

Workshop Session 5

Cultural Studies: Ishmael Reed and Graciela Limón

Video Program Overview

Part I: In San Francisco, California, Betty Tillman Samb and her students explore Ishmael Reed's poem "Railroad Bill, A Conjure Man." Students meet Reed, who answers questions about his work. Part II: In San Bernadino, California, Bobbi Ciriza Houtchens and her students explore the Graciela Limón novel *Erased Faces*, about the Zapatista uprising. The teacher introduces students to the culture of Chiapas, Mexico, through a bilingual folktale and a dialogue with Limón.

Theory Overview

Cultural studies is an approach to examining the complex ways in which societal beliefs are formed. Focusing on the social divisions of class, gender, ethnicity, and race, this approach examines the ways in which meanings, stereotypes, and identities (both collective and individual) are generated within these social groups. The practice of cultural studies almost always involves the combination of otherwise discrete disciplines, including literature, sociology, education, history, philosophy, communications studies, and anthropology. Such an interdisciplinary approach is key to an understanding of these issues, because it allows students to study and compare multiple, varied texts that deal with the culture and history of a particular group.

Workshop Session (On-Site)

Getting Ready—Part I (15 minutes)

- Review Ishmael Reed’s poem, “Railroad Bill, A Conjure Man.”
- What questions arose when you read “Railroad Bill”?
- What cultural and/or historical references in the poem are unfamiliar to you? Which are familiar?
- How did the related texts influence your understanding of “Railroad Bill”?

Watch Part I: Ishmael Reed (approximately 30 minutes)

Going Further—Part I (15 minutes)

Discuss as many questions as time permits. You may want to answer more of the questions in your journals at home and share ideas on Channel-Talk.

Teachers who are teaching multicultural literature from a cultural studies perspective are using a wide range of material to build knowledge of one particular text. No text exists in isolation. You can certainly read an individual text and get a wealth of information, but you’ll get, often times, isolated information. So, you look for other resources that are somehow related to the work and you use them not simply as background information, but as intersecting information. —*Dale Allender, Associate Executive Director, NCTE*

- What do you think about Part I of the workshop program and the way in which the teacher used a cultural studies approach to the literature?
- What other books, articles, stories, poems, essays, films, visual artworks, or music might you explore to help you better understand “Railroad Bill, A Conjure Man”?
- What are some other ways you could provide a cultural context for this poem?
- How might you incorporate or adapt the strategies for use in your classroom?
- What are some possible next steps to this lesson?

Getting Ready—Part II (15 minutes)

- What questions did reading the materials on Graciela Limón generate for you?
- Jot down and share with the group questions you would like to ask Graciela Limón.

Watch Part II: Graciela Limón (approximately 30 minutes)

Workshop Session (On-Site), cont'd.

Going Further—Part II (15 minutes)

Discuss as many questions as time permits. You may want to answer more of the questions in your journals at home and share ideas on Channel-Talk.

- What do you think about Part II of the workshop program and the way in which the teacher used a cultural studies approach to the literature?
- How would you handle using material with mature themes in your classroom? (administration/parents/students)
- How might you incorporate or adapt the strategies seen in this program for use in your classroom?
- What authors/resources are available in your school district?
- What are some other ways you might provide a cultural context for *Erased Faces*?
- What are some possible next steps to this lesson?

Between Sessions (On Your Own)

Homework Assignment

Go to the Web site at www.learner.org/channel/workshops/hslit and:

- Review Workshop Session 5: read the theory overview, teaching strategies, information about the authors and literature, lesson plans, and resources.
- Prepare for Workshop Session 6: preview the theory overview and information about the authors and literature (biographies, synopses of works, Q&As, key references, and resources).

In the Readings and the texts from the Reading List following Workshop Session 6:

- Read: excerpts of N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain* and Russell Leong's poem "Aerogrammes" (in the Workshop Session 6 Readings).
 - As you read the excerpts from *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, consider the following questions:
 - What is the central idea of this piece?
 - What did Momaday want us to remember about his people, his grandmother, and their traditions?
 - Also, compare the style and structure of the various sections.
 - As you read "Aerogrammes," use the coding technique that Bobbi Ciriza Houtchens used in her lesson, marking passages you find interesting (check), new information you've learned (plus) and questions you might have (question mark).
 - Bring your notes and copies of the works to the next workshop session.

