



A review of
The Tar Baby:
A Global
History
B.C. Kennedy

Brian Wagner begins *The Tar baby: A Global History* by directly confronting the controversial place that the tar baby inhabits in contemporary culture as a 'racial epithet, a folk archetype, an existential symbol and an artefact of mass culture', while simultaneously operating as a metaphor suggesting a problem that gets worse the harder you try to solve it. The tar baby story, in which a fox uses a tar baby, usually made of tar and turpentine, to entrap a rabbit, which outwits the protagonist, belongs to the classic trickster tradition. However, like all stories in this genre, running alongside the entertainment element is a moral undertone with a serious message and Wagner argues that far from being a simple folk tale, the tar baby story is 'a collective work in political philosophy' that provides an anchoring point where 'associated ideas and examples can be set into a constellation that would not otherwise be available to analysis'. Wagner's interpretation of the story emphasises the formulaic representation of the trickster's crime against nature, which is sometimes depicted as 'illegitimate appropriation' and other times as a 'defection from communal norms'. The fundamental question the story addresses is one of accessibility. Who controls access to food and water when the rules have been subverted by colonialism, slavery, global trade and the loss of the commons to enclosures?

Wagner notes that by far the best-known version of this story is by Joel Chandler Harris in 'Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings' (1881). While this was not the first tar baby story to be printed, it was reproduced in the 'manufactured voice of an imaginary ex-slave', and it was this factor, Wagner argues, that made a difference to the story's 'future transmission, documentation, and reception'. In 1939 Walt Disney Studios purchased the franchise rights to the Uncle Remus stories and seven years later the tar baby was featured in *Song of the South*, one of the first feature-length films to combine animations and live action. Wagner argues that it is a measure of the extraordinary influences wielded by the culture industries at mid-century that the story is still strongly associated with this film decades after Disney removed the

film from commercial circulation. However, Wagner warns that the 'disproportionate attention' given to the Uncle Remus version 'has obscured the story's actual range'. Tracing its history and its connections to slavery, colonialism, and global trade, Wagner explores how the tar baby story – thought to have probably derived from the African diaspora – came to exist in hundreds of forms on five continents, passed on, it is believed, through oral tradition. This book seeks to look 'beyond this oral tradition to discover examples of the story's narrative elements outside the domain claimed by folklorists'.

No-one can say for certain when or where the story first originated; however, the tar baby story has been, Wagner suggests, 'central to our understanding of cultural traditions that slaves brought from Africa to America'. Circulating at the same time and in the same places as the new thinking about property and sovereignty that developed in colonial law and political economy, the tar baby story comes to embody an understanding of the interlocking processes by which custom was criminalised, slaves were captured, and labour was bought and sold. Nowadays while the term 'tar baby' may be interpreted as a racial slur, in its original context, it was a metaphor for a sticky situation that got worse the more one tangled with it. The story illuminates what Wagner terms 'the impact of science on the conflict over natural resources'. The crude tar-and-turpentine figure which Uncle Remus Brer Fox constructs is a piece of technology that gets the better of Brer Rabbit, and raises the question of whether this version was partly constructed as a response to slavery; the threat of punishment and death was real and this 'fearful struggle' undoubtedly held special meaning for slaves. The story demonstrates that 'slaves were neither deracinated nor submissive' but learned survival strategies.

As Wagner asserts, this book departs from previous thinking about the tar baby but it relies on established critical precedents, especially those versions printed between 1865 to 1945. The book is divided into five chapters starting with the tar baby's receptive history followed by a fascinating analysis in chapter two that addresses the 'longstanding controversy over the direction of the tar baby's diffusion and the implications that followed from this controversy in intellectual movements ranging from the new social history to symbolic anthropology'. The next three chapters correspond to the three stages in the story: the setting of the trap, the springing of the trap, and the trickster's escape. In the opening sequence of the three-part narrative structure, the author seeks to understand the tar baby 'in relation to cognates in other intellectual traditions'. Moving through the thief's encounter with the tar baby, drawing associations from the colonial discourse on fetishism, Wagner focuses in the final section on the escape to the briar patch where constriction and claustrophobia give way to exhilarations and freedom as the rabbit returns to the unenclosed landscape that he calls home. 'The briar patch', says Wagner, 'is a symbol

of the commons, the unenclosed, unowned land that provides refuge and resources that sustain the life of the community'. The most perplexing aspect of the story in its many versions is that the opening scene of the story is structured in a way that makes it impossible to identify with the rabbit; it is a freeloader. Yet over the course of the story we like him and by the end want him to escape. 'There is no question that we are meant to identify with the rabbit,' says Wagner, and in this book he explains the mystery of our identification with the rabbit, which is not, he suggests, as simple as it has often seemed'.

The book concludes with twelve examples of the tar baby story from the late 19th and early 20th centuries that Wagner has chosen to illustrate the story's conventions, features, variations, and the scale of its geographical distribution. It includes a map indicating where the stories were collected as well as the dates on which they were published to provide a 'highly selective and concentrated exhibition of the story's range and ambition'. Convincingly persuasive, this book depicts the tar baby story as representing 'nothing less than a comprehensive philosophy of world history'. This scholarly work has wide appeal to readers interested in cultural studies, children's literature and social history.

Author: Brian Wagner.

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