

## "You Can't Do That, You're the Wrong Race": African American Women Storytellers at a Contemporary Festival

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Women storytellers are one of the main attractions at the annual Pinkster festival in Tarrytown, New York.<sup>1</sup> Pinkster, a celebration of Pentecost and the arrival of springtime, is a holiday tradition that Dutch immigrants brought with them to colonial New York and New Jersey in the early seventeenth century. While Dutch slave owners in the lower Hudson Valley gathered together to celebrate this holiday, the blacks whom they enslaved enjoyed a few days' respite from their labor. Historians have documented that by the late 1700s, blacks also participated in the festivities, which included several days of dancing, music, spectator sports, and the syncretization of African and Dutch rituals.<sup>2</sup> Originally "allowed" by the Dutch to join in the celebration, blacks gradually appropriated and redefined the event for themselves. Eventually Pinkster evolved into an "inversion holiday,"<sup>3</sup> a lively festival in which blacks, both enslaved and free, were the principle actors and organizers while whites and Native Americans from the region observed from the sidelines as spectators. Fearing that the open assembly and public revelry of blacks would encourage slave revolts, white officials in Albany, New York, voted in 1811 to ban Pinkster festivals.

Recently, some African Americans in New York have reclaimed Pinkster as a commemoration of cultural pride and racial identity.<sup>4</sup> On the surface, the contemporary Pinkster festival is an attempt at historic reenactment for the purposes of public entertainment and education. Dressed in period costumes, performers are actually contemporary African American artists who have been invited and are paid to entertain.<sup>5</sup> They delight the crowds with their storytelling, dancing, music, and playing African drums at Philipsburg Manor, an historical site in Tarrytown, a suburban community on the Hudson River thirty miles north of New York City. The manor grounds now consist of only 25 of the original 52,500 acres of agricultural property once owned by the wealthy Dutch immigrant, Frederick Philipse. In the 1700 and 1800s, the Philipse family used white tenant farmers and enslaved blacks from West Africa and Madagascar to work the land and provide the labor that made the Philipses one of the wealthiest families and owners of the most slaves in the region. In 1940 the multi-millionaire John D. Rockefeller, Jr. purchased Philipsburg Manor and began restoration efforts, which were eventually assumed by Historic Hudson Valley, the historical society that Rockefeller founded. Society staff organized the recreation of Pinkster festivals at the site beginning in the early 1980s.

Two aspects of the contemporary Pinkster festival caught my eye: 1) the distinctive role of African American women storytellers, contextualized by the fact that women are largely responsible for reclaiming and shaping the festival as a whole, and 2) the attempt to focus public attention on the history and legacy of racism in the United States. Contemporary Pinkster festivals offer a retelling of the region's history. Here storytellers, assuming the personas of enslaved blacks, present themselves not as subservient or passive victims, but as artists and teachers in positions of communal authority. Radiah Harper Sumler, the director of programs for Historic Hudson Valley, began a serious effort to restore and redefine the African American aspects of Pinkster in 1988.<sup>6</sup> Her outreach and ties to the local African American community and her invitations to African American performers substantially changed the character of the event from one that was predominantly attended by whites to a more Afrocentric celebration. Pinkster festival now draws more African Americans than any other activity sponsored by Historic Hudson Valley. Although historic society staff did not design the Tarrytown Pinkster festival to be an explicitly political event, over time and under the guidance of Sumler, the celebration became an important vehicle for developing a sense of African American community and identity. It is largely because of Sumler's efforts as an historian and organizer that women play such an important part in the festival as organizers and performers.<sup>7</sup> In 1994 and 1995, women were in charge of all the main festival events except the African drumming.<sup>8</sup> In addition to performing as storytellers and fortune tellers, women direct both the African colonial dance troupe (called the Children of Dahomey) and the English Country Dancers.

The primacy of women as performers and organizers is particularly striking when contrasted to another Pinkster celebration that occurs just seventy miles away. To kick off the yearly festival in Albany, New York, a group of people dressed in colonial Dutch costumes (including oversized wooden shoes) play at scrubbing a section of downtown State Street with soapy water and heavy wooden brooms, while amused television camera crews, reporters, city officials, and onlookers applaud their efforts. Two of the costumed participants carry a banner that reads "The Dutch Settlers Society of Albany, 1624-1664." All but two of the fourteen performers are women, there to entertain the audience by mimicking the work of colonial Dutch women who washed the streets for meager wages.

The observers include a group of (identically-dressed) contestants for Albany's Tulip Queen, chosen annually from among approximately a half dozen beautiful young women who compete for the title.<sup>9</sup> Nobody in the crowd seems to object to the political implications of the event: two groups of women celebrating their own history of devaluation either as menial laborers or as sexualized objects of desire. Gender, race, and class dynamics are trivialized by the presentation of the event as a humorous and innocent parody. The African American celebration of Pinkster in Albany was once considered so threatening to the white men who governed the city that they declared the holiday illegal, and in the modern-day rendition, African American participation has been erased altogether. Celebration of Dutch heritage and culture is paramount (the event is now known as the Tulip Festival rather than Pinkster), a Eurocentric version of history is reinforced by omission, and women are symbolically demeaned, trivialized, and sexualized in the Albany celebration.

