

Brian Wagner, Berkeley Book Chats, October 17, 2018

Timothy Hampton: Welcome to Berkeley Book Chats. I'm Timothy Hampton, director of the Townsend Center for the Humanities. Berkeley Book Chats showcase a Berkeley faculty member engaged in a public conversation about a recently completed work. This popular series highlights the richness of Berkeley's academic community.

Timothy Hampton: Today's conversation features Bryan Wagner of the English Department discussing his book *The Tar Baby: A Global History*. He is joined by Christopher Tomlins from Berkeley School of Law.

Christopher Tomlins: Thank you, good afternoon, so as we fared as Jenna said we're here to talk about Bryan Wagner's delightful provocative book, *The Tar Baby, A Global History*. Bryan of course is well known to many of us as associate professor in the English department here. His research focuses on African American expression history and culture about which he's written in *Disturbing the Peace, Black Culture and the Police Power after Slavery* published 2009. And in lots more work right on the cusp of publication, and I should say it's a great personal pleasure for me to be his interlocutor on this occasion. Now we'll all I'm sure have memories of our own first encounters with the story of the tar baby. Mine, I get to tell you mine, mine was as a five-year-old child in grim mid-1950s England where my greatest pleasure was to lose myself in the multiple volumes of a publication named as I recall Neton's Pictorial Encyclopedia, in which I encountered the version of the story popularized by Joel Chandler Harris amidst photographs wonderful photographic essay is about Shackleton's exploration of the Antarctic and stories of mythic Greek gods.

Christopher Tomlins: I loved the story that five-year-old me loved the story but I remember it puzzling me particularly its conclusion, why did the rabbit want to be thrown into a briar patch. I had fallen myself into a patch of stinging nettles. I did not have fond memories of undergrowth, it seemed dangerous to me. And even though the rabbit seemed to love the briar patch and my five-year-old very, very literal mind after being thrown into the briar patch wasn't the rabbit still stuck to the tar baby? Well Brian answers innumerable questions about the story in his book, although not to my chagrin my own five-year-old question. But I think his most remarkable time, which is also his most remarkable achievement in the book because the claim is very well substantiated is not only that the history of the story of the tar baby is indeed as the book's title suggests a global history in that it conforms to a story type found all over the world. A story type whose very global diffuseness renders questions about particulars of origin and transmission both and simultaneously fascinating, but also irrelevant in the meaning everywhere takes on a local past.

Christopher Tomlins: But also and in a sense contradicting what I just said about locality it's a story that actually has a transcendental universal meaning. Bryan pays scrupulous attention to what the late Clifford Geertz would recognize as thick description or in other words the established ethnographic tradition of interpreting the story. But he believes it's important lies elsewhere as he says in the final pages of the book, restored to its full range the tar baby presents nothing less than a comprehensive philosophy of world history. Now that is actually in my view

that is a brilliant claim, it's also one that invokes a sort of a Hegelian terrain that modernist historians, the kind that trained me as a historian longer ago than I care to think have almost completely abandoned for the low-hanging fruit of contextualization, and complexity, and contingency. So I'd like us as we move forward next hour I'd like us to keep an eye on that comprehensive philosophy of world history and this conversation. But first and perhaps as a way to begin and perhaps to provide a pathway toward the tar babies world historical importance, maybe I can ask Bryan to tell us how you came to write the book. Perhaps as you tell us that can you also tell us about the literature's that you're encountered along the way and how their claims and their deficits shape your path?

Bryan Wagner:

Great, go for it. Thank you so much Chris and thank all of you for coming out, thanks to the Townsend Center for having us, this is a great series. I'm really honored to be here. Do you all know the story? Yeah, yeah, no, okay so all right, so it's important. Let me tell you the story because it's very simple but also I mean as Chris was suggesting I believe it contains everything. So here's the story though, so there's a rabbit, there's a fox, they're neighbors. All summer the rabbit spends his time singing songs, and drinking wine, and smoking cigarettes while the Fox tends his field, he works hard. So then the rabbit the following winter steals all of the the hard-fought produce that has been grown by the Fox. So the next year the Fox decides that he's going to catch the rabbit rather by building a tar baby out of tar and turpentine, this lifelike figurine he places it on the road to his fields. And when the rabbit approaches the tar-baby he greets the tar-baby and when he is not greeted in return he strikes the tar-baby twice with his hands, kicks it twice with his feet, and headbutts it until he's stuck at five points and left at the mercy of the Fox.

