההיא שעתא אמר חד קושטא ותלת שיקרא, קם בצפרא ואזל גבי טבחא, א"ל הי לך פריטין והב לי מן ההוא בשרא דרמשא, א"ל לית לי, א"ל מאן הוה עיסקיה, א"ל חד אימרא הוה לי ומתה אמה, והוה לי חדא כלבתא מניקה, והוה אימרא ינקה מינה, וכד אתית ברמשא ואטרחת עלי, לא הוה לי בשרא למיתן לך, ונכסית ההיא אימרא ויהבית לך מן בשרא, בההיא שעתא

אמר תרתי קושטא ותרתי שיקרא. אזל גבי קפילא וא"ל הי לך פריטין והב לי מן ההוא חמרא דרמשא, א"ל לית לי, א"ל ומה הוה עיסקיה, א"ל חדא גפן אית לי והוה נציבא על קברא דאבונן, ואטרחת עלי ולא הוה לי חמרא למיתן לך, ויהבית לך מן ההוא חמרא, בההיא שעתא אמר תלת קושטא וחדא שיקרא. אמר זייל ההוא גברא ויבדוק באימיה, אזל גבי אימיה ואמר לה בריה דמאן אנא, אמרה ליה מן אבוך, א"ל אמרי לי קושטא בריה דמאן אנא, ואי לא כדון אנא קטיל לך, א"ל אבוך לא הוה מוליה, לא טבית עבדית דאזלית וזיינית ואייתיתית יתך להדין מודלי ולא יזיל לגבן אוחרן. בההיא שעתא אמר ומי ירושלמיים אתאן גבן ועבדינן ממזרים, אתקין ביניהון דלא יהוון מקבלים ירושלמי.

תוב בתר יומין אזל חד ירושלמי לאתינס, ולא הוה בעי שום בר נש לקבליה, אזל ליה לחנותא, מדאכל ושתי בעא מדמוך תמון, א"ל מריה דחנותא כבר עבדין בינן דלא ידמוך בינן חד מירושלם, עד דהוה קפיץ תלתא קפיצין, א"ל לית אנא ידע האיך אתון קפיצין, אלא קפוץ קדמי ואנא בתרך, קפיץ קמיה קפיצה קמייא איתייהב במיסון דחנותא, קפיץ תניינא איתייהב על תרע חנותא, קפיץ תליתאה אישתכח לבר מתרעא, וקם ההוא ירושלמאה וסגר תרעא לאפווי, א"ל מה הוא דין, א"ל מאן דבעית מעבד לי עבדית לך.²⁷

[2] Four Jerusalemites went to Athens and were received by an [innkeeper]. In the evening he prepared a meal for them. While they were eating and drinking, he set four beds for them, one of them damaged. After they ate and drank, he said [to himself]: "I have heard that the people of Jerusalem are extremely wise; I will go in and lie there among them to know what they are saying." One of them awoke [the one who was lying on the damaged bed] and said: "Even though you may think that I am lying on a bed, I am actually lying on the ground."

The second one woke up and said: "You're surprised at this? The meat he gave us tasted like dog."

The third one woke up and said: "You're surprised at this? The wine we drank had the taste of the grave."

The fourth one woke up and said: "You're surprised at this? The man himself [master of the house] is not the son of his father."

Then [the innkeeper] said: "One is telling the truth and three are lying." He rose in the morning, went to the butcher and said to him: "Take payment and give me some of the same meat as last night."

"I have none."

"What's the story?"

The butcher said: "I had a lamb whose mother died and I had a nursing dog so the lamb nursed from her. When you came in the evening and pressed me, I had no meat to give you. So I slaughtered that lamb and gave you the meat."

At that point, he said: “Two are telling the truth and two are lying.”

He went to the wine merchant and said to him: “Take payment and give me the same wine as last night.”

“I have none.”

“What’s the story?”

The wine merchant said: “I have a vine that grows on the grave of our father, and you pressed me and I had none to give you, so I gave you some of that wine.”

At this point, he said: “Three are telling the truth and one is lying. This man [the innkeeper] better go and check with his mother.” He went to his mother and asked, “Whose son am I?”

“Your father’s.”

“Tell me the truth, whose son am I, or I will kill you now.”

She said to him: “Your father could not have a child. Did I not do the right thing to go and prostitute myself, thus establishing you as heir rather than letting [the property] go to someone else?”

At that point, he said: “Will the Jerusalemites come to us and make us all bastards?” The [Athenians] agreed among themselves that they would no longer take in people from Jerusalem.

[3] Some days later, another Jerusalemite went to Athens, but no one would give him lodging. He went to an inn and, after he ate and drank, he asked to sleep there. The innkeeper said to him: “We have already made [a pact] among us that no one from Jerusalem will sleep here, until he jumps three times.”

“I don’t know how you jump here, so you jump first, and I will go after you.” [The innkeeper] jumped once and reached the middle of the inn; he jumped a second time and reached the inn’s gate. He jumped a third time and found himself outside the gate. The Jerusalemite got up and locked the gate.

“What are you doing?”

“I am doing to you what you wanted to do to me.”²⁸

At the outset, it must be recognized that the rabbis are doing exegesis; Hebrew Bible is the constitutive intertext of the midrash.²⁹ The verse presented for comment is:

אֵיכָה | יִשְׁבֶּה בְּדָד הָעִיר רַבַּתִּי עַם, הִיָּתָה כְּאַלְמָנָה רַבַּתִּי בְּגוֹיִם

(Alas, lonely sits the city once great with people!

She has become like a widow, once great among the nations [Lam 1:1].)

In rabbinic methodology of reading Scripture, the verse's apparent redundancy (in this case *rabbati am—rabbati vagoyim*) is an invitation to explore possibilities of meaning highlighted by the superfluity of language. Although the sages are aware of biblical parallelism, ideas about the cryptic and faultless nature of Hebrew Bible lead them to conclude that repetition must signal a difference. The lament cannot refer simply to decimation of the once robust population.

What other greatness among the nations is remembered as the city sits in ashes? Wisdom. Each of the eleven riddles and trickster tales contain some contest of cleverness between people of Jerusalem and people of Athens. Rome may have taken over the empire from ancient Greece, but the true glory of Hellenic culture is wisdom, and this—according to the midrash—is still the province of the Jews.³⁰ In other riddles of the cycle, it is clear that even the children of Jerusalem can surpass grown and worldly men from Athens. Unlike the military equation of the fifth century, this fictional battle of wits is designed for Israel to win. The rabbis have absorbed Hellenic models of wisdom and contest—and also turned them on their head with these reversal of power relationship fantasies. While the source of wisdom among rabbinic characters is almost always Torah, even when the content of their special vision does not hinge upon a verse, here that foundation does not appear necessary.³¹ Each encounter attests to the power of the powerless Jews.

