Chapter One
IDEAS OF CULTURE

A rabbit and a wolf are neighbors. In the summer, the rabbit wastes his time singing songs, smoking cigarettes, and drinking wine, while the wolf stays busy working in his fields. The rabbit then steals from the wolf all winter. The next year, the wolf decides he will catch the rabbit by placing a tar baby, a lifelike figurine made from tar softened with turpentine, on the way to his fields. When the rabbit meets the tar baby in the road, and the tar baby does not reply to his greetings, the rabbit becomes angry and punches, kicks, and head-butts the tar baby until he is stuck at five points and left to the mercy of the wolf. The rabbit is not, however, trapped for long: he tricks the wolf into tossing him into the briar patch, where he makes his escape.

This composite obviously, perhaps inevitably, fails to capture the true range of variation in the oral tradition of the tar baby. In the hundreds of versions on record, the thief is sometimes a rabbit, other times a spider or a monkey. The owner is sometimes a wolf, other times a possum or a lion. The thief sometimes takes grain from a field, other times fruit from an orchard or water from a well. This flexibility is normal in any vernacular tradition, and any interpretation of the tar baby needs to account for the regular substitution of characters, props, and incidents that occurs as the story is related again and again. Accordingly, one of the central tasks undertaken by scholars interested in the tar baby has been to explain how the story traveled so widely, and why it changed, when it did, along the way.[1]

FIG. 1.1. A. B. Frost, "'Gracious Me! An' den He Howl.'" Pen and ink. From Joel Chandler Harris, *Told by Uncle Remus: New Stories of the Old Plantation* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1903), 44.

This longstanding interest in the tar baby, in where the story has been and how it has moved from one place to another, has proven extraordinarily fruitful. This chapter outlines the tar baby's intellectual reception in anthropology, literature, history, and folklore—disciplines that were being professionalized in the same decades when collectors were publicizing their surprising discoveries about the scale of the story's worldwide circulation. Although the most elementary questions asked about the tar baby—how it traveled from location to location, why it traveled as far as it did—have never been, and likely never will be, answered empirically, this has never put a stop to speculation. Indeed, it has always been the things we cannot say for sure that have inspired the most influential discourse about the tar baby. The mystery of the story's diffusion, in particular, helped to shape the terms in which it became possible to think more capaciously about culture.[2]

During the late nineteenth century, the tar baby was one of the examples most often cited by collectors interested in the cul-

FIG. 1.2. A. B. Frost, "'Brer Rabbit, he Put his Han' ter his Head.'" Pen and ink. From Joel Chandler Harris, *Told by Uncle Remus: New Stories of the Old Plantation* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1903), 45.

tural traditions that slaves had transmitted from Africa to America. Joel Chandler Harris, in particular, was convinced that the tar baby, like the other tales told by Uncle Remus, came from Africa, and in his introductions to the Uncle Remus books, he sought to substantiate this connection by comparing the stories he collected in Georgia to stories collected by Wilhelm Bleek in South Africa and Charles Hartt in Brazil. Based on the similarities among these stories, Harris suggested that they represented the culture that united the African diaspora. According to Harris, stories like the tar baby expressed a racial point of view. They were political allegories in which the relative position of the weaker animals corresponded to the global perspective of the race.[3]

Others followed Harris in this interpretation, looking for analogues to Brer Rabbit wherever there were people of African descent. Some scholars, such as Thomas Crane and Héli Chatelain, recognized prototypes for the tar baby in trickster tales found in Liberia, Congo, Mauritius, South Africa, and the Gold Coast, and they tracked the changes that occurred in the story as it trav-

eled to such places as Cuba, Jamaica, Mexico, and Louisiana. Like Harris, these collectors were committed to an approach that they inherited from Johann Gottfried Herder and the Brothers Grimm, an approach that assumed folk traditions conserved national or racial identity as they were transmitted from generation to generation. In 1892, David Wells put the point succinctly. It was possible, Wells noted, to reconstruct the "history of a race" by tracing the "alterations" in its "typical legends." In 1896, Alice Bacon agreed with Wells, suggesting that stories like the tar baby were the "chain" that linked "the American with the African Negro." "Every story in Uncle Remus," Bacon elaborated, "can be shown to exist in a more primitive shape in Africa, and among people who cannot be suspected of having imported it." As early as 1877, William Owens was prepared to affirm what seemed obvious: that stories like the tar baby were "as purely African" as the "faces" of the people who told them. Summarizing this prevailing wisdom in 1914, Charlotte Sophia Burne noted the importance of the "African slave-trade" to the "dissemination of folk-tales," citing as her main example the "Tar-Baby story," which was known to have been "inherited" by the "coloured population of the United States" from the "tribes of Angola and the Congo." Writing in 1933, Alice Werner makes the same point. Not only "the Tar-baby" but literally "every story in 'Uncle Remus,' " she proposes, "can be shown to exist in a more primitive shape in Africa, and among people who cannot be suspected of having imported it from America or elsewhere."[4]