Ongoing Activities

- In your journal, include thoughts, ideas, or questions you might have as you review the online materials and reflect on the workshop session. Make note of whether your participation in the session influenced any experiences in your classroom.
- Online, click on Reflection/Interactive Forum, an activity that you can use to interpret poems using the pedagogical approaches covered in this workshop. Read one of the two poems featured and respond to the *cultural studies* questions. Share your answers on the discussion board.
- Share ideas on Channel-Talkhslit@learner.org.

Workshop Session 5 Readings

Railroad Bill, A Conjure Man

by Ishmael Reed

Railroad Bill, a conjure man
Could change hisself to a tree
He could change hisself to a
Lake, a ram, he could be
What he wanted to be

When a man-hunt came he became
An old slave shouting boss
He went thataway. A toothless
Old slave standing next to a
Hog that laughed as they
Galloped away.
Would laugh as they galloped
Away

Railroad Bill was a conjure man
He could change hisself to a bird
He could change hisself to a brook
A hill he could be what he wanted
To be

One time old Bill changed hisself
To a dog and led a pack on his
Trail. He led the hounds around
And around. An laughed a-wagging
His tail. And laughed
A-wagging his tail

Morris Slater was from Escambia
County, he went to town a-toting
A rifle. When he left that
Day he was bounty.
Morris Slater was Railroad Bill
Morris Slater was Railroad Bill

Railroad Bill was an electrical
Man he could change hisself into
Watts. He could up his voltage
Whenever he pleased
He could, you bet he could
You could, you bet he could

Now look here boy hand over that
Gun, hand it over now not later
I needs my gun said Morris Slater
The man who was Railroad Bill
I'll shoot you dead you SOB
let me be whatever I please
The policeman persisted he just
Wouldn't listen and was buried the
Following eve. Was buried the
Following eve. Many dignitaries
Lots of speech-making.

Railroad Bill was a hunting man
Never had no trouble fetching game
He hid in the forest for those
Few years and lived like a natural
King. Whenever old Bill would
Need a new coat he'd sound out his
Friend the Panther. When Bill got
Tired of living off plants the
Farmers would give them some hens.
In swine-killing time the leavings of
Slaughter. They'd give Bill the
Leavings of Slaughter.

Railroad Bill was a conjure man he
Could change hisself to a song. He
Could change hisself to some blues
Some reds he could be what he wanted
To be

E.S. McMillan said he'd get old
Bill or turn in his silver star
Bill told the Sheriff you best
Leave me be said the outlaw from
Tombigbee. Leave me be warned
Bill in 1893

Down in Yellowhammer land
By the humming Chattahoochee
Where the cajun bango pickers
Strum. In Keego, Volina, and
Astoreth they sing the song of
How come

"Railroad Bill, A Conjure Man" by Ishmael Reed is reprinted with permission from the author. Originally titled, "Railroad Bill, A Conjure Man: A Hoodoo Suite."

Workshop Session 5 Readings, cont'd.

Bill killed McMillan but wasn't
Willin rather reason than shoot
A villain. Rather reason than
Shoot McMillan
"Railroad Bill was the worst old coon
Killed MicMillan by the light of the
Moon
Was lookin for Railroad Bill"
Was lookin for Railroad Bill

Railroad Bill was gris-gris man
He could change hisself to a mask
A Ziba, a Zulu
A Zambia mask. A Zaramo
Doll as well
One with a necklace on it
A Zaramo doll mad of wood

I'm bad, I'm bad said Leonard
McGowin. He'll be in hell and dead he
Said in 1896
Shot old Bill at Tidmore's store
This was near Atmore that Bill was
Killed in 1896.
He was buying candy for some children
Procuring sweets for the farmers kids

Leonard McGowin and R.C. John as
Cowardly as they come. Sneaked up
On Bill while he wasn't lookin.
Ambushed old Railroad Bill
Ambushed the conjure man. Shot him
In the back. Blew his head off.