In the course of the riddle cycle, the Jerusalem from which these Jews hail is presented as a vibrant metropolis with schools and markets, like other cities of the Roman Empire. Yet, after the Bar Kochba revolt in the second century CE, there are no more Jerusalemites. Jews are forbidden to live there. In fact, there is no Jerusalem; Hadrian renamed the city Aelia Capitolina. The historical facts help to reveal an encoded layer of meaning. It does not matter whether the redactors are projecting an invented Edenic past, an illusory present or a messianic future—talking about Jerusalemites both highlights their homelessness and identifies the city as the eternal home of the Jewish people.

A close reading of the text exposes its consistent embedding of the double voice. One of the Jerusalemites ends up sleeping on the ground, a sign of mourning. This is the announced defect at the outset, the one that the Athenian acknowledges to be true because he was the one who gave them a damaged bed. It reflects the known world, in which the dominant power of Rome has sent Israel into exile and a permanent state of mourning.

The other dislocations, however, unfold within the Athenian community itself. They are known to the wise Jerusalemites, gifted with second sight, but not evident to the proprietor. The lamb that tastes of dog was an orphan who succumbed to a cruel fate. The vine that grows on the grave represents a severing

of the vintner from his ancestors and his inheritance. These are indignities “served” to the Jews for now, but they symbolize disjunctions in the fate of the oppressor. The inversion culminates, of course, in the innkeeper discovering he is illegitimate and his property does not rightly belong to him.

Like the Oedipal tale, the path to self-knowledge discovered through solving the riddle leads to his downfall. This one is instigated not by the fates or the gods or the Oracle at Delphi, but by the helpless Jews, whose special insight into Divine history sees the tragic flaw in the oppressors that will ultimately doom them. The rabbis have learned through their study of Hebrew Bible and their own experience of exile that neither God nor the land will tolerate immorality. Thus imperial conquest, with its attendant death, destruction, and dislocation, undermines the very territorial claims it seeks to achieve.

This fatal flaw is revealed in the violence of the denouement, ushered in with additional inversions and encoded meanings: it is the innkeeper’s mother, not the nation of Judah in exile, who fears dispossession and extinction. The word for the status she passes to her son is resonant with associations to homeland (*moleid, moledet*). Her desperate act of prostitution is a foil, either for the widow—namely the widowed city of Jerusalem, bereft but somehow great among the nations—or the people of Israel, who will not “hook up” with other nations in order to elude their difficult fate.

Paternity is linked to identity, and the text presents the wise Jerusalemites (subaltern) as more secure in their identity than the Athenian (dominant culture).³² It is also linked to inheritance. When the innkeeper threatens his mother, his capacity for violence does not yield fruits of Roman conquest, but rather strips away his power and reveals his bastardy. The very image of the innkeeper, a man who allows others to lodge temporarily in his home, is subverted so that he himself is shown to have no claim to the property.

This last message is clearly reinforced in the sequel found in Riddle 3: a Jerusalemite seeks lodging but is refused. The symbolism of exile is hard to miss. He uses his status as a cultural outsider—I don’t know how to jump like you do in Athens—to trick the Athenian. Three quick jumps, and the innkeeper is locked out of his own home. “I am merely doing to you what you sought to do to me.” This Jerusalemite’s calculated indirection reveals the genre’s affinity with the trickster tale.

So why are these riddles included in *Lamentations Rabba*? Galit Hasan-Rokem, in her analysis of Jewish folklore, offers several useful insights. By translating the harsh experience of loss into an artistic form that incorporates a sense of play, the riddles and trickster tales offer humor’s unique gift for spiritual renewal. They also promise order in a chaotic

universe, a narrative victory with answers to questions that can be worked out, in place of the enigma of reality in which the Jewish people have inexplicably remained in exile for centuries.³³

Although she does not explore the extensive subversion encoded in the text, she appreciates how

the riddle genre presents categories, meddles them, reconstitutes them, and constantly reenacts their inner collapse. Riddles thus truly express the chaotic and desperate wavering between stable, collective self-assurance, gained through the rabbis' perception of themselves as the bearers of true wisdom. . .and the threat of individual and collective annihilation.³⁴

For a culture in exile, categories of *self* are also continually broken down and reconstituted. Theories of double voice and signifyin(g) help to disclose the full implications of this mode of discourse. Riddles are ideal vehicles for imagining a world that is different than the one we see; even the meanings of words and images are no longer constant.

Although the riddle is embedded inside another riddle that encodes the subversive messages, it is not because the rabbis are afraid that Roman authorities might hear and somehow view the wild stories as a threat. The literature is inner-directed. Rather, the method is a conscious utilization of the double voice to grapple with the unavoidable double consciousness that is pressed into their psyches as a marginalized community within the empire. After all, the reader does not actually see Jews presented through Roman eyes; it is instead a house of mirrors in which the outsider's gaze is projected through the rabbinic imagination. Colored by the empire's hegemonic power to define, both perspectives reflect how they see themselves. Constituted in the conflict, they also express themselves—their fears and their dreams—in tropes of Hellenistic culture.

The rabbis are the philosophers among the Jews; they engage in biblical exegesis with methods of Hellenistic rhetoric. They are served dog meat (metaphorically) and death (more literally), yet are the conservers of sacred texts and traditions. Repopulating Jerusalem in their imagination also reveals the depth of their loss; the pain is their legacy and proof that it was once a sacred home. Midrash is written in a mix of Hebrew and Aramaic with a smattering of Greek, including words that reveal the imprint of Persian and Hellenistic imperial influence. Living within Jewish and mixed communities in the northern part of the land of Israel, these rabbis are still at home in a way, but not masters of the house. They are absorbed into the dominant

culture, and so they need its language, its forms, and its values. Yet they preserve their unique identity and reclaim some dimension of their voice by resignifying everything.

Although all trickster tales and riddles navigate the tension between what is and what could be, between what should happen and what does—and they open the space between words to allow for new possibilities of meaning—there is a special potency when employed by a dislocated, dispossessed people. They use the language and imagery of the oppressor because it is also *their* language. The additional meaning is encoded not to obscure but to communicate the fragmented identity of the authors or redactors. By requiring us to ferret out the underlying interpretation, they also weave us into the fabric of meanings, making their struggle our own.