At the same time as these various critics and collectors were casting their argument for the diasporic provenance of the tar baby, others suggested that the entire tradition concerned with speaking animals, including the collection of ancient fables attributed to Aesop, could only have come from Africa. As early as the thirteenth century, a Byzantine scholar named Planudes speculated that Aesop was a black man from Ethiopia, but this idea did not gain broader acceptance until the nineteenth century when writers like William Godwin and William Martin

Leake developed an argument based not only on the evidently false etymological connection (Aesop to Aethiop) that Planudes had made, but also on specific examples, such as "Washing the Ethiopian White," and on the flora and fauna that recur in the fables. While these claims about Aesop's blackness remained conjectures, they were common enough to shape the interpretation of the trickster stories that had become, thanks to Harris, strongly associated with African Americans. Some critics, like Arna Bontemps, have even argued that the only "question" is not whether but how Aesop's fables were turned into the animal stories told by slaves, with others, like J. H. Driberg, suggesting that "if Aesop was not an African, he ought to have been" given the powerful correspondence between his fables and the modern trickster tradition.[5]

The tar baby's importance to the African diaspora was also emphasized in later studies, including James Weldon Johnson's *Native African Races and Culture* (1927) and Melville Herskovits's *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941), which made the case for the influence of African retentions in New World slave societies more comprehensively and systematically than had previous collectors, like Harris, whose research was limited in its coverage and frequently based on specious generalizations. Even as scholars broadened their base of evidence, the tar baby story remained an important touchstone in the argument for African cultural survivals. According to Herskovits, the story was a primary example of the "cultural luggage" that Africans brought with them to America. These claims were supported by field research, as the tar baby had in fact been recorded in locations throughout the African continent from peoples including the Makua, Mbundu, Duala, Dinka, Manganja, Hausa, Fantee, Baronga, Namwanga, Nyungwe, Yao, Temne, and Ewe. As Herskovits notes, the tar baby was considered "so characteristic of West Africa" that collectors had used the version narrated by Uncle Remus as a "point of comparative reference" when seeking out their own folklore on the continent. Collectors sometimes substantiated their

claims for the tar baby's diasporic provenance by citing informants who learned the story in Africa before coming to America, as is the case with Lattevi Ajaji, who told the story to John Lomax in Texas. Other times they explained that their informants had learned the story from a friend or relative who had heard it in Africa. Collectors also argued for an African origin by tracking cognates—elements whose strong similarity suggests direct transmission or a common source—marking parallels between "The Wonderful Tar Baby Story" and stories like "The Leopard in the Maize Farm" (collected by John Weeks in the Lower Congo) or "The Spider and the Farmer" (collected by Alfred Burdon Ellis in the coastal territory later known as Ghana). Even when there was no evidence for direct transmission, it seemed plausible to assume a link between stories with such similarities, especially when the stories in question were shared by a racial population presumably related by blood.[6]

This line of argument has always been controversial. Right from the beginning, some scholars disputed Harris's claim that the tar baby story came from Africa. Even before Harris published his first book, he received a letter from John Wesley Powell, the head of the Smithsonian Bureau of Ethnology, proposing another possible origin for the Uncle Remus stories that Harris had been printing in the *Atlanta Constitution*. Encountering "The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story" when it was syndicated in his own evening newspaper, Powell recalled that he had heard versions of the story during his fieldwork with the Southern Paiute in Utah, though at the time he had no idea that the tar baby was also being told by slaves. Powell asserted in his letter to Harris that the tar baby story, like many other Uncle Remus tales, was not in fact invented by African Americans but borrowed from American Indians.