Well, lawmen came from miles around
All smiles the lawmen came.
They'd finally got rid of
Railroad Bill who could be what
He wanted me to be

Wasn't so the old folks claimed
From their shacks in the Wawbeek
Wood. That aint our Bill in that
old coffin, that aint our man
You killed. Our Bill is in the
Dogwood flower and in the grain
We eat
See that livestock grazing there
That Bull is Railroad Bill

Now Hollywood they's doing old
Bill they hired a teacher from
Yale
To treat and script and
Strip old Bill, this classics
Professor from Yale.
He'll take old Bill the conjure
Man and give him a-na-ly-sis. He'll
Put old Bill on a leather couch
And find out why he did it.
Why he stole the caboose and
Avoided nooses why Bill raised so
Much sand.

He'll say Bill had a complex
He'll say it was all due to Bill's
Mother. He'll be playing the
Dozens on Bill, this
Professor from Yale

They'll make old Bill a neurotic
Case these tycoons of the silver
Screen. They'll take their cue
From the teacher from Yale they
Gave the pile of green
A bicycle-riding dude from Yale
Who set Bill for the screen
Who set Bill for the screen

They'll shoot Bill zoom Bill and
Pan old Bill until he looks plain
Sick. Just like they did old Nat
The fox and tried to do Malik
Just like they did Jack Johnson
Just like they did Jack Johnson

But it wont work what these hacks
Will do, these manicured hacks from
Malibu cause the people will see
That aint out Bill but a haint of
The silver screen. A disembodied
Wish of a Yalie's dream

Our Bill is where the camellia
Grows and by the waterfalls. He's
Sleeping in a hundred skies.
That cumulus
That just went by that's Bill's
Old smiling face. He's having a joke
On Hollywood
He's on the varmint's case.

Workshop Session 5 Readings, cont'd.

Railroad Bill was a wizard. And
His final trick was tame. Wasn't
Nothing to become some celluloid
And do in all the frames.

And how did he manage technology
And how did Bill get so modern?
He changed hisself to a production
Assistant and went to work with
The scissors.
While nobody looked he scissored
Old Bill he used the scissors.

Railroad Bill was a conjure man
He could change hisself to the end.
He could outwit the chase and throw
Off the scent he didn't care what
They'd sent. He didn't give a damn what
They sent.

Railroad Bill was a conjure man
Railroad Bill was a star he could change
Hissself to the sun, the moon
Railroad Bill was free
Railroad Bill was free

Workshop Session 5 Readings, cont'd.

THE WONDERFUL TAR BABY STORY

“Didn't the fox never catch the rabbit, Uncle Remus?” asked the little boy the next evening.

“He come mighty nigh it, honey, sho's you born--Brer Fox did. One day atter Brer Rabbit fool 'im wid dat calamus root, Brer Fox went ter wuk en got 'im some tar, en mix it wid some turkentime, en fix up a contrapshun w'at he call a Tar-Baby, en he tuck dish yer Tar-Baby en he sot 'er in de big road, en den he lay off in de bushes fer to see what de news wuz gwine ter be. En he didn't hatter wait long, nudder, kaze bimeby here come Brer Rabbit pacin' down de road--lippity-clippity, clippity -lippity--dez ez sassy ez a jay-bird. Brer Fox, he lay low. Brer Rabbit come prancin' 'long twel he spy de Tar-Baby, en den he fotch up on his behime legs like he wuz 'stonished. De Tar Baby, she sot dar, she did, en Brer Fox, he lay low.

“‘Mawnin!’ sez Brer Rabbit, sezee - ‘nice wedder dis mawnin!’ sezee.

“Tar-Baby ain't sayin' nuthin’, en Brer Fox he lay low.

“‘How duz yo' sym'tums seem ter segashuate?’ sez Brer Rabbit, sezee.