Brer Rabbit

Brer Rabbit stories come from African-American folklore of the slave communities—another culture in exile. Like the texts in *Lamentations Rabba*, they operate as encoded tales that invert character, power structures, and meaning. Yet there is an additional wrinkle in evaluating their literary rendering: although developed as an oral tradition among and for African Americans, the most well-known and extensive collection of tales was published by Joel Chandler Harris, a white Georgian journalist born in 1845.³⁵ He invented a black storyteller, a former slave named Uncle Remus who claims to have “nothing but pleasant memories of the discipline of slavery.”³⁶ Uncle Remus works on his old plantation and spins the tales for the son of his former masters. Critics appropriately problematize this literary frame and Harris’ co-opting of the narratives, but the tales can still illuminate the double voice/double consciousness of African-American culture even though (or perhaps because) they are filtered through Harris’ pen.³⁷

Some background is necessary to set up the excerpt, a story Harris calls “Mr. Rabbit Grossly Deceives Mr. Fox.” Usually in Western folklore, the fox is the clever character, but this is not the case in Brer Rabbit stories. While the rabbit is occasionally done in by all the forces aligned against him, especially a sometimes-wily Brer Fox, he usually gets the better of them. Nonetheless, he does get into trouble. Brer Rabbit’s most infamous failure was to fall for the Tar Baby hoax, finding himself completely stuck to a mass of tar, at which point Brer Fox could have easily finished him off. Of course, the rabbit managed to trick his way to safety, but apparently word got around

about his folly. In the present story, he goes to visit Miss Meadows and the gals (recurring human characters within the tales) and they are having a grand time at Brer Rabbit's expense, laughing endlessly about the Tar Baby. As Uncle Remus narrates, Brer Rabbit sits there and "takes it" for a while; finally he gives a wink and speaks up:

. . . "Ladies, Brer Fox wuz my daddy's ridin'-hoss fer thirty year; maybe mo', but thirty year dat I knows un," sezee; en den he paid um his 'specks, en tip his beaver, en march off, he did, des ez stiff en ez stuck up ez a fire-stick.

Nex' day, Brer Fox cum a callin', and w'en he gun fer ter laugh 'bout Brer Rabbit, Miss Meadows en de gals, dey ups en tells 'im 'bout w'at Brer Rabbit say. Den Brer Fox grit his toof sho' nuff, he did, en he look mighty dumpy, but w'en he riz fer ter go he up en say, sezee:

"Ladies, I ain't 'sputin' w'at you say, but I'll make Brer Rabbit chaw up his words en spit um out right yer whar you kin see 'im," sezee, en wid dat off Brer Fox marcht.

En w'en he got in de big road, he shuck de dew off'n his tail, en made a straight shoot fer Brer Rabbit's house. W'en he got dar, Brer Rabbit wuz spectin' un 'im, en de do' wuz shet fas'. Brer Fox knock. Nobody ain't ans'er. Brer Fox knock. Nobody ans'er. Den he knock agin—blam! blam! Den Brer Rabbit holler out mighty weak:

"Is dat you, Brer Fox? I want you ter run en fetch de doctor. Dat bait er pusly w'at I e't dis mawnin' is gittin' 'way wid me. Do, please, Brer Fox, run quick," sez Brer Rabbit, sezee.

"I come atter you, Brer Rabbit," sez Brer Fox, sezee. "Dere's gwineter be a party up at Miss Meadows's," sezee. "All de gals 'll be dere, en I promus' dat I'd fetch you. De gals, dey 'lowed dat hit wouldn't be no party 'ceppin' I fotch you," sez Brer Fox, sezee.

Den Brer Rabbit say he wuz too sick, en Brer Fox say he wuzzent, en dar dey had it up and down, 'sputin' en contendin'. Brer Rabbit say he can't walk. Brer Fox say he tote 'im. Brer Rabbit say how? Brer Fox say in his arms. Brer Rabbit say he drap 'im. Brer Fox 'low he won't. Bimeby Brer Rabbit say he go ef Brer Fox tote 'im on his back. Brer Fox say he would. Brer Rabbit say he can't ride widout a saddle. Brer Fox say he git de saddle. Brer Rabbit say he can't set in saddle less he have bridle fer ter hol' by. Brer Fox say he git de bridle. Brer Rabbit say he can't ride widout bline bridle, kaze Brer Fox be shyin' at stumps long de road, en fling 'im off. Brer Fox say he git bline bridle. Den Brer Rabbit say he go. Den Brer Fox say he ride

Brer Rabbit mos' up ter Miss Meadows's, en den he could git down en walk de balance er de way. Brer Rabbit 'greed, en den Brer Fox lipt out atter de saddle en de bridle.

Co'se Brer Rabbit know de game dat Brer Fox wuz fixin' fer ter play, en he 'termin' fer ter outdo 'im, en by de time he koam his ha'r en twis' his mustarsh, en sorter rig up, yer come Brer Fox, saddle en bridle on, en lookin' ez peart ez a circus pony. He trot up ter de do' en stan' dar pawin' de ground en chompin' de bit same like sho 'nuff hoss, en Brer Rabbit he mount, he did, en dey amble off. Brer Fox can't see behime wid de bline bridle on, but bimeby he feel Brer Rabbit raise one er his foots.

"W'at you doin' now, Brer Rabbit?" sezee.

"Short'nin' de lef stir'p, Brer Fox," sezee.

Bimeby Brer Rabbit raise up de udder foot.

"W'at you doin' now, Brer Rabbit?" sezee.

"Pullin' down my pants, Brer Fox," sezee.

All de time, bless grashus, honey, Brer Rabbit wer puttin' on his spurrers, en w'en dey got close to Miss Meadows's, whar Brer Rabbit wuz to git off, en Brer Fox made a motion fer ter stan' still, Brer Rabbit slap de spurrers inter Brer Fox flanks, en you better b'leeve he got over groun'. W'en dey got ter de house, Miss Meadows en all de gals wuz settin' on de peazzer, en stidder stoppin' at de gate, Brer Rabbit rid on by, he did, en den come gallopin' down de road en up ter de hoss-rack, w'ich he hitch Brer Fox at, en den he santer inter de house, he did, en shake han's wid de gals, en set dar, smokin' his seegyar same ez a town man. Bimeby he draw in a long puff, en den let hit out in a cloud, en squar hisse'f back en holler out, he did:

"Ladies, ain't I done tell you Brer Fox wuz de ridin'-hoss fer our fambly? He sorter losin' his gait now, but I speck I kin fetch 'im all right in a mont' er so," sezee.