Others noticed the similarities between "The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story" and the trickster tales that geologist Charles Hartt had collected among the Amazonian population in Brazil. Although Harris maintained that the Amazonians had been taught

the story by Africans recently imported as slaves, other scholars, such as James Mooney, held that Hartt's evidence actually supported the opposite conclusion and that the tar baby story was in consequence not an ancestral inheritance from Africa but instead a cultural compound that could only have been made in the Americas.[7]

Things only became more confusing as collectors continued to find versions of the tar baby in far-flung regions of the world that were assumed to be culturally distinct from one another. The realization that African Americans and Amazonian Indians had culture in common was one of many discoveries from this time that challenged prevailing wisdom about the circulation of culture, during which it was revealed again and again that people from different lands, speaking different languages, were telling the same stories. Such revelations raised basic questions about the relationship between race and culture. In 1906, William Wells Newell detailed the potential implications. Rather than a "closed race handing down from generation to generation its own stock of ideas and beliefs," Newell imagined bits and pieces of information that were continually "differentiated into new forms" as they drifted from place to place with "disregard" for "barriers" of "descent or language."[8]

Without standard units of measurement or other methodological controls, folklore collectors were free to sketch any number of speculative itineraries for the tar baby story. Following Powell's argument in his debate with Harris, many claimed the story was invented in America by the Cherokee, Natchez, or some other tribe before it was borrowed by slaves. Also common was the hypothesis that the tar baby was formulated in Europe, where it was supposed to have descended from the Roman de Renard, a medieval story sequence that was alleged to have traveled from France to Haiti to Louisiana. According to F. M. Warren, the similarity between the two stories appeared to indicate a "very close connection," or almost a "translation," the "Roman de Renard being written 700 years ago and Uncle Remus some

fifteen years ago." Elsie Clews Parsons suggested another theory, holding that the tar baby had once belonged to the "Master Thief" story cycle transcribed by Herodotus, and that its independence came relatively late in its passage from Europe to Africa to America. Others believed they had located the story's origin in Spain, Portugal, or Lithuania. Franz Boas took the time to try out several theories about the tar baby's "peculiar distribution," the most striking of which was the idea that the story was carried to places like Mexico and the Philippines by European sailors who had learned the story from slaves who had come to Spain and Portugal direct from Africa. "It is not improbable," Boas concludes, that European settlers were ultimately "instrumental" in "disseminating tales of Negro origin."[9]

No matter where these arguments turned, they retained the same stakes. If the tar baby originated in Africa and was carried to other continents by Africans, its transmission could be conceived as diasporic and therefore discernible, across time and space, as a kind of heredity. On the other hand, if the tar baby came from somewhere other than Africa, or if it was transformed during its global diffusion by some intermediary influence, then the strong claim about the story's connection to racial identity did not hold. If you could track the story's derivation to Europe, Asia, or America, it followed that there was no necessary connection between culture and race. Whether culture follows or crosses over lines of descent, whether culture is racial, or race is cultural, whether culture constructs or transcends racial identity—these questions have persisted in something like their original form in a range of disciplines including folklore, anthropology, history, musicology, religion, literature, and geography, not to mention interdisciplinary fields such as African American Studies and Ethnic Studies that have made the problem of culture into one of their foundational concerns.[10]

After Harris, the most influential theory about the story's origin and subsequent diffusion was offered by Joseph Jacobs in his book *Indian Fairy Tales* (1892). Responding directly to Harris's

hypothesis about the story's racial descent, Jacobs rejected the idea that the tar baby story came from Africa, proposing instead that it came from India, where it had derived from another story called "The Demon with the Matted Hair," the fifty-fifth installment from the Jātakas, a cycle of legends recounting the previous lives of the Buddha. In this story, Buddha is a prince who battles a demon, striking it repeatedly and becoming stuck at five points to its syrupy hair. Jacobs cites circumstantial evidence to build his case that "The Demon with the Matted Hair" is the precursor to "The Wonderful Tar Baby Story," but his claim rests mostly on the oddness of the five-point attack, which is so "preposterously ludicrous" in both tales as to suggest that they could not have been "independently invented." For Jacobs, the fact that there are tar baby variants in South Africa in regions where there are also Buddhist symbols woven into the local culture "clinches the matter." The story, he decides, must have been invented in India more than 1,500 years before it was taken to Africa by Buddhist missionaries and then brought to America through the slave trade. Over time, other scholars agreed with Jacobs that the story came from India even as they imagined new pathways for its diffusion—suggesting that its arrival in Africa, for instance, might have come as late as the sixteenth century, with the arrival of Portuguese sailors. Others argued the story went from India to Europe before it was taken to America and taught to slaves by their masters. Others still found versions in Japan, Indonesia, and the Philippines that appeared to have been transmitted directly from the Indian subcontinent.[11]