“Brer Fox, he wink his eye slow, en lay low, en de Tar-Baby, she ain't sayin' nuthin’.

“‘How you come on, den? Is you deaf?’ sez Brer Rabbit, sezee. ‘Kaze if you is, I kin holler louder,’ sezee.

“Tar-Baby stay still, en Brer Fox, he lay low.

“‘You er stuck up, dat's w'at you is,’ says Brer Rabbit, sezee, ‘en I’m gwine ter kyore you, dat's w'at I'm a gwine ter do,’ sezee.

“Brer Fox, he sorter chuckle in his stummick, he did, but Tar-Baby ain't sayin' nothin’.

“‘I'm gwine ter larn you how ter talk ter 'spectubble folks ef hit's de las' ack,’ sez Brer Rabbit, sezee. ‘Ef you don't take off dat hat en tell me howdy, I'm gwine ter bus' you wide open,’ sezee.

“Tar-Baby stay still, en Brer Fox, he lay low.

“Brer Rabbit keep on axin' 'im, en de Tar-Baby, she keep on sayin' nothin', twel present'y Brer Rabbit draw back wid his fis', he did, en blip he tuck 'er side er de head. Right dar's whar he broke his merlasses jug. His fis' stuck, en he can't pull loose. De tar hilt 'im. But Tar-Baby, she stay still, en Brer Fox, he lay low.

“‘Ef you don't lemme loose, I'll knock you agin,’ sez Brer Rabbit, sezee, en wid dat he fotch 'er a wipe wid de udder han', en dat stuck. Tar-Baby, she ain'y sayin' nuthin', en Brer Fox, he lay low.

“‘Tu'n me loose, fo' I kick de natal stuffin' outen you,’ sez Brer Rabbit, sezee, but de Tar-Baby, she ain't sayin' nuthin'. She des hilt on, en de Brer Rabbit lose de use er his feet in de same way. Brer Fox, he lay low. Den Brer Rabbit squall out dat ef de Tar-Baby don't tu'n 'im loose he butt 'er cranksided. En den he butted, en his head got stuck. Den Brer Fox, he sa'ntered fort', lookin' dez ez innercent ez wunner yo' mammy's mockin'-birds.

“‘Howdy, Brer Rabbit,’ sez Brer Fox, sezee. ‘You look sorter stuck up dis mawnin!’ sezee, en den he rolled on de groun', en laft en laft twel he couldn't laff no mo'. ‘I speck you'll take dinner wid me dis time, Brer Rabbit. I done laid in some calamus root, en I ain't gwineter take no skuse,’ sez Brer Fox, sezee.”

Here Uncle Remus paused, and drew a two-pound yam out of the ashes.

“Did the fox eat the rabbit?” asked the little boy to whom the story had been told.

“Dat's all de fur de tale goes,” replied the old man. “He mout, an den agin he moutent. Some say Judge B'ar come 'long en loosed 'im - some say he didn't. I hear Miss Sally callin'. You better run 'long.”

“The Wonderful Tar Baby Story” by Joel Chandler Harris is reprinted with permission from the University of Virginia.

Workshop Session 5 Readings, cont'd.

HUNGRY SPIDER AND THE TURTLE

SPIDER was a hungry one, he always wanted to eat. Everybody in Ashanti knew about his appetite. He was greedy, too, and always wanted more than his share of things. So people steered clear of Spider.

But one day a stranger came to Spider's habitation out in the back country. His name was Turtle. Turtle was a long way from his home. He had been walking all day in the hot sun, and he was tired and hungry. So Spider had to invite Turtle into his house and offer him something to eat. He hated to do it, but if he didn't extend hospitality to a tired traveler it would get around the countryside and people would soon be talking about Spider behind his back.

So he said to Turtle:

"There is water at the spring for you to wash your

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"Hungry Spider and the Turtle" by Harold Courlander is reprinted with permission from the publisher of *The Cow-Tail Switch and Other West African Stories* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1991)

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HUNGRY SPIDER AND THE TURTLE

feet in. Follow the trail and you'll get there. I'll get the dinner ready."