En den Brer Rabbit sorter grin, he did, en de gals giggle, en Miss Meadows, she praise up de pony, en dar wuz Brer Fox hitch fas' ter de rack, en couldn't he'p hisse'f.

"Is that all, Uncle Remus?" asked the little boy as the old man paused.

"Dat ain't all, honey, but 'twon't do fer ter give out too much cloff fer ter cut one pa'r pants," replied the old man sententiously.³⁸

The most obvious inversion is that the helpless-looking creature is really the one who holds the cards. While it is unlikely that Miss Meadows

and her friends actually believe at the outset that Brer Fox was the riding horse for Brer Rabbit's father, Brer Rabbit knows that the proud fox will do whatever it takes to prove him a liar and shame him again. Brer Fox's ego will entrap him, a fate sealed by his privilege and sense of superiority as he readily accepts the apparent incapacity of his adversary. The story's subversive power is intensified as the rabbit exploits the image of his weakness in the eyes of the other, feigning illness and presenting himself as especially vulnerable, to get Brer Fox to let down his guard. It is easier for him to believe the rabbit's helplessness than to tolerate his "uppity"-ness.

Yet throughout the anthology, Brer Rabbit encounters unrelieved hostility, and he must survive by his wits and his footspeed—qualities that correlate with the slave experience. Harris' daughter-in-law wrote in a collection of his letters, "[T]he parallel between the case of the 'weakest' of all animals who must, perforce, triumph through his shrewdness, and the humble condition of the slave raconteur is not without its pathos and poetry."³⁹ Brer Rabbit as the hero both confirms the slave reality and transforms it in the imagination.

Deeper levels of encoding adopt images of the hegemonic culture and then turn them on their head. A negative racial stereotype of the nineteenth century, for example, portrays black men as ridiculous for trying to ride horses like English gentlemen. It is seemingly embraced; Brer Rabbit openly proclaims all his riding limitations. Yet he manages to attach his spurs surreptitiously while riding, and proudly keeps his seat as "his horse" gallops up to the house. The image has been inverted to turn Brer Fox into the fool.

The narrative also exposes the farce of imagining that a sentient character in the story would be the riding horse for someone else and, for a moment, we glimpse the absurdity of slavery's most basic premise: how can a human being become someone's beast of burden? Then we watch how Brer Fox begins to change once he has all the constraints—saddle, bridle, blinders—laid upon him. The image of him pawing the ground and snorting "like a real horse" lifts up in the most brutal way the vile presumption that slavery itself knocked the last human elements out of the African race. In the end, hitched up at the post, Brer Fox "couldn't he'p hisse'f." While the premise must be rejected on its face, the story quavers just a bit because it knows that slavery has profoundly damaged the soul of its people. Speaking in tropes of white culture and challenges from a black one, the tale is indeed double-voiced.

It is tempting to attach signifyin(g) significance to minor details, although there is always the danger of over-reading. Brer Fox' attempt

at indirection, hoping to manipulate the rabbit into coming with him by insisting that the ladies feel it would not be a party without him, possibly plays on racist stereotypes; in the Jim Crow era, the potential power of African Americans was frequently diminished in the white imagination by casting them as comedic entertainers. Is Brer Rabbit's decision to shut his door and not answer the fox's call simply a plot device to prove his illness, or does it also reflect a compelling slave fantasy of refusing to answer the master's summons? Does the bit of parsley that Brer Rabbit claims has upset his stomach play on the cruel scarcity in African-American life, even after slavery? Do the spurs represent the physical cruelty imposed on the population, which sometimes forced them to act against their better interests? Perhaps Brer Rabbit's claim that the fox had belonged to his family for decades deliberately sabotages the logic of "owning" slaves, passing them down through generations. These and other clues ignite the imagination.

Surely the feigned politeness of the rabbit to his sworn enemy (and perhaps even the subservience of Harris' Remus character) is a tool of survival and suggests a malevolence buried within. One of the most famous expressions of this strategy is found at the beginning of Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*. The narrator describes the deathbed of his grandfather, who instructs the assembled family members as follows: "Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open."⁴⁰

The fantastic element of a folktale—setting the story at a comfortable distance chronologically or geographically (long ago and far away), or in this case using animals to represent human characters—enables narratives to embrace extremes, to indulge in wish fulfillment, and to violate social taboos. It is not simply a matter of fantasizing a reversal of power relationships. Here the rabbit ends up with the ladies whom, Robert Hemenway asserts, represent the order of the white world.⁴¹ Brer Rabbit sits in their parlor smoking his cigar "same ez a town man," putting on airs. Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, but probably not this time. The image challenges one of the most powerful sexual taboos of the Old South—the black man and the white woman.

Bernard Wolfe claims the thin veil of humor and hidden subtext protected the slave community from fully yielding to its own fury, a natural response to the wildly unjust institution of slavery. He calls it a "psychic drainage system" that would "prevent inner explosions by siphoning off hatreds."⁴² In a study on the fictions of slavery, however,

Glenda Carpio intuits there is more to the humor than a release valve for pent-up aggression. She is most interested in humor's capacity to illuminate incongruity. "[T]he humor of incongruity allows us to see the world inverted, to consider transpositions of time and place and to get us, especially when the humor is hot enough to push our buttons, to question the habits of mind that we may fall into. . . ."43 Illuminating incongruity, inversion, transposition, questioning habits of mind—these words echo Hasan-Rokem's insights regarding the riddle and thus lead us back to the double voice.

The narratives are profound articulations of multiply refracted selves: they speak for people who know the perversion of racism and yet cannot fully escape its impact or even the self-image fashioned by the white gaze; people who would challenge white hegemony but also know that their language, religion, and culture are fashioned in part through it. Du Bois writes, "One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro: two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."⁴⁴

Drawing Connections

It is worth mentioning a trickster tale within rabbinic literature that more directly parallels "Mr. Rabbit Grossly Deceives Mr. Fox." Found within a rare expansive exegetical discussion in the *Babylonian Talmud* (Megillah 16a),⁴⁵ it elaborates on the biblical encounter between Haman and Mordechai when the former must arrange for the latter to be honored by riding the king's horse while dressed in the king's attire (Esther 6). Normative power dynamics are established at the outset, with Mordechai alarmed that Haman has come to kill him; he interrupts his "rabbinic" instruction and warns his students to stay out of the way so they do not get into trouble.⁴⁶

Once he learns that the king ordered Haman to arrange for Mordechai's public accolades, however, he none too gently manipulates the conversation. Mordechai gets Haman to serve as his barber (so he can be appropriately groomed for such an occasion) and then climbs onto his back to mount the king's horse. He persuades Haman to stoop for him by claiming weakness from many days of fasting. Presumably, Mordechai undertook the fast hoping that God would thwart Haman's evil decree ordering the destruction of all the Jews; ironically, it also becomes the pretext for shaming Haman. Not only does Mordechai ride (or at least climb) on his adversary's back, he kicks

him once he is mounted—suggestive of the later text's image of Brer Rabbit jamming his spurs into Brer Fox's side.