During the first half of the twentieth century, scholars led by Aurelio Espinosa further subdivided the tar baby by adapting techniques from the so-called "historical-geographical" method in folklore studies, an approach championed by Archer Taylor and Stith Thompson in the United States, which was supposed to provide the tools for breaking down any story (or "tale type") into its "fundamental motifs" ("motifs" in this case referring to the smallest elements in a story "having a power to persist in

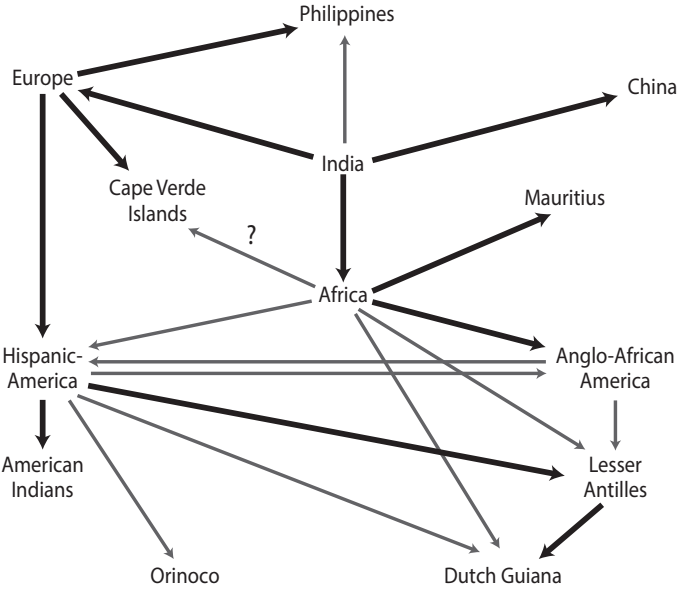

FIG. 1.3. Aurelio Espinosa, "[Chart Showing the Direction of the Tar Baby's Diffusion]." From Aurelio Espinosa, "More Notes on the Origin and History of the Tar-Baby Story," *Folklore* 49 (1938), 180.

tradition"). In a monumental series of essays published between 1930 and 1944, Espinosa gathered together every version of the tar baby he was able to locate, two hundred and sixty-seven by his count, and parsed them using statistics, tables, figures, and graphs to reveal the sequence of the story's development as well as the course of its global diffusion. Charts measured versions of the story in which the thief is a rabbit against others in which the thief is a spider, a monkey, a jackal, or a human. Calculations were performed to demonstrate how the thief's role in the story pivots around the changing mechanism of the trap, which in some cases involves artifice (a figure made from tar, wax, or bird lime), in others a naturally occurring entity or substance (a rotten stump or an ogre's unwashed hair), and in others still a supernatural agency (a cursed amulet or vodou doll).[12]

Although Espinosa and his associates presented their methods as if they were scientific, their thoughts about the development of the tar baby were shaped by the controversy over its origin, which dated all the way back to Uncle Remus. There is no question that Espinosa was a partisan dedicated to proving the tar baby's links to South Asia and Europe. Given his assiduous research methods, Espinosa's willingness to disregard evidence to the contrary is all the more striking. He makes no mention, for instance, of stylistic devices, like the ideophone ("lippity-clippity") or the use of honorific titles ("Brer Rabbit") that others have invoked to suggest the story's connection to Africa. Espinosa admits that his conclusions will be subject to revision as new versions of the story surface, but he remains convinced his claims are incontrovertible in light of the available evidence. This certainty comes at a cost, because it ignores the extent to which his conclusions are prefigured by his own assumptions. At the same time, Espinosa ignores the notorious unreliability of ethnographic sources. The corruption of these sources has been a cause for concern as scholars have enumerated flaws resulting from manipulation, condescension, evasion, reticence, mishearing, and failed memory, not to mention the eye-catching inconsistencies introduced by editors. Even the classification system used by Espinosa to correct for this unreliability has been shown to carry its own bias in the provincial standards it applies to stories from the rest of the world.[13]