Turtle turned and waddled down to the spring with a gourd bowl as fast as he could. He dipped some water from the spring and carefully washed his feet in it. Then he waddled back up the trail to the house. But the trail was dusty. By the time Turtle got back to the house his feet were covered with dirt again.

Spider had the food all set out. It was steaming, and the smell of it made Turtle's mouth water. He hadn't eaten since sunrise. Spider looked disapprovingly at Turtle's feet.

"Your feet are awfully dirty," he said. "Don't you think you ought to wash them before you start to eat?"

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HUNGRY SPIDER AND THE TURTLE

Turtle looked at his feet. He was ashamed, they were so dirty. So he turned around and waddled as fast as he could down to the spring again. He dipped some water out of the spring with the gourd bowl and carefully washed himself. Then he scurried as fast as he could back to the house. But it takes a turtle a while to get anywhere. When he came into the house Spider was already eating.

"Excellent meal, isn't it?" Spider said. He looked at Turtle's feet with disapproval. "Hm, aren't you going to wash yourself?"

Turtle looked down at his feet. In his hurry to get back he had stirred up a lot of dust, and his feet were covered with it again.

"I washed them," he said. "I washed them twice. It's your dusty trail that does it."

"Oh," Spider said, "so you are abusing my house

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Workshop Session 5 Readings, cont'd.

HUNGRY SPIDER AND THE TURTLE

now!" He took a big mouthful of food and chewed it up, looking very hurt.

"No," Turtle said, sniffing the food, "I was just explaining."

"Well, run along and wash up so we can get on with the eating," Spider said.

Turtle looked. The food was already half gone and Spider was eating as fast as he could. Turtle spun around and hurried down to the spring. He dipped up some water in the gourd bowl and splashed it over his feet. Then he scrambled back to the house. This time he didn't go on the trail, though, but on the grass and through the bushes. It took him a little longer, but he didn't get dust all over his feet. When he got to the house he found Spider licking his lips.

"Ah, what a fine meal we had!" Spider said.

Turtle looked in the dish. Everything was gone. Even the smell was gone. Turtle was very hungry. But he said nothing. He smiled.

"Yes, it was very good," he said. "You are certainly good to travelers in your village. If you are ever in my country you may be assured of a welcome."

"It's nothing," Spider said. "Nothing at all."

Turtle went away. He didn't tell other people about the affair at Spider's house. He was very quiet about his experience there.

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HUNGRY SPIDER AND THE TURTLE

But one day many months later Spider was a long distance from home and he found himself in Turtle's country. He found Turtle on the shore of the lake getting a sunbath.

"Ah, friend Spider, you are far from your village," Turtle said. "Will you have something to eat with me?"

"Yes, that is the way it is when a person is far from home—generosity merits generosity," Spider said hungrily.

"Wait here on the shore and I'll go below and prepare the food," Turtle said. He slipped into the water and went down to the bottom of the lake. When he got there he set out the food to eat. Then he came to the top of the water and said to Spider, who was sitting impatiently on the shore, "All right, everything is ready. Let's go down and eat." He put his head under water and swam down.

Spider was famished. He jumped into the water to follow Turtle. But Spider was very light. He floated. He splashed and splashed, kicked and kicked, but he stayed right there on top of the water. For a long time he tried to get down where Turtle was eating, but nothing happened.

After a while Turtle came up, licking his lips.

"What's the matter, aren't you hungry?" he said.

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Workshop Session 5 Readings, cont'd.

HUNGRY SPIDER AND THE TURTLE

“The food is very good. Better hurry.” And he went down again.

Spider made one more desperate try, but he just floated. Then he had an idea. He went back to the shore, picked up pebbles and put them in the pockets of his jacket. He put so many pebbles in his pockets that he became very heavy. He was so heavy he could hardly walk. Then he jumped into the water again, and this time he sank to the bottom, where Turtle was eating. The food was half gone. Spider was very hungry. He was just reaching for the food when Turtle said politely:

“Excuse me, my friend. In my country we never eat with our jackets on. Take off your jacket so that we can get down to business.”