The conversation between Mordechai and Haman includes riddling types of exchange, but Mordechai's verbal victories are opening hostile. He repeatedly calls Haman a *rasha* (evil one), and uses his logic and Torah learning to insinuate that Haman is both slave to the king and deserving of mistreatment. It sets a tone that makes this passage less apt for discussing the double voice, despite the amazing narrational similarities. While Mordechai's initial fear briefly reflects the vulnerability of the Jews, the tension quickly dissipates and he does not embody the double consciousness discussed earlier.

Much ink has been spilled in rabbinic scholarship about the differences between Palestinian and Babylonian traditions, with appropriate circumspection when relying on the literature to help substantiate historical analysis.⁴⁷ There is no Palestinian parallel to compare in this instance, so one can simply speculate that the cultural context of the more well-established rabbinic authorities in Sassanian Babylonia moves them to theorize or dramatize their experience of exile somewhat differently than the authors of the Lamentations midrash, redacted within the Land of Israel under Roman/Christian domination.

Focusing then on the very different stories from midrash and African-American folklore that nonetheless share the quality of double voice, it is meet that we examine the more salient similarities. Some have been addressed in the separate analyses. Each fashions a fictional battle that inverts normative assumptions: the helpless holds the cards, the traveler knows the local score, the lowly creature acquires his own sentient beast, the itinerant lays claim to the property. Playing on stereotypes of the outsider and the oppressed, they deploy literary features of the fool and the foil, humor and irony in the reversal of power relationships.

These fantasies both dream the new reality and accentuate the misery of the present. In the process, they reveal the absurdity of the known world. The son who imagines that murdering his mother will somehow set right his patrimony makes the property claims of imperial conquest seem equally ridiculous. Brer Rabbit's "ridin' hoss" repudiates the ethic of slavery and racial discrimination. And yet none of these narratives' heroes can escape their own histories, and how they fracture the categories of self.

The stories also reveal substantive differences in the worlds they represent, of course. While both the Jewish and African-American populations under study were "Others within" who dwelt among the dominant culture, the rabbit (or African-American character) interacts with his oppressor on a regular basis in personal relationship. Emerging from

householder slavery, blacks in the south were fully embedded with the whites around them. Jews in Late Antiquity surely encountered regular interpersonal conflict with authorities and others, but the midrash feels more political. The image of Jerusalemites traveling away from “home” embodies the rabbinic fantasy of national restoration, a vision not available to Southern blacks in nineteenth-century America. Four Jerusalemites traveling together also intimates the framework of collective trauma that defined Jewish experience, while the lone rabbit hero jostles us to consider the profound dislocation that chattel slavery caused within black family and community.

Most glaringly, the rabbinic text is telling its own story and Harris’ collection of Brer Rabbit tales are filtered through the lens of white experience. While all subaltern communities struggle against those who try to speak for them, Jews already had a literature, making it harder to deny their voice. Harris’ work is further complicated by his use of dialect. Some readers judge his rendering to be credible; others point to the gulf between the Standard English of the boy or the anonymous narrator, and the exaggerated misspellings and mispronunciations of all the “black” characters, arguing that the dialect appears as minstrelsy.⁴⁸

Yet comparison of these texts from such different times, places, and cultures also helps to uncover more elaborate literary devices that deepen the complexity of the double voice. They both utilize characters who recognize the tragic flaw that will doom their opponents, antagonists who represent the dominant culture. While the four wise Jerusalemites deploy their second sight and Brer Rabbit (as well as the Jerusalemite of Riddle 3) employs simple intuition, their knowledge sets up the dramatic irony that moves the reader/listener to identify more intensely with the subversive perspective. We know what they know, and are drawn to their side.

Also, the outlaw justice that unfolds has a “measure for measure” quality. A common motif in rabbinic literature (מידה כנגד מידה), the result has semantic if not substantive parity. Since the game is rigged against the underdogs, the chicanery that is a requisite part of their narrative triumph is not considered immoral. As Daniel Boyarin argues in presenting the Talmudic hagiography of R. Eleazar b. Perata as a “veritable Brer Rabbi,” worming his way out of Roman execution, “Any sort of deception is legitimate, as long as it gets you off the hook with the oppressor, because his rule is absolutely illegitimate.”⁴⁹

And yet it is not quite valorous. R. Eleazar’s approach is set in tension with a colleague who announces his obedience to God and is bravely martyred (*b. Avodah Zarah 17b*). In Brer Rabbit and *Lamentations Rabba*, the humor may delight and the ends may justify the means, but the roles the

heroes play take a toll. The four Jerusalemites are wise, not cunning; still, they can complain only privately about the indignities served up to them. For all their insight, they appear to have no agency to change the world around them. The jumping Jerusalemite who follows them in the text must first, like Brer Rabbit, play the fool to expose the fool—and their respite from pervasive hostility is only temporary.

The Literature in the Eyes of the Other—Fragments of Reception History

The cost of such literary subterfuge rises when it is no longer reserved for the intended community, exaggerating Du Bois' "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others." When the Church Fathers encountered rabbinic texts or traditions, they certainly read them through their own lens and for their own purposes, yielding very different meanings. They frequently argued that various midrashic passages served as witness to the truth of Christianity—a claim they had attached to Hebrew Bible as well. They would point to other material to demonstrate the absurdity of Jewish interpretation, accusing the rabbis of being blind to the meaning of their own Scripture.⁵⁰

There was not broad Christian interest in rabbinic literature, however, until the Middle Ages "when for a variety of historical reasons, the Talmud became available to non-Jews and a violent sort of delayed-reaction response was indeed generated, producing finally a self-directed censorship of the Talmud on the part of early modern Jews."⁵¹ In 1240, the Talmud was put on trial in Paris—and lost—leading to book burnings and Church-sponsored censorship. Jewish scholars were forced to participate in public disputations, defending against charges that the Talmud both supported Christian claims and contained blasphemy regarding Jesus.