Ethnographic documentation is inconclusive even under the best circumstances, and many leading accounts of the tar baby have made insufficient allowance for this contingency as they have connected the dots between the remote sites where the story happens to have been transcribed. The best that can be said for many of these arguments is that they are "not improbable," to borrow the term that Franz Boas uses to describe his own hypothesis. In the 1888 inaugural issue of the *Journal of American Folklore*, reflecting on the controversy over the Uncle Remus stories, Thomas F. Crane was already worrying that folklore collec-

tion was being contaminated by the "prejudice" of scholars who brought a "preconceived theory of the origin and diffusion of popular tales" into the field. The tar baby was transcribed repeatedly by collectors eager to confirm, deny, or elaborate some hypothesis about its derivation, and by extension, some theory about the relationship between culture and race.[14]

Even as Espinosa, Herskovits, and other thinkers were quick to insist that their conclusions were based on incomplete evidence and were therefore subject to revision, they continually deferred to a projected moment in the future when they felt they would have enough data to reach a definite conclusion about the story's circulation. Herskovits and Espinosa had little doubt that their knowledge of the tar baby would eventually be "systematic" and "complete," and their approach to classification took for granted that each new discovery brought them closer to this horizon. Others, including Ruth Benedict, were less sanguine, insisting that the "direction of diffusion" could be established only by using "special kinds of data" that were absent in this case. Some things about the tar baby, perhaps, were unknowable, though this possibility has never kept scholars from speculating about the story. Indeed, one might even argue that the story's unknowability has been a spur to theoretical innovation, starting with the rudimentary ideas that nineteenth-century scholars posited in relation to the tar baby, such as the age-area hypothesis, which says a story's age can be deduced from the distance it has traveled, or the rule that says the probability of a connection between two stories increases with the complexity of the elements they share. Speculation did not stop with these early theories, as new conjectures about the story continued to attract interested commentary from leading scholars.[15]

Increasingly in the twentieth century, these ideas about cultural circulation were adapted by historians and anthropologists eager to think more expansively about politics. It was hoped that sources like the tar baby could provide a way to understand the politics practiced by the colonized, the unwaged, and other

groups whose contributions had been undervalued by previous generations of scholars whose attention had been trained on political elites. At stake in this new approach was the identification of a new political perspective that was formed outside state institutions and outside the cash nexus, a perspective that could bring focused attention to a history of violence that was obscured in disciplines like law and political economy that had little interest in people whose primary records were oral traditions. This was an expansive politics that spread across jurisdictions—a cultural politics for want of a better term—that was less likely to bind itself to a territory than to spiral outward, operating alongside established institutions wherever landless people happened to find themselves.[16]

As scholars worked to substantiate this new approach, they looked to vernacular traditions that featured speaking animals as their trickster protagonists. According to James Scott, these trickster traditions were "hidden transcripts"—ephemeral sources, usually coded or concealed, that recorded the arts of everyday resistance. Taken in combination and read back into the contexts in which they circulated, these traditions were said to have been shaped at a time when European commoners were being expelled from the land, American Indians were being conquered and pillaged, and Africans were being kidnapped and transported across the ocean as slaves. Certainly in many instances, the stories predated the onset of modernity, but their utility in recent centuries, as they were adapted to the struggle over expropriation, remained a predominant concern in this interpretation, and the stories were understood accordingly as Manichean political allegories in which the repeated battles between speaking foxes, rabbits, spiders, and wolves were supposed to represent entrenched conflicts in human history.[17]

This orthodox interpretation assumes that identification in these stories was routed through the weaker animals, who had to rely on their wits when outmatched by their stronger opponents. It was acknowledged that these stories had universal appeal, as

we all like to root for the underdog, but it was also suggested that commoners, natives, and slaves had specific reasons for identifying with the weaker animals given their own struggles against their oppressors. Returning to a stock situation in which the strong attack the weak only to be tricked in return, these stories revealed the elementary aspects of a previously unacknowledged approach to politics, an approach that was geared neither to the graduated advance of reform nor to the flashing forward of revolution but instead to the repeating waves and cycles of everyday existence. This was an approach based on tactics rather than principles and deception rather than disputation, an approach that found its own justice by seizing every advantage and surviving to fight another day.[18]