Bryan Wagner:

Not trapped for long however because he's in most cases he's able to trick the Fox into tossing him into the briar patch where he's able to make his escape. There's a lot of variation in the story, right, there are hundreds of versions of the story, different animals involved, different crops involved. And they're also variations in narrative structure but that's the broad outline that will give you a place to start and it's really important to that there's three parts to the story, first the theft, then the setting of the trap to catch the thief, and third the escape, frequently the briar patch sometimes there are other ones as well. Chris asked about how I came to be interested in the story and part of it has to do with the canonization of the story that's written by Joel Chandler Harris and attributed to the fictional character Uncle Remus in 1880, which is then I think for many people most familiar from its adaptation by Walt Disney in the movie song of the south and the 1940s.

Bryan Wagner:

And there's a lot to be said about its diffusion and mass culture. I'm really interested in a different story about its earlier circulation and also its intellectual reception. Okay, so in the 1880s actually in the wake of Joel Chandler Harris is publishing his version of the story people working in the nascent disciplines of social science were obsessed with this story. If you look at the first issue of the journal of American folklore journal still in existence, there is a forum about the tar-baby and its history of circulation. I mean it was already an important enough issue in 1885 for it not to have just an article but a whole forum of essays about this question. And at that moment it's really the case that some very essential ideas about culture and politics are formed around this representative case of the tar baby. So one main point of debate in the late 19th century that still remains with us has to do with how the story got from place to place. So by some contemporary estimates the story is the most often collected story in the late 19th century.

Bryan Wagner: But it was collected on five different continents having evolved over centuries, so it was a recognized from the beginning as a global story. And interestingly there's no Australian version from the Classical period in collections, there's no version in Antarctica, which is like not as surprising you but Australia is actually very surprising for a number of reasons. But five continents to developed over centuries in hundreds of forms and so there's interest at that moment and how did the story get to all of those places. And so people develop various hypotheses about how it got from place to place. One hypothesis that I call a theory of diaspora somewhat anachronistically says that the trajectory of culture follows lines of racial descent, right? So this is often involves positing an African origin to the story and imaging it's transmission through the slave trade, to the Americas, and elsewhere, that's one theory of its circulation. Another is a theory that's called at the time diffusion, which actually emphasizes not that culture follows great lines of racial descent but instead that it crosses over lines of racial descent. Various populations inevitably are sharing stories that came from other kinds of place and that promiscuous circulation of culture was something that was inevitably global in its scale.

Bryan Wagner: So people are working out that argument around this particular case and that remains true all the way through into the 20th century where to skip forward by the 1960s and 1970s people are thinking anew about cultural politics in ways where the trickster becomes a paradigm for understanding politics as something as Chris was saying that's contingent, that's embedded in the everyday rather than being about on the grand scale of revolution or the institutional mechanics of reform. So this is to say again that over the long duration of the story's reception it's been an important case for thinking. And I think it's actually been an especially important case in part because the original mystery of how it got to be in all of these places remains a mystery. It's the unknowability of its transmission has been a spurt of thought for more than a century now. So I mean it was like recognizing both that people don't know that history as much and just feeling that intellectual consequences of the story's reception we're really fascinating. So let me say a few things about the comprehensive philosophy of world history and this is to just give you some sense of why I'm not crazy because that sounds like a real a grandiose claim, right?

Bryan Wagner: And then I'll pause for a second and we can talk about how some of these things develop. So one of the things that's interesting is especially in the new social history when people are about everyday resistant and we're thinking about the story as a paradigm for politics is that they all go to that version that's familiar to Chris. They go to the version that's told by the fictional character, Uncle Remus. There's lots to say and lots of has been said about how that version it involves a lot of distortion and stereotyping. The dialect is very heavy, there's one thing in particular that people haven't commented on that's important to me about the canonization of that version of the story, which is that in that tripartite structure I described to you. Theft, setting the trap for the thief and the escape. The first part is left out by Joel Chandler Harris, right? It begins in effect in many, with the setting of the trap, right? I think that this is really consequential not only for how we experience that story, but also for the theory of politics it's built from that story.