Although these dramatic assaults do not indicate direct Christian reception of the *Lamentations Rabba* material, they surely created a climate of self-scrutiny akin to the one Du Bois describes. For example, there is great debate among scholars about the degree to which Nahmanides may have dissembled regarding the authority of aggadah under pressure of the Christian gaze in the Barcelona disputation of 1263.⁵² Even more germane are medieval Christian tropes that emerged about the image of the Jew; unfortunately, many of them are still in circulation. In 2003, the Anti-Defamation League published a collection of contemporary retreads of these centuries-old calumnies: Jews are described as subhuman, untrustworthy,

and sexually deviant—all ostensibly demonstrated within rabbinic literature itself.⁵³ Such polemical attacks necessarily impact the way Jews see the stories they tell about themselves.

There is much more direct evidence when it comes to reception of the Brer Rabbit tales. Alice Walker laments that Harris stole a good part of her heritage by making her ashamed of them. This treasured slice of African-American folklore, which had the power to challenge, criticize, and inspire, was transformed for her by the white gaze:

I believe that the worst part of being in an oppressed culture is that the oppressive culture—primarily because it controls the production and dispersal of images in the media—can so easily make us feel ashamed of ourselves, of our sayings, our doings, and our ways. And it doesn't matter whether these sayings, doings or ways are good or bad. What is bad about them and, therefore, worthy of shame, is that they belong to us.⁵⁴

The gaze was intense with the first volume, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* (1880), selling more than 7,000 copies in its first month—largely to white readers in the South. More volumes followed (along with a racist 1945 Disney film version, *Song of the South*), and the figures of Brer Rabbit and Uncle Remus entered the nation's cultural lexicon.⁵⁵ We see the “southern preoccupation with the unsettling mystery of black identity” and the palimpsest of race and identity that continues to be reinscribed today.⁵⁶

This literary history necessitates some reflection on the stories' reception among Southern whites during slavery and Reconstruction. It is hard to imagine that they were so self-satisfied and blind as to miss the subversive symbolism entirely. The historian Lawrence Levine states, “The white master could believe that the rabbit stories his slaves told were mere figments of a childish imagination.”⁵⁷ His claim is not persuasive; Harris surely knew better. Although he likely missed particular subtleties or specific references,⁵⁸ he puts in Uncle Remus's mouth at one point, “Well, I tell you dis. . . . [E]f deze yer tales wuz des fun, fun, fun, en giggle, giggle, giggle, I let you know I'd a-done drapt um long ago.”⁵⁹ Privilege and bias can cloud vision in significant ways, but it is unlikely that Harris' readers were completely oblivious to the messages; the animal tale is a weak disguise for the characters' often malicious aggression.

Since encryption was not designed to obscure meaning, but to articulate the double voice, it is possible that the consequent indeterminacy was

essential for white readers as well. Of course, they used it for their own purposes. While the nation labored to uproot the scourge of slavery, so clearly portrayed as unjust in the tales, Uncle Remus' character somehow reassured Southern whites that they were not the source of evil. His relationship with the boy suggested that the intimacy they imagined with "their Negroes" was real even though their claim to ownership was shattered. His continuing presence on the plantation offered reassurance that the social order would not be utterly upended, even though the revolutionary rabbit would not be denied. Drawn in to decode the text, white readers became makers of meaning and found anchors of stability in a rapidly changing world.

For Southern blacks who told these stories during and after the experience of slavery, the text acknowledged the violence, suffering, and inferior status inflicted on the black community, while at the same time they believed and hoped the black hero could prevail. White readers around the nation, who read these books in huge numbers during Reconstruction, saw the real-world perpetuation of inferior status inflicted on the black community reflected in the text, even though the hero *imagined* getting the best of his former masters. These dialectical tensions illustrate the double voice more as Bakhtin intended it: they exemplify the multivocality of authorial voice, and the dialogic nature of literature and language that establishes heteroglossia.

Conclusion

Homi Bhabha extends Bakhtinian subversion of authoritative language through hybridization to the dialogical context of colonialism. It is possible, although unlikely, that the stories destabilize hegemony by "inscribing and disclosing the trace of the other so that it reveals itself as double-voiced. . . . The voice of colonial authority thus hears itself speaking differently, interrogated and strategically reversed."⁶⁰ To the extent that Christian identity is constructed in part over against Jewish identity, as is white identity over against black identity, any "outside" encounter with Brer Rabbit tales or rabbinic midrash could entail some trace of this dynamic.

Yet this study remains skeptical of the idea that the stories have much power to challenge hegemony before the advent of contemporary criticism, and stresses instead the inner-directedness of the discourse. Brer Rabbit tales

developed as stories the African-American slave population told among themselves, and rabbinic midrash was aimed at Jewish audiences.

This perspective is reinforced by the fact that the encoded message often challenges the order of black society, not the majority white culture. The Tar Baby story, for instance, raises the specter of black-on-black violence, with Brer Rabbit all too quick to bully a black creature he believes to be inferior to him, and all too eager to “teach” him lessons in respect similar to those he has no doubt received.

Comparable self-critique is evident in *Lamentations Rabba* and other rabbinic texts as well. A parable in Chapter 3, for instance, both challenges and affirms the Jewish strategy of waiting faithfully for God to restore the nation.⁶¹ The encoding of the parable form (*mashal*) is also well suited to express the double voice, yielding a set of dualities: Torah is their consolation and their crutch. God is still bound to the Jewish people, but has hidden the Divine face. There is faith that their fealty will be rewarded, but also anger that the people would be subjected to such profound suffering, and existential terror that the covenant could be permanently destroyed. What if their faithful waiting, when it would be so much simpler to become assimilated in the dominant culture, was meaningless? As nonstandard theology, these ideas are encoded—but not to hide them.⁶² Engaging the reader/listener in the act of interpretation, the cipher amplifies their impact and sets them in dialectical tension to articulate the multilayered truth of a people in exile.

The paradox of the parable adopts the mainstream rabbinic doctrine of reward and punishment in the context of an eternal covenant, and also affirms the experience of doubt and abandonment as well as the absurdity of the Jewish condition. Its duality is akin to the inversion of the riddle that adopts the imagery of Hellenistic culture but insists on a Jewish signification, thereby preserving both identities. It is akin to Brer Rabbit’s utilization of racial stereotypes, recognizing how the African-American community is defined by them and how it refuses to be defined by them. Differently communicated in diverse genres, representing diverse cultures, the double voice of peoples in exile expresses the deep fractures of double consciousness, but also “pervasively skeptical subversion”⁶³ that guards against totalitarianism of any sort. It offers agency and voice to articulate the whole self, not conscribed by cultural hegemony, theological doctrine, the tendency to defer self-critique, or any other limitation that would make them deny any part of themselves or their experience. It is a powerful tool of complex self-expression and a strategy for survival.