During the 1960s and 1970s, this interest in cultural politics became strongly associated with the new social history, a movement that looked to unconventional source materials like broadside ballads, anonymous letters, confessions, rumors, and folklore to document the consciousness of non-elite groups whose experience was not reflected in the actuarial tables and statute books that had previously been the preferred sources for scholarship. This approach borrowed from the established interpretation of the trickster tradition, looking to the rabbit in particular for insight, and it drew explicitly, if not always systematically, from recent developments in historical materialism, symbolic anthropology, and the sociology of everyday life. The central theme in this research was that the capacity of common people for self-directed action had to be taken into account in order to gauge the course of history. This was a capacity that could not be grasped by looking to the usual places in the usual ways. It required new kinds of evidence, and it also required a willingness to expand the domain of politics to encompass the entire range of human activity.[19]

The crux of this new thinking about politics centered on everyday life: scholars from a range of disciplines worked to reconstruct the reasoning behind small acts of resistance like breaking

tools, burning crops, adulterating food, hiding out, slowing down, poaching, pan toting, and pilfering—acts, in other words, that occurred not on the grand stage of history, where revolutions were plotted and worlds were transformed, but in the obscure confines of ordinary situations where individual tactics were either inferred or improvised and formal organization was not required. Because they involved taking opportunities when they presented themselves and reacting on the spot to miscalculations or lapses in surveillance, these acts of everyday resistance were in every sense contingent and circumstantial. There were skeptics, including the historian Eric Hobsbawm, who said these acts were "pre-political," meaning that they were performed by people who had not yet found a way to conceptualize their aspirations, and there were others, including Eugene Genovese, one of the preeminent scholars of North American slavery, who argued that these acts were detrimental to the development of political consciousness, as they focused on routine conflict between individuals rather than a principled critique of systematic exploitation. Increasingly, however, these skeptics were holdouts within intellectual movements that had begun to concentrate much of their critical attention on the quicksilver politics of everyday life.[20]

Some thinkers, such as Michel de Certeau, went so far as to say that acts of day-to-day resistance were always *sui generis*. "Lacking a view of the whole," these tactics were "limited by the possibilities of the moment." They could not be modeled, generalized, or planned in advance. Based on a situational ethics, they were not supposed to be taken as norms to be followed in every instance. They were justified only under certain conditions. It was also invariably the case, according to Certeau, that these practices did not, and could not, take place on their own terms. By definition, they were performed by individuals who lacked the capacity to impose themselves on the world. It did not make sense to conceive politics in universal principles when the circumstances susceptible to influence were so restricted and uncertain. This was a politics about day-to-day survival, a politics that

saw abstraction as an absurdity, rebuffing talk of rights and prerogatives to focus on here and now, always returning attention to situational necessity.[21]

Exemplified in oral traditions like the tar baby story, this was a politics that was often cast symbolically—or *culturally*—so that it could be concealed in plain sight. Zora Neale Hurston famously describes her own culture as fitting like a "tight chemise" that she could not see while she was wearing it. Stories about "Brer Rabbit's capers," Hurston continues, were like second nature to her, but their full meaning was easiest to grasp when they were viewed in context from a distance. Hurston's metaphor affirms that every culture needs to be understood in relation to its own particular assumptions, adding the ironic twist that these assumptions are often invisible to cultural insiders because they are so prevalent as to be taken for granted. These are ideas that Hurston learned from her mentor Franz Boas, ideas later elaborated during the 1960s and 1970s by symbolic anthropologists like Clifford Geertz, who argued that traditions and rituals needed to be understood in light of the symbolic meaning they held for participants. Culture, Geertz believed, was a story people "tell themselves about themselves." It expressed a worldview endemic to a locality, with stories and rituals deriving their embedded meaning from their coexistence in a "web of significance."[22]

The tar baby story has been interpreted in precisely these terms as situational and metaphorical rather than rational and abstract, with its symbolic significance keyed to actors and objects present in its immediate environment. Moving freely from location to location, the tar baby is thought to remain tuned into its changing local circumstances, embodying the culturally specific values associated with particular locations and particular peoples. Based on these premises, traditional stories like the tar baby have been seen as political, and even inherently political, to the degree that they resist assimilation to the universal designs that others would impose on them. Stories like the tar baby in-

here in their stubborn particulars. They are irreducible. As such, they provide a basis for claiming autonomy against usurpers. This resistance is not only exemplified but expressed thematically in the tar baby, as the story both performs and figures its commitment to culture through its conventional recourse to the briar patch, the ancestral home that gives the rabbit refuge from the enemy.[23]