Turtle took a great mouthful of food and started chewing. In a few minutes there wouldn't be anything left. Spider was aching all over with hunger. Turtle took another mouthful. So Spider wriggled out of his coat and grabbed at the food. But without the pebbles he was so light again that he popped right up to the top of the water.

People always say that one good meal deserves another.

Workshop Session 5 Readings, cont'd.

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two-hour lunch and go home and rest; I'd cover for him, then I'd go home for two hours and sleep, and he'd cover for me.

One Thursday at BMMC, I collected class assignments, distributed graded papers, and presented an extensive review of material that would be on the final exam. Christmas was about two weeks away, so most of the students, instead of paying attention to me, were dreaming of a white one. We finished around eleven o'clock. I didn't give a homework assignment because I was leaving town for the weekend and didn't want the burden of paperwork when I returned. The students could spend the weekend studying for the final.

Outside, icy winds skied across the nearby Hudson River and splashed on my face. I pulled my coat collar up tighter around my neck. I was in full stride when I hit the sidewalk, trucking toward the Number 2 train, triple tired, homebound for bed. I was halfway to the train station and decided to stop at a discount store to buy a scarf. Got in there and caught a clothes-buying fever; bought two scarfs, a pair of gloves, lumberjack boots, six pair of wool socks, and two army-green wool blankets. I dragged toward the counter with my arms filled. The counter girl tallied up my bill. A fellow with a suitcase bumped into me as he hurried toward the exit. "Excuse me," he muttered, speeding and weaving through the crowd of shoppers with a skill that should have been in a chapter of the professional football running backs' playbook. The counter girl bagged my goods and handed me my change. "Thank you. Please come back."

"Hold it right there!" a voice roared. I spun around. The shake-and-bake running back dropped the suitcase and was trying to scramble out the door. A fat white man grabbed him by the arm, swung him around, and locked him in a full nelson. "I got 'im, Frank!" he shouted. Frank, curly red hair dangling onto his forehead, and eyes as blue as stones in Indian jewelry, faced Robert (I found out his name later) with a bat. The would-be thief's face was twisted in pain, and he was grasping for breath. "Turn me loose, bitch! Damn it!" he gagged. "I said get your hands off me!" The fat fellow eased up a bit, but he kept the full nelson firm. Frank kept pumping that bat; he was ready to slam Robert's head out of the stadium if he would've made a funny move. A female employee retrieved the suitcase while Frank and the fat guy forced the suspect to the back of the store. The fat guy released his hold on Robert and left to call the police. Frank pumped the bat at his detainee, head level. "Don't you move, boy!" he spat. "My name is Robert, bitch! I got ya', boy, right here!" He grabbed a fistful of his crotch.

Robert's face was round and the color of honey, lashed with lines from the whips of white and black nigger breakers. He raked his hands over his ruffled, short, nappy African locks as he repeatedly growled, "You keep your hands off me."

I stood there watching along with everyone else. I don't get involved in such situations. I'd rather observe from the bleachers, eating popcorn and minding my own business.

YUSEF SALAAM

Brer Rabbit Escapes Again, or Brer Fox Bites Off More Than He Can Chew

I was juggling two jobs at the time. I was working the graveyard shift at Harlem Hospital as a patient escort, a nice title for a person who pushes patients around on stretchers or wheelchairs to the X-ray room or the wards. I also had a part-time job as an adjunct English professor at the Borough of Manhattan Community College. I'd hit there around nine-thirty in the morning after clocking out of the hospital at eight A.M. I taught composition three mornings a week; the last class was on Thursday. By then I was dog-tired. I always managed to get some sleep in between transporting patients. My supervisor and I had a special arrangement. We both lived near the hospital, so he'd take a

"Brer Rabbit Escapes Again, or Brer Fox Bites Off More Than He Can Chew" by Yusef Salaam is reprinted with permission from the publisher of *Brotherman: The Odyssey of Black Men in America* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996)

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that showed my disgust with Robert. "I got a little Irish boy out on Long Island who loves this Black stuff," Robert boasted. Frank's face flushed pink. "I know what he likes and I know how to give it to him." Frank looked at me, his eyes questioning. I shrugged my shoulders. "T-tell him to stop talking like that." The fat part of the bat rested on his shoulder. I waved my hands to indicate that I was as helpless as he was. "Stop it!" He pumped the bat. "Goddammit, be quiet!"