Bryan Wagner: When you don't have an initial situation it becomes the case that the reasons why the wolf and the rabbit are fighting or self-evident. They're writing because wolves are wolves and rabbits are rabbits, and they naturally are our enemies. It also follows that the story becomes an allegory where differences in social position correspond to species difference, right, so people who are stronger you have more power in society or respond to the stronger animal. People who have relative weakness in society correspond to the weaker animal. It follows as well that the peasant, slaves, and natives who are sharing the story have a natural

affinity and identification with the weaker animals with the trickster. This is a standard interpretation you get, but again it's crucially a standard interpretation that depends upon the canonization of the version of the story attributed to Uncle Remus because when you look at that opening situation things become a lot more complicated, okay? It's the opening situation, I'll give you an example to make it more concrete.

Bryan Wagner: There's a version of the story that appears in 1841 in a Cherokee tribal newspaper in Oklahoma, and this version of the story has an opening sequence that is actually quite common. You find it Alfred Byrd and Ellis collects almost the same story in the so called slave coast of West Africa in 1890. But so this version though in 1841 from Oklahoma begins with a drought, the animals have to get together to try and figure out what to do because they can't get water. So they say, "Here's what we'll do, we'll all work together to dig a well. We'll dig a well and then we'll all share the water, anyone who participates in the digging of well can have water, if you don't participate, fine, but you don't get to use our water." So they do this, things get better, they use the well. The rabbit; however, decides that he's not going to dig the well. He knows that he can sneak in at night and take the water for himself anyway. And not only does he sneak in and steal the water he muddies the well so that no one else can use it.

Bryan Wagner: So this is a version of a classic so-called social dilemma known as free riding, the idea that when societies try to organize themselves, to manage these kinds of common pool resources to something like a well, right, there's a problem, which is that people are naturally inclined to be selfish. And if they know that they don't they can still get access to the well without doing the labor, inevitably there will be free riders in that situation who will take advantage of the resource without contributing labor, which will eventually lead to a situation of chaos or to what Garrett Hardin calls the tragedy of the commons. This is just one as Chris said, this is like one example of many that are used to generate the story of the tar baby. And the amazing thing, this blew my mind when I realize it's the amazing thing is that literally with very few exceptions all of those stories have exact analogs in natural rights discourse, and the law of nations, and in political economy. I give you one example this problem with free riding. There are other examples that have to do with a labor mixing argument that we know from John Locke.

Bryan Wagner: Other examples that have to do with ideas of just war, others that have to do with the idea of rest nullius or the legitimacy of occupation of unoccupied or uncultivated land. Literally, I mean like it requires no interpretive ingenuity on my part to see that the story begins with those same narrative scenarios or thought experiments, literally they're the same. So not only is the story circulating in the same places at the same time as these ideas that we know from colonial law and political economy, it's actually using the same narrative elements to address these problems of production and subsistence. So this is in part why I have license I think to talk about the story as a work of philosophy. There's a lot more to say about the problems that this poses. I'll say one thing and then I'll open up to Chris and we can think about this together. The one reason why I think this produces real trouble for the standard interpretation of the story is that in the situation I described to you where the animals dig the well, identification with the trickster is really difficult. It's actually the case, that situation is structured in such a way to make identification with the trickster almost impossible. It may actually be the case that in those situations the trickster has some justification for his entitlement to the resource.

Bryan Wagner: But as this situation is structured his motivations inevitably reduce to indolence and appetite, right, so it's literally the situation is structured as to make his

perspective unavailable to representation. Actually in intellectual history as you all may know that position of the so called lazy rascal it's famously a position that is resistant to representation from Karl Marx to Gayatri Spivak. There's a lot of discourse on the fact that that perspective is actually something that is blocked from view in classical political economy. It's true in the story too. You actually don't need to go to intellectual history though to understand that point. If you just think again about the fact that the story does not permit us to see things from the perspective of the trickster in that initial situation, which is to say though it's not to say that people who were telling the story did not identify with a trickster. There's lots of contextual evidence to show that that was the case. What I'm arguing is that identification with the trickster in that case is a lot more complicated than we have previously assumed, not something we can take for granted at the start, not something we can assume on the grounds that the story is an allegory.

Bryan Wagner: It's actually something that rather emerges over the course of the story especially through the so-called stick fast sequence that the middle scene of struggle for recognition and the trapment in that closing scene of the briar patch. It becomes possible to see how the story in an amazing way comes to assert its perspective from within a situation where its perspective is supposed to be absent. So that's I'm gonna stop there and we can talk some more, but that's partly that way in which I try to think about the story differently from how people have previously have.