RACHEL S. MIKVA is the Herman E. Schaalman Associate Professor in Jewish Studies and Director of the Center for Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Studies at Chicago Theological Seminary. Her scholarship focuses on the intersections of biblical exegesis, culture, and ethics.

Notes

1. See brief discussions of the oral–written interface within rabbinic literature in Elizabeth Shanks Alexander, “The Orality of Rabbinic Writing,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, eds. Charlotte Fonrobert and Martin Jaffee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 38–57; Rachel Mikva, *Midrash vaYosha* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 23–24. A longer study can be found in Martin Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth: Writing and Oral Tradition in Palestinian Judaism, 200 B.C.E.–400 C.E.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). Henry Louis Gates Jr. discusses the oral roots, recurrent oral performance, and rhetoric of orality found within African–American folklore and literature, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African–American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), xxv–xxvi, 22, 53.

2. Although there is general agreement on African origins of many motifs, some scholars highlight thematic affinities with Native American folklore. See, e.g., Jonathan Brennan, ed., *When Brer Rabbit Meets Coyote: African–Native American Literature* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 114–38.

3. See Amnon Linder, ed., *The Jews in Roman Imperial Legislation* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987).

4. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 136–37.

5. Mikhail Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 324.

6. Michael Awkward, *Inspiriting Influences: Tradition, Revision and Afro–American Women’s Novels* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 56.

7. See, e.g., Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 365; Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Carl Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Champaign: University of Illinois, 1988), 271–313.

8. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; Stilwell: Digireads, 2005), 7.

9. Dorothy J. Hale, “Bakhtin in African American Literary Theory,” *English Literary History* 61, no. 2 (1994): 450.

10. See, for instance, Robert Stepto, *From Behind the Veil* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1979); Houston A. Baker Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro–American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); and Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*.

11. William Lyne, “The Signifying Modernist: Ralph Ellison and the Limits of the Double Consciousness,” *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America (PMLA)* 107 (1992): 319. Hale also criticizes their “attempt to transform the Du Boisian crisis of subaltern invisibility into a Bakhtinian triumph of self–articulation” (“Bakhtin,” 448, 464). Edward Said offers a trenchant critique of those who might romanticize any experience of exile as the foundation of literary insight and “enriching motif of modern culture,” *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 173–86.

12. A number of early Zionist thinkers opined that centuries of exile had deformed the Jewish self. See Eliezer Schweid, “Rejection of the Diaspora in Zionist Thought,” in *Essential Papers on Zionism*, eds. Yehuda Reinharz and Anita Shapira (New York: New York University Press, 1996). Arnold Eisen, on the other hand, is among those who point to the Jewish experience of exile enabling a special insight into human existence, *Galut: Modern Jewish Reflection on Homelessness and Homecoming* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1986).

13. Gates, xxiv.
14. *Ibid.*, xxii.
15. For a discussion of these genres, see Burton Visotzky, "The Literature of the Rabbis," in *From Mesopotamia to Modernity*, eds. Burton Visotzky and David Fishman (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999), 71–102.
16. Max Kadushin astutely settled for discerning "value concepts" within rabbinic thought, *Organic Thinking* (1938; Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2010). Others, such as Ephraim Urbach, sought to describe a more fully developed system, *The Sages* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975). Literary hermeneutics are described in numerous places in rabbinic texts, with a number of variations. A brief distillation can be found in Herman L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 15–30.
17. The degree and nature of Hellenistic influence continue to be debated, but its integration within Jewish/rabbinic culture is undeniable. See Lee Levine, *Judaism and Hellenism in Antiquity* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998); Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, trans. John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1981); Saul Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine/Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (1942, 1950; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 2012); Louis Feldman, *Judaism and Hellenism Reconsidered* (Leiden: Brill, 2006); and Shaye Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1988).
18. See Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).
19. Gates, 46–47, 82. His idiosyncratic rendering of the term represents an effort to preserve its origins in black vernacular, in which the final "g" would generally not be pronounced.
20. Burton Visotzky, "In Hoc Signum Vincent," in *Theorizing Scriptures*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 248. See also David Weiss Halivni, *Peshat and Derash: Plain and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis* (London: Oxford University Press, 1998).
21. Gates, 48; Visotzky, "In Hoc Signum Vincent," 249. In the Babylonian Talmud *Shabbat* 63a, the great sage Mar is reported to have taught: אין מקרא יתבא מידר פשוטו—The verse cannot be completely severed from [lit: depart from the hands of] its contextual meaning.
22. Gates, xxiv, 51; Visotzky, "In Hoc Signum Vincent," 249. For discussion of retold biblical narrative within midrash, for instance, see Joshua Levinson, "Dialogical Reading in Rabbinic Exegetical Narrative," *Poetics Today* 3 (2004): 497–528.
23. Gates, 59. On page 63, he alludes to this exercise as "trope-a-dope."
24. *Ibid.*, 54. He cites Roger D. Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle: Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1970), 66–67. Claudia Mitchell-Kernan also mentions encoding and indirection in her ground-breaking study of signify(n)g, "Signifying," in *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 311.
25. Galit Hasan-Rokem, *Web of Life: Folklore and Midrash in Rabbinic Literature*, trans. Batya Stein (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 62. For a more complete discussion of the midrash, see the prolegomenon in Paul Mandel, "Midrash Lamentations Rabbati" (PhD diss., Hebrew University, 1997) [Hebrew].
26. Hasan-Rokem, 44–45. "Aggadic" midrash refers to that part of the literature that is not halakhic; i.e., it is not designed to shape praxis.
27. *Lamentations Rabba I*, as recorded in Solomon Buber's eclectic scholarly edition, Vilna 1899; copied from *Bar Ilan Responsa Project*, Version 21 (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University, 1972–2013).
28. The English translation is my own. In Hebrew, bracketed words are textual variants identified within the Buber edition; brackets in the English text indicate words added for clarity. The entire riddle sequence can be found in English translation in Hasan-Rokem, 48–51.
29. Textual parallels comprise another type of intertext. The Babylonian Talmud *Sanhedrin* 104a–b presents one riddle of the longer sequence in excavating meanings of the verse from Lamentations. When the wisdom of the Jewish captives is revealed, their captor releases them. The Talmud often presents such second sight (usually attributed to the rabbis themselves) as somehow salvific. A 14th-century Munich manuscript of the Babylonian Talmud has a more

extended pericope that includes a variation on the illegitimate son, except that his character is a captor rather than a host. In neither story are the Jews presented as Jerusalemites. See Hasan-Rokem, 60–62.