It was clear to me what was unfolding. Robert was Brer Rabbit, the famous trickster in Black folk tales, who was always outwitting Brer Fox when Brer Fox caught him being mischievous. Or when Brer Fox was trying to bully him. Frank was the powerful fox who'd caught the rabbit trying to steal. Now Robert was attempting to talk his way out of trouble.

In one famous tale Brer Fox catches Brer Rabbit stealing from his garden. He contemplates what kind of punishment to mete out to the rabbit. Brer Rabbit pleads for Brer Fox to do whatever he deems to be the fitting punishment but don't throw him in the dreaded briar patch. Brer Fox, seeing Brer Rabbit's fear of the briar patch, tosses him in the patch, not realizing that the briar patch is the trickster's home.

Every Black man in the USA has had to play Brer Rabbit to a white man/Brer Fox at one time or another under varying circumstances. Frank was waving the bat. He inched closer to Robert, the bat held high for a head shot.

"I'm gonna show you what you white boys like," Robert proposed, fingering the waist of his pants. Frank rushed at him. "Don't you dare!" he screamed. Robert dropped his pants, slipped down his underwear. Stood there buck naked. Frank's bat clanked to the floor. Robert turned around, bent over, grabbed the cheeks of his butt. "This is what you white boys love, ain't it now?" He offered. "Goddamn you! You crazy, filthy bastard!" Frank belatedly. His eyes were wide with fright and desperation. He shook his head nervously as if he was about to have a fit and bit his lips hard like he was trying to will himself from thinking compelling, unwanted thoughts. His face, a sad clown mask, pleaded with me that he might be losing his mind.

"Come on, man. Put your clothes on," I urged Robert. "You ain't all that crazy," Robert looked at me. He knew that I was a fellow Brother Rabbit and was aware of the game he was running. He pulled up his underwear and pants as easily as he had dropped them. The sound of two-way radios came from the stairway. And the voices of men talking. Robert began talking loud again, rambling about how much white men loved him and how, when he was younger, he made a Jewish fellow leave his wife. Two pale-faced cops entered. The one with the sergeant stripes asked, "What's the problem, fellows?" He directed the question to me because Frank was out of it. In the midst of Robert's noisy ranting about his white-boy lovers, I tried to explain what had happened. The cops laughed nervously as they picked up on what Robert was saying; inside of their laughter was a hint that I should laugh too. And I faked a laugh that was heartier than theirs. "The guy's a nut," the young-

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"I ain't stole nothing," Robert snapped. "Did I go through that door with anything?" Frank cocked his bat. "No, but you—" "Ain't no 'but' about it. I didn't go through that door with nothing, so the law says I ain't stole nothing." Frank circled Robert, cutting off the path to the door. "You had no intentions of paying for that suitcase. You went past the counter, straight toward the door as fast as you could . . . and as fast as you people run, I wasn't about to let you get too far a head start." "What you mean 'you people'?" Robert asked. Frank looked around. Several of "you people" were staring bullets at him. "I know what you really meant to say. Why don't you go head and say it, you racist!" Frank opened his mouth to respond, blinked his eyes, and Robert broke for the door. Frank's bat swished at the space where Robert had stood. He burned a path halfway to the counter and slammed head-on into a lady coming into the store. He and the woman laid sprawled on the floor. Frank stood over him with the bat raised all the way uptown. As the bat tilted downward, a woman screamed, "Lord, have mercy! Don't kill 'im!" It was a deep, guttural, moan-shout-scream, the kind I've heard at funerals. Frank checked his swing, braking halfway to Robert's head. That bluesy voice had moved me too. "Man, don't kill him," I said calmly. "You'll go to prison for murder." That voice had stirred something in me. I put my hands on Frank's shoulders.