Christopher Tomlins: As I was reading it and of course once tempted in reading the story to just sort of to begin to extrapolate to impose interpretations of one's own. And I couldn't help thinking although this may be a stretch, but I couldn't help thinking of Animal Farm, Orwell. And in a way the context in which I was thinking of Animal Farm is actually the one that you have just described, which is the position of the trickster these are the collective that take it upon themselves to alleviate their situation cooperatively. And it strikes me that in a way the rabbit becomes less difficult to sort of access imaginatively if in a way the rabbit you perceive, the rabbit is pushing back against two kinds of modernity, you might say there's the modernity of collectivism, the modernity of the group that comes together to resolve its problems of which is illustrated on animal farm, and meets its own tragic end in Animal Farm. And there's the rabbit who's also pushing back against a different modernity, which is the capitalist modernity and modernity of improvement for profit, improvement of the accumulation of resources.

Christopher Tomlins: And I mean the place that that took me and this is to leap toward the end of the book toward the philosophy of world history in a sense is to say it seems to me that you end up ... I don't know if this is company you want to be and you end up ... because of other things you say about his work and the course of the book. But you an end up in a sense sort of a long side James C. Scott, but in the art of not being governed, which is a wonderful perhaps people know James Scott's work and that book in particular, which it's essentially an altitude theory of resistance you might say. The way you explain how different kinds of cultures have developed in mountain areas as opposed to valley areas is that you see valley people as those who have driven out or expropriated those who initially lived in those areas have developed them into in Scotts terms paddy culture because his argument is largely Asian based.

Christopher Tomlins: And the original inhabitants desire to escape from the oppression of paddy of kingdoms or cultures, political cultures dependent upon paddy culture so they move upwards, literally they move upwards out of the valleys into mountain ranges. And your rabbit is behaving in a very similar way it seems to me and this

is your philosophy world history that this is a movement away from forms of oppression. And also a movement away from forms of oppressive modernity as well.

Bryan Wagner: Yeah, thank you that's a lot to think about. And I mean I cite that book approvingly in that closing section on the briar patch and so in that sense I think I would say, yes, I mean I have quibbles with it. But the point being that I think about the briar patch not as an abstract symbol which is often how it's right but as I actually like pointing to a concrete place and actually talked a lot about Liberty County Georgia in the concluding chapter, and like the particular kinds of commons institutions informal economy that exists there. And something that's referenced by the briar patch in this story, but so this idea of there being in the mountains and in the far-off reaches or the bottoms, this is where people can go to find protection from the civilizations that might otherwise try to enslave them or exploit them in various ways. It's a way of thinking about what the briar patch is in the story. I think it's maroon settlement, it is a kind of enclave that exists in the midst of civilization but is not of civilization.

Bryan Wagner: I mean it's a marker therefore of the failure of primitive accumulation, right, we're at the process of ex procreation to totalize itself everywhere. There remain these kinds of mountain fastnesses and shelters, regions of refuge where it's possible to ground oneself. And so that is how I think about it, and the larger intervention there though is again to say that in terms of how we've thought about politics and culture, the tar baby has been a central example. There's some important kinds of problems with how culture and politics have been thought through since the 1970s questions about the composition of the except at agency that we've inherited. And there's a way in which I think I'm the tar-baby allows us to specify better some of those concepts. You might say that the story anticipates more than we have realized about the claims that have been made in its name. And so by thinking about the situation of the tar babies, the situation of expropriation by thinking about its scale is the same scale as the so called great transformation in world history I think it actually becomes possible to think more precisely about what we mean when we talk about culture grounding it again in those shatter zones that that James Scott talks about.

Bryan Wagner: I think that it takes a theory of agency that develops again with the tar babies in one of its central cases in the 1960s and 1970s as an alternative to older theories of political subjectivity, that find politics to come from the sloughing off of the dead weight of tradition or the revelation of contradictions from the point of production. Those old theories of politics are things that the new social historians in the 1970s are trying to do away with. To come up with a new idea of politics it's about contingency, about everydayness. And their problems with that theory that they come up with and I think actually the tar baby story has better solutions than we have realized because again it knows more about what historians have been trying to say based on the story then people have recognized. And so thinking about the story in the terms that I think it invites offers I think an important alternative to received ideas about culture and politics. It actually go all the way back to the 1880s, but there are different stages along the way and there are many important ways in which I think we're still speaking through those terms and the story still has things to teach us.