The theory of cultural politics associated with this interpretation of the tar baby has remained influential, especially in interdisciplinary fields focused on race and ethnicity, where it has served as a *lingua franca* for scholars seeking a common approach to their objects of study. At the same time, others have expressed reservations about this theory, especially its account of political agency, which is thought to take too much for granted. To its skeptics, this account fails to explain the motivation for resistance. Moreover, the account appears circular to the extent that it defines the politics practiced by peasants, natives, and slaves in idealized abstractions, like freedom and self-determination, that were themselves defined over centuries in opposition to the material exploitation suffered by peasants, natives, and slaves.[24]

These objections about vague or circular reasoning ultimately come down to the complaint that thinking about cultural politics has emphasized the embedded and contingent practices of everyday life to an extent that has obscured a fundamental question about the perspective from which these practices are put to use. Sometimes this thinking appears to assume a free-standing individual that exists fully formed apart from society, an individual whose perspective can be taken for granted. Other times this thinking seems to reduce the vagaries of individual intention to a mechanical process where categories of interest derive automatically from circumstantial inequalities. In both of these respects, the new thinking about cultural politics can seem substantially weaker in conceptualization than the political theories it seeks to supplant, as it dispenses with the ways that others have accounted for the emergence of political consciousness without

offering anything in their place. In contrast to the old myths about individuals throwing off the dead weight of tradition or classes coming to consciousness as contradictions are revealed from the point of production, it would seem that the new social history and its associated intellectual movements are content to take individual agency for granted, thereby leaving us without the backstory we need to understand how politics becomes possible in relation to objective circumstances.[25]

I remain interested in these questions about culture and politics, and I believe we have been right to look to the tar baby for answers. My sense, in fact, is that the tar baby anticipates more than we have assumed about the claims that have been made in its name. Restored to its full breadth, the story may even help us solve some of the problems that have beset the political theory it helped to establish. In this book, I depart from the orthodox interpretation of the tar baby, which has been repeated over generations to the point where it has become common sense. If the story's contingency has often been understood as a virtue, and even as an antidote to the universal designs projected by colonial dictate, my sense is that this standard interpretation has kept us from perceiving the scale at which the story pitches the disagreement between its characters. The story thinks locally and tactically, that much is true, but it also thinks broadly and indeed philosophically about the world in ways we are likely to miss if we are not willing to credit its capacity for integrated thought. Ultimately, it is at this higher level of abstraction, in the recurring conflict among its representative characters, that the tar baby story has perpetuated, over centuries and around the world, an intellectual tradition that rivals the most vaunted parables about the origin of property and the nature of politics.

This new approach to the story requires us to seek out common characteristics not only in myth and oral tradition but also in written records. Folklorists have always been willing to entertain the possibility that the tar baby is directly linked to vernacular traditions from other centuries and other continents, but they

have not considered the possibility of its association to other intellectual domains. Treated as an example of culture, whether retained or remixed, and valued for its distance from the instrumental approach to nature represented in modern society, the tar baby has been interpreted in a way that obscures the circumstances under which it was characteristically collected. These were circumstances in which populations were mobile and mixed; labor was organized on a mass scale to produce commodities for export; and colonialism was long established. The tar baby is engaged from start to finish with these prototypically modern conditions. Too often reduced to something as vague as heritage or something as elementary as circumstantial self-preservation, the tar baby's political thinking is communicated in conventional tropes and scenarios that were adapted at the same time in other philosophical traditions in the attempt to come to terms with the disorienting experience of globalization.[26]

Approaching the tar baby in this manner, I have tried to keep in mind what is likely unknowable about the story. Probably we will never be able to say for sure where the story originated, nor will we be able to cut out the additives that compromise its authenticity, but admitting our uncertainty on these points is useful, if only because it returns us again to the task of interpreting the story. Rather than producing a theory of culture based on conjectures about how the tar baby came to be in the places it was told, I hope to show what we can infer about the story's meaning based on its common existence in places where people were struggling with elementary and unresolved questions raised by the onset of capitalism. If the tar baby's diffusion is often invisible and uncertain, its presence is felt again and again in places where the right to subsistence, the distribution of property, the legitimacy of contract, and the prerogatives of sovereignty are central questions. Elaborating on these matters, this book argues that the tar baby is best understood not as folklore but instead as a collective experiment in speculative reason keyed to problems of sociability in the natural world.