Meanwhile, at Philipsburg Manor, SharRon Mason and J. Gilliam Brown--the two African American women storytellers who performed at Pinkster festivals from 1992 through 1995--celebrated cultural practices of the African Diaspora and educated the public about the legacy of slavery in the Northeast.<sup>10</sup> Prior to the 1994 festival, a male storyteller, Dylan Pritchett, also performed regularly at the Tarrytown event. Both male and female storytellers told tales that offer moral lessons about tenacity, integrity, and pride in African American identity. Both employed narrative strategies traditionally used by African American storytellers, such as inviting the choral response and verbal participation of audience members, and featuring animals as the main characters of their tales.

The women's storytelling, however, is distinctive in several ways. None of the stories Pritchett told included female characters, either as animals or people, while the women's narratives featured both males and females. At the 1992 Pinkster festival, for example, J. Gilliam Brown told a story about a boy who found himself in a quandary and subsequently turned to various family members for advice. Reiterating the value and contributions of women, particularly older women, Brown explained that it was his grandmother's counsel that allowed him to solve his dilemma; only her experience and wisdom were useful in helping the boy find a solution. Noting a difference in the kinds of stories told by African American men and women, SharRon Mason mentioned to me her concern about the "chauvinism" of some male storytellers, particularly their exclusion of women's experiences and themes in their repertoires. Mason commented that one important aspect of her work involved selecting and recreating more stories that featured female characters and women's ingenuity.<sup>11</sup>

Unlike the stories told by Pritchett, families and the interpersonal dynamics between family members are

prominent themes in many of Mason's and Brown's tales. Often, family relationships can be interpreted as a metaphor for other, larger social relations or may provide a vehicle for commenting on gender dynamics. In 1992 SharRon Mason told a story that offers a critique of hierarchy and preferential treatment, both within families and in broader cultural settings. There was once an African king who had three sons. One day, the king, who valued intelligence over bravery or strength, attempted to ascertain which of his sons was the smartest. He sent each young man out into the world to accomplish a difficult feat, which involved solving a riddle that would demonstrate his ingenuity. Unexpectedly, all three of the sons managed to achieve their goals, thereby proving their worth to the father. Unable to identify one as better or more discerning than the others, it was the king who learned a lesson: all of his children were clever in their own ways, and all had important contributions to offer. Through her telling of the story, Mason replaces competition with an affirmation of multiplicity: each person, particularly each child in a family, should be valued for his or her particular gifts and talents, which may strengthen the family as a whole.

The repertoires of women storytellers at Pinkster festivals are noteworthy as much for what they omit as what they include. Several of Dylan Pritchett's tales are parodies of biblical stories (e.g., the creation of life, Noah's ark). By inverting conventional roles or changing the endings to stories, Pritchett has found biblical tales a convenient and effective medium for commenting on race relations.<sup>12</sup> However, despite their centrality to many aspects of African American culture, neither Mason nor Brown told biblical narratives. This may not be surprising in light of the fact that women have only secondary status or are invisible in many of these stories, that biblical stories may not correspond to or adequately address some women's experiences, and that not everyone in their audience could relate to Judeo-Christian imagery. Instead, Mason and Brown told trickster tales that instruct the listener about ways to better understand social relations. Sometimes these stories offer gender-specific messages. In 1992 SharRon Mason told a West African tale about a beautiful, but extremely vain, young woman. She meets a snake who has disguised himself as a handsome prince. The prince impresses everyone with his wealth and power; he eventually seduces the woman, choosing not to reveal his real identity until after she has married and followed him to his homeland. Upon her arrival, she learns that she has been tricked and enslaved by an impostor. Rather than a prince, she has married a selfish and vicious serpent.

There are several ways to interpret the message of the story, and Mason left the audience to draw their own conclusions. On the most obvious level, the tale is an admonition about the over-valuation of physical beauty: vanity is blinding and destructive, and one must never judge people by their outward appearance. Mason chose

however, to tell this tale at a festival celebrating the traditions of people who have been brutalized on the basis of their skin color. Accordingly, the storyteller reminds her audience that judging people by their looks, including their race or ethnicity, instead of their character and contributions to society, is a foolish and ignorant practice. In addition to this encoded message about the consequences of racism, Mason also conveys a gender-specific warning to women about the dangers of looking for a charming or powerful male to give their lives meaning.<sup>13</sup> Women who rely on their physical attributes to find fulfillment, according to this reading, may find themselves at the mercy of male coercion and violence. The tale suggests that it is misguided and potentially harmful for women to entrust their security or happiness to beguiling men, who may only want to domesticate them. After all, the story warns, sometimes men are not what they appear to be.

In 1994 Brown told a story that was so warmly received by her audience that she performed it twice in one day. It provided her with a vehicle for linking messages about issues of gender, class, age, nationality, or sexual identity with issues of race: Farmer Gray and Farmer Brown were neighbors. Farmer Gray was extremely envious of Farmer Brown, constantly making comparisons between the two of them. One day Farmer Brown got a mule. When Farmer Gray saw it, he was extremely jealous. He dug a huge hole in