Christopher Tomlins: Yeah, yeah I think what I really liked about it and about your analysis of it and particularly the briar patch. I mean exit is an option, you don't have to stay and struggle remorselessly and get beaten over and over again. The rabbit gets to live or the rabbit gets to try to leave at any rate.

Bryan Wagner: Yeah, absolutely.

Christopher Tomlins: I mean before we open, in a sense one of the most intricate and in a way difficult or demanding points of analysis I think in the book is when you canvass what you call the stick fast. And I wonder if you could share some of that because it's a really, really, this is the point where the rabbit is stuck. And it's a point where you say in the book explanations of what this means diverge. And one explanation diverge is sort of very unsatisfyingly into a global recapitulation of the story instead of actually grappling with the meaning of the story at that point. So maybe you could ...

Bryan Wagner: Yeah, you're right, it is an involved chapter. I will canvass like a few points that we could potentially follow up on. The first thing I would say about this middle sequence where the trap is sprung, right, is that actually it's continuous with the structure of that opening sequence in the sense that here are two again you're not really seeing the situation from the point of view of the trickster. The implied audience knows in the same way that the wolf knows that a tar baby is a trap or a tool, it's an instrument designed to produce an effect whereas the rabbit actually thinks it's a fetish object. I mean there's all actually a lot to say about the stories fetishism and the rabbit makes the mistake of attributing sentience and intentions to a physical object. The implied audience knows is not capable of recognizing him in return in responding to his ... so there's a way in which the dramatic irony of that sequence is continuous with the earlier sequence in the sense that it actually locks us out of the rabbit's perspective.

Bryan Wagner: Ralph Ellison is written very beautifully on this an existential impasse that's implied as that mistake leads to hit and being stuck fast and immobilized. It becomes I think I'm more complicated when you think about the context in which the story is circulating, which is a context in which Garrett Hardin aside, there are many successful examples of commons institutions where people are ... I talk a lot about this example from the Philippines of the tar baby story where in the context of the Philippines the stories about this guy McCoy who's trying to grow fruits and vegetables and this ape steals all of them. But in the context of the Philippines agriculture was happening at the turn of the 20th century when the story was collected in a way that was very much dependent on commons institutions that were highly successful, so like Sanghera is like this irrigation collectives had existed that at the time are fundamental.

Bryan Wagner: It wasn't the case in other words in the world where that story when it was being told that people confronted a state of nature as an individual in which their property was fundamentally insecure. There are actually institutions in place that through which these things would be negotiated and protections were offered. They weren't always successful, but in many cases they were. And so what's interesting to me about that context for the story is that I think it suggests in some interesting ways that I'm not gonna be able to fully elaborate that the stick bath sequence contains some sparks of consciousness or some sparks of the rabbits perspective where you're starting to see a way in which what is disallowed or barred from representation at the outset his sense of an enduring entitlement to an existing set of resources actually starts to come through.

Bryan Wagner: And I spend a lot of time thinking about his strange optimism in approaching the tar baby in the road right it's this interesting thing, right, it's a stranger. He's not like is this an enemy, he doesn't like go into his defensive crouch, he's like, "How are you doing," that's his which is if you bracket the dramatic irony for a second. It's an optimistic beautiful thing to do, and if you think about it from his perspective for a second, he's understanding that interaction as a breach in an existing set of social relations or an existing etiquette it's reduced to. And I think at that moment you can start to see the dreamwork of the stick fast sequence where the wolf is replaced by a proxy, a tar baby. And you can see the tar baby is

indifference unwillingness to recognize the rabbit as a repetition of the boorish indifference that's shown by colonizers and slavers, those who are ignoring the existing arrangements in lands that are being claimed or places where the regimes of property are being imposed by force.