30. Yohanan Levi asserted in his classic work, *עולמות נפגשים* [*Encounters Between Worlds*] (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1960) [Hebrew], that Greeks in the age of Alexander the Great actually did associate wisdom with the East and believed inhabitants of Judea to embody a sacred insight. See also Chaim Nathan Marks, *זוהר, חכמה וכוח בארבעת הסיפורים הראשונים בקובץ*, “זהות, חכמה וכוח בארבעת הסיפורים הראשונים בקובץ” [“Identity, Wisdom and Power in the First Four Stories of the ‘Wisdom of the Jerusalemites’ Anthology in Lamentations Rabba”], *Mo’ed* 20, no. 9 (2010): 117–34 [Hebrew].

31. Rabbis are most commonly portrayed with such special wisdom; see for instance *Leviticus Rabba* 9:9, where Rabbi Meir knows what transpired in private conversation between an attendee at his lectures and her husband, and he also knows precisely what to do to ameliorate the situation.

32. Greek literature, too, included tropes linking questions of paternity and identity. See Mary Ebbott, *Imagining Illegitimacy in Classical Greek Literature* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2003).

33. Hasan-Rokem, 44, 65.

34. *Ibid.*, 52.

35. Harris may well have come by the tales “honestly”; most scholars believe that, as an illegitimate child who went to work as a teenager in a print shop on a Southern plantation, he heard the stories from Uncle George Terrell, Old Harbert, and other slaves in their nightly gatherings. R. Bruce Bickley Jr., *Joel Chandler Harris: A Biographical and Critical Study* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1981), 19.

36. Joel Harris, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* (1880; New York: D. Appleton, 1881), 12.

37. Scholars do not generally contest Harris’ version of the narrative traditions, but they investigate his life and writing for bias; Walter M. Brasch, *Brer Rabbit, Uncle Remus and the “Cornfield Journalist”: The Tale of Joel Chandler Harris* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2000). The 1980s saw passionate debates about who “owns” the art and artifacts of African-American culture, and whether or not to restore Harris’ work to the canon of children’s literature. See, e.g., R. Bruce Bickley, *Critical Essays on Joel Chandler Harris* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981); Opal Moore and Donnarrae MacCann, “The Uncle Remus Travesty,” *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (1986): 96–99.

38. Joel Harris, 36–39.

39. Julia Collier Harris, *The Life and Letters of Joel Chandler Harris* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918), 159.

40. Ralph Ellison, *The Invisible Man* (1952; New York: Random House, 1991), 16.

41. Robert Hemenway, introduction to *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Stories*, Joel Chandler Harris (New York: Penguin, 1982).

42. Bernard Wolfe, “Uncle Remus and the Malevolent Rabbit,” *Commentary* 8 (1949): 31–41.

43. Glenda Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 6.

44. Du Bois, 7.

45. It is likely that the material, located at the end of Chapter 1 in Tractate Megillah, existed as a separate midrashic corpus and was later inserted into the Talmud. See the introduction in Eliezer Segal, *The Babylonian Esther Midrash: A Critical Commentary* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994).

46. The Talmud is unconcerned with the anachronistic scene of Mordechai instructing the rabbis long before the rabbinic period. The literature frequently treats rabbinic Judaism as the normative embodiment of the tradition in biblical contexts.

47. See, e.g., Jeffrey Rubenstein, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Christine Hayes, *Between the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds: Accounting for Halakhic Difference in Selected Sugyot from Tractate Avodah Zarah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Ronit Nikolsky and Tal Ilan, eds., *Rabbinic Traditions Between Palestine and Babylonia* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2014). Since Joseph Heinemann’s

classic work, *אגדה ותלמודה* [*Aggadab and Its Development*] (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing, 1974) [Hebrew], scholars have been sensitive to literary and historical recontextualizations of midrashic material.

48. See John Goldthwaite, "The Black Rabbit: Part One," *Signal* 47 (May 1985): 86–111; compared to Moore and MacCann, 97.

49. Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 55.

50. See, for example, Jay Braverman, *Jerome's Commentary on Daniel: A Study of Jewish and Christian Interpretations of the Hebrew Bible* (Washington, DC: Catholic Bible Association of America, 1978); Nicholas de Lange, *Origen and the Jews* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 1977); Magne Sæbo, ed. *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation*, 2 vols. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996).

51. Boyarin, 164 fn. 15. Dynamics driving this change include apocalyptic expectations in the 13th century, expanded pietism, shifting economies, and growing awareness that Judaism had not remained a fossilized form of "Old Testament religion" as Augustine imagined in his theological justification for limited toleration of the Jews. See Hyam Maccoby, *Judaism on Trial: Jewish-Christian Disputations in the Middle Ages* (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1993).

52. See an excellent summary of positions in Robert Chazan, *Barcelona and Beyond: The Disputation of 1263 and Its Aftermath* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 142–57. He also has a working paper on the Paris trial, "The Trial and Condemnation of the Talmud," New York University Tikvah Center Working Paper 1/2011. For discussion of various disputations, see Jeremy Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).

53. "The Talmud in Anti-Semitic Polemics," Anti-Defamation League, 2003.

54. Alice Walker, "The Dummy in the Window: Joel Chandler Harris and the Invention of Uncle Remus," in *Living by the Word* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1981), 32.

55. Robert Cochran, "Black Father: The Subversive Achievement of Joel Chandler Harris," *African American Review* 28, no. 1 (2004): 21.

56. Anand Prahlad, "Africana Folklore: History and Challenges," *Journal of American Folklore* 118, no. 469 (Summer 2005): 254.

57. Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (1977; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 114.

58. See Nina Mikkelsen, "When the Animals Talked—A Hundred Years of Uncle Remus," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 8, no. 1 (1983): 4.

59. Joel Harris, *Nights with Uncle Remus: Myths and Legends of the Old Plantation* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1911), 330. Robert Cochran draws a distinction between Harris as transmitter of the tales, and his white audience, preferring to view him "a Brer Rabbit among authors." With indirection, covert insinuations and other tools of signifyin(g), he challenges a swath of Old South racial codes ("Black Father," 24, 27).

60. Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 21.

61. See David Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 56–62, for a thoughtful discussion of the passage.

62. See Adam Gregerman, "Have you despised Jerusalem and Zion after you had chosen them?: the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in Jewish and Christian writings from the land of Israel in Late Antiquity" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2007), for further discussion of this theme; <http://sunzi.lib.hku.hk/ER/detail/hkul/4346471>.

63. Hasan-Rokem, 52.