I had heard that woman's voice before. Or one like it. It was my grandma's or aunt's voices when they got the Holy Ghost in church and would moan, cry, and shout about Jesus. I'd heard those blue notes at Harlem Hospital when an employee, a sweet, gentle woman, came screaming clots of mercy pleas downstairs to the emergency room where her son lay dying from gunshot wounds.

"You just hold him until the police comes," I advised Frank. Robert scrambled to his feet. "That's right, brother. He ain't got no business hitting me with no bat." He eased next to me. I shifted away from him. "Look. You tried to steal the man's suitcase. You're wrong. Frank, you should hold him somewhere out of the public's eye until the cops come." Frank nodded. "Downstairs in the basement." He pointed the bat toward the basement and nudged Robert in the side with it, prodding him forward. Robert dragged forward. "Boy, you go on down there with him so they won't hurt him," a voice sang out from the front of the store. It was the same voice that drew me out of the bleachers into Robert and Frank's mess. I followed them into the basement.

The basement was a dim-lit cavity with boxes scattered all over. It was eerily quiet. Frank was holding his position at home plate. Robert was running his mouth, talking loud, saying nothing. I glanced at my watch and yawned, tired from working two jobs, tired of Robert's mouth. He was blowing incoherent blah-blah-blahs until he said, "I'm a good bitch. I done had lovers from Manhattan to Miami. I ain't got to steal no suitcase." Frank winked and smiled at me, rolled his eyes to the sky in ridicule of Robert. I beamed back a smile

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gest one observed. I nodded my head in agreement. A store assistant came down and told them the whole story. "Look," the sergeant said. "It's close to Christmas. You don't want to see nobody go to jail. You got your suitcase back, don't ya?" The store assistant nodded. In other words, these white men didn't want Robert in the backseat of their squad car or down at the precinct, which was probably filled with predominately white men, talking like "a nut."

"And you, buddy," the sergeant said, turning to Robert. "If you ever come in this store again, we'll throw you in jail—no questions asked. You understand?" Robert bowed his head and, still babbling, disappeared upstairs.

I caught the Number 2 train. Truly tired. Snored all the way. When the train belled into my stop on 135th Street in Harlem, I jerked alive.

Brer Rabbits always sleep with one eye open.

Workshop Session 5 Reading List

Works marked with * are required texts for this workshop that do not appear within the Readings in this guide. Other works are the sources for excerpted materials in the Readings or are recommended for additional study.

Courlander, Harold. "Hungry Spider and the Turtle," from *The Cow-Tail Switch and Other West African Stories*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1991. ISBN 0805002987

Dunbar, Paul Laurence. "We Wear the Mask" from *The Collected Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1993. ISBN 081391454X; ISBN 0813914388 (pbk.)

Harris, Joel Chandler (as retold by). *The Story of Brer Rabbit and the Wonderful Tar Baby*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990. ISBN 0887082505 (bk. & cass.) <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~UG97/remus/tar-baby.html>

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica*. San Francisco: Harper, 1990. ISBN 0060916494

_____. *The Sanctified Church*. New York: Marlowe, [1998], © 1981. ISBN 1569247307 (pbk.)

* Limón, Graciela. *Erased Faces*. Houston: Arte Público Press, 2001. ISBN 1558853421

Marcos, Subcomandante. *The Story of Colors (La Historia de los Colores)*. El Paso: Cinco Puntos Press; Bilingual edition, 2003. ISBN 0938317717

Reed, Ishmael. "Railroad Bill, A Conjure Man," from *From Totems to Hip-Hop: A Multicultural Anthology of Poetry Across the Americas, 1900-2002*. Reed, Ishmael (ed). Thunder's Mouth Press, 2002. ISBN 1560254580

Salaam, Yusef. "Brer Rabbit Escapes Again, or Brer Fox Bites Off More Than He Can Chew," from *Brotherman: The Odyssey of Black Men in America*. Boyd, Herb and Robert Allen (eds). New York: Ballantine Books, 1996. ISBN 0345383176