- Speaker 1: So far from the story you get from people like Eric Hardin where state and market-based solutions are the inevitable unfolding of history. From this perspective it becomes possible to understand how modernization is something that's imposed by force in a situation where there's an existing regime of social relations that's being ignored in exactly the way that the tar-baby ignores the rabbit.
- Christopher Tomlins: So we've been covering an immense amount of ground in a very short time and it's indicative of how much is packed into this book. But of course, you're here not simply to listen to us for each other, but to join in so the floor is open to anybody who might have a question or Bryan or a comment of their own, an experience to share anything, sorry, please.
- Speaker 2: Bryan, what's the oldest version of the story that you found and where is it from?
- Bryan Wagner: Yeah, so dating is really difficult, right, so I mean it would be from the 1830s early, it's printed version, but obviously so oral traditions don't leave dated traces, so it's the working assumption of everyone who's collecting the story before the 1830s, 1840s all the way up to more recently that the stories circulation exceeds the moment of collection. So there was something in that late 19th century of funny hypothesis called the age area hypothesis, which says that like the further apart two instances of a story or piece of culture are the older it would be. So it's certainly the case that I would say the important answer is we don't know, but in terms of like a material trace it's 1831.
- Speaker 3: Okay.
- Christopher Tomlins: Yes, sir, thank you.
- Speaker 4: Thank you, in looking at that story from Oklahoma in 1840s I was thinking about Flint, Michigan for some reason and I wonder if it works out to wonder how anyone would identify with the trickster, could a corporate entity identify with the trickster at all if you tease that out?
- Bryan Wagner: Yeah, that's really interesting I would say yes, right, and in fact I mean there is a funny identification with the motive of profit maximization that's there as well so absolutely it's available, but it's not available in the way that people have interpreted the story. But there are a lot of things to say about Flint and about how a commitment to a common pool into a public good right is something that the story tries to foreclose at the outset, but in important ways I think arrives there at the end.
- Speaker 4: Thank you.
- Christopher Tomlins: Please, thank you.
- Speaker 5: Thank you so much for this conversation I was wondering if you can talk about the futurity of this tale as it continues to move through media, so you talked about the oral history, turning into literature, turning into film, turning into



theme park, turning into music, so what could we understand about the continued projection and significance of this tale.

Bryan Wagner: This is a very good question which is part of what LaShawn is working on in her dissertation, so you know actually a lot more about this than I do. And so we know in a funny way, I know is like what I've read from some other books, so I made a very strategic choice to foreclose especially after the Disney movie like its circulation and mass culture because precisely because it was like the problem I was trying to address was the over-representation of that version of the story, which has all of these ... it's compromised in all of these ways. And so I mean I'm really ... I do go up further but like really what I call the major phase of collection is something like the 1880s to the 1930s.

Bryan Wagner: And I'm really interested in that set of ethnographic interviews where the story is being recorded, so it's a little bit artificial, right, because obviously those stories like move on in all these other kinds of ways. The one thing I would say about it is the over-representation of one version of the story. But there's so much else to say about it, which is why I'm glad you're writing about it.

Christopher Tomlins: Please.

Speaker 6: In the last election or the one before that I forget which there was some white politician who used the tar-baby image in a speech and it was castigated for it for making a racist remark. I never thought that tar-baby itself was a racist image and I wonder if you could talk about that?

Bryan Wagner: Yeah, this is a really good question it's actually how I start the book too is talking about this issue that it's both simultaneously a racial epithet and a figure of speech that refers to a situation that gets worse the harder you try to solve it. And so it's a complicated question and one thing that a lot of people have said William Safire, John McWhorter, or other people have they've tried to suggest that its connotation as a racial epithet is of pretty recent vintage. McWhorter in particular is very condescending on that point, something that's important is that they're wrong on the facts actually. I have versions of it being used as a racial epithet in 1820s, so before any instance of it in a recorded instance of it in a story, in the newspaper there are various black space sketches where it's being used as an epithet. So it's important that those two senses, its sense as an insult, a fundamentally degrading insult and as a figure of speech coincide.

Bryan Wagner: And I would actually argue that they are in every way continuous with one another the way, in which the epithet tries to empty out the point of view of its object, ridicule and negates the perspective on the world that that figure might hold is in many ways continuous with the problem that's faced when the rabbit faces the tar-baby. The threat to subjectivity that's worked out there again, Ralph Ellison is so good on this is actually quite continuous with the working of the epithet in the world. So I would actually say that you want to ... and they're complicated things about writing a story that also has those connotations attached to it. But you need to think about all of it together I would say, the important intervention I feel like I make on that point though is to trace the longer history of the epithet, which a lot of people have claimed does not exist. It's very important to the history of the story that's a very old and long-standing usage.

Christopher Tomlins: I'd like to if I may just to follow that in a sense, first, I'm not so sure about the American usage of the town, but in English and also in Australian English, the phrase a touch of the tar brush is a pejorative reference to miscegenation to the

product of my to miscegenation. And I'm struck by the repetition of tar as that which clings, adheres, is difficult to get rid of. And I guess if that be the reason that I said that my five-year-old self was sort of puzzled by what appears to be of a rabbit's escaped by being thrown into the briar patch is there's nothing in the story at least as I read it, maybe it's Joel Chandler Harris's version that says that the ribbit is freed from the tar baby. So the rabbit gets to carry the tar-baby as like a sort of a deficit wherever the rabbit goes, and it's taught me that just as people have written these intricate and interesting stories in migration history that is the reception of migrant populations, how the Irish became white, how Jews became white, or how Eastern European, South Eastern European Jews became white.

Christopher Tomlins: So in a way the confrontation of the rabbit with the tar-baby one might arguably say is this the story of how the African becomes black?

Bryan Wagner: Yeah, I think there's definitely something to that. So I want to address the two points, one has to do with tar and embrace and then the other point is about why he's not still stuck to the tar baby. Okay, so I mean it is really important actually to the story-

Christopher Tomlins: Which I'm building a huge edifice.

Bryan Wagner: Yeah, I like your edifice so it's important that in the story if you look at illustrations if you look at many versions the tar-baby is actually very explicitly identified as a person of African descent, very frequently that's part of the address the rabbit's address to the tar baby. So I mean I start to think about it when I'm thinking about the problem of identification and how people think about the slave identifying with the rabbit unproblematically and automatically that actually what you find in that sequence is the opposite. A rabbit trying and failing to elicit recognition from the sculpted image of a slave, so as with the epithet the racial denotation of the tar-baby is very explicit, right, and I think it carries I think into stories where it's less explicit but there's abundant textual evidence and also iconographic evidence for that point. In terms of why I think actually the rabbit is not stuck to the tar-baby when he flies into the briar patch. I think that there's something magical that happens in that moment because just as I think that there's this interesting thing early on when in the initial approach to the tar-baby we're locked into the wolf's perspective.

Bryan Wagner: And we were laughing at the rabbit because we know things that the rabbit doesn't know, in the end obviously we're laughing at the wolf because we now know something that the wolf didn't know, right, which is that the briar patch is not an uninhabitable state of nature, it's rather a home. It's a side vicinity, right, and so there's a way in which what's interesting to me about that is I think the briar patch shows up as deus ex machina in the story, right? It's been there all along, but suddenly it comes from the outside of that dramatic encounter to provide or an escape that we had no idea was possible. But the reason why it feels like a deus ex machina is that we couldn't see it before because we were locked into the perspective of the wolf. And so there is gradually then there's a shift in point of view that makes the briar patch available to us and there's something then about how the release happens and the escape happens that is not precisely about solving the problems in the terms that it's presented, but instead magically unblocking the situation such that the rabbit can suddenly become more sovereign, more complete, more autonomous than anyone could ever be. It's a fantasy in that moment.

Bryan Wagner: And so because it's a fantasy I think his slightly implausible, inexplicable extraction from the tar makes sense to me.

Christopher Tomlins: That's something that you actually develop in talking about Liberty County that is the actual environment that lends itself to thinking of the briar patch not as my five-year-old brain's memory of stinging nettles, but as you say as Liberty as a place for freedom. And if you read Walter Johnson's lovely book *River of Dark Dreams*, which is about slavery and cotton culture and plantation lower Mississippi Valley between 1800 and 1850. And Johnson actually works this reversal that on the one hand you have what he calls a casserole landscape, that is a landscape that is designed as a prison. It's a landscape in which lines of sight that cotton fields are designed to and the placement of roads and things like that are designed to create a landscape in which slaves can be seen and runaways can be seen. But that the nature of plantation agriculture in these areas is always to leave these spaces undeveloped, tangled edges into which runaways run and become to some degree maroon like. I mean to the extent that marronage is available to lower Mississippi Valley slaves, which is in a very, very limited way, that's why it's occurring.

Bryan Wagner: Yes, absolutely and it's complicated as you remember from that section too. I think that it actually also shifts importantly with emancipation, right, so like under slavery it's in fact the case that I'm self-provisioning so going out in these places to gather oysters, or pick berries, or hunt is something that masters will allow slaves because this actually means that they have to pay less money for their subsistence. And actually in an economic downturn this could make or break a plantation, so they are actually following with allowing slaves to have in most cases these kinds of customary rights, it also meant that they had something it could take away. They could threaten to take away that day off or access to the commons for subsistence. This is something we have a lot of documentation of in Liberty County in that moment, it shifts though after emancipation when they're trying to enforce labor contracts.

Bryan Wagner: And these kinds of resources for subsistence hunting, grazing your pigs or cows out on common lands actually become a threat to the labor contract right because it means that people could negotiate for higher demands with the promise that they might be able to weather the loss of the job. And so there you see the criminalization of custom, important trope in the new social history happening in that moment, and I think you can also see the versions of the tar baby story about the story that is transcribed in 1893 and also a song about the rabbit and the tar baby that's a little bit earlier, dealing with that transformation in the criminalization of custom as it happens in Liberty County in very, very precise terms. I mean it's really my aim again to come up with something that is quite grand, but that also is specifiable in that way, right, where these terms can actually really be brought to the ground, which is why I spend so much time there in Georgia trying to show that actually these abstractions are in some ways more meaningful in a local sense than the terms of politics and culture that previously we've extracted from the story.

Christopher Tomlins: Do we have time for one more question?

Tomlins: Please, you asked it.

Speaker 7: So I hope this isn't too large of a question to be the last question, but I was actually really interested in the questions around gender and children and family in this entire global history of the tar baby story. So actually like at a brass tacks level of political economy with the relationship between the polis and the white ghosts or whatever. It always struck me in the Joel Chandler Harris version and also the *Song of the South* version it seems like the animals are anthropomorphized and labeled as men, they're Brer Fox, Brer Rabbit, and so on, and it almost seems like the briar patches this zone doesn't have households or families and it doesn't

seem to have women and children. Yet the tar baby is described as a baby and all of that, so I was wondering if there is a political economy discussion of family and wives and husbands and all of that going on?

Bryan Wagner: Yeah, Daniel, it's a complicated question, but yeah, no, it's really important and there are in different versions of the story you see different kinds of bad masculinity, there's a lot to say there. I know I would say though in terms of the politics of the story to the emphasis upon the briar patch it's a site of social reproduction like as a site of domestic production. All of the kinds of customs that I was describing are actually very much gender integrated and are about often about like petty production of pies and crafts for sale, so it's actually it is really the nativity that's involved in the briar patch and it's more of that we can really go into is actually gender is a very important factor in it. And there are ways in which I think some of those claims are a little bit abstracted from the context that you rightly have some good questions about. But I think there's no question though that the ways in which it's staking the political sphere on those kinds of commons institutions those kinds of customary practices um gender is a very important dimension of how production is being thought about there.

Christopher Tomlins: So I'm gonna ask this really final question which may be entirely unfair. The question I have is when you invoke world history, what you mean by that? Do you mean here is a story that can be taken to act as a sort of an index of conditions that one can find all over the world wherever one looks or do you mean world history in a kind of Hegelian sense?

Bryan Wagner: The former so in the sense that of like well a few things, the first thing again is like I'm thinking about world history and it receives what people have previously talked about as world history which could include Hegel. But I'm thinking about the story's aspiration to think all at once about the situations of peasants, natives, and slaves. It's actually experiencing different versions of the same process, so there is this will to abstraction right that is I think an attempt at a global imagination and that's motivated again by the sense that people for so long have seen the stories politics as something it's contextual, contingent, that's based on interest-based action under local circumstances. So part of it is a negatively motivated attempt to restore the degree of abstraction that I think is really in the story. But it's also the case that I think the way that abstraction works is it's an attempt to explain situations that are similar, but different in many, many different times and places.

Bryan Wagner: So it's I would say a global attempted explanation that again uses many of the same terms, narrative devices as things that we tend to call philosophy, right? And it's actually an accident of disciplinary history that we have not afforded this story that capacity for abstract thought that we're very willing to afford Locke or Grotius or Pufendorf.

Christopher Tomlins: Mm-hmm (affirmative), all right, thank you.

Timothy Hampton: We hope you enjoyed this Berkeley Book Chat, and we encourage you to join us in person or via podcast for future programs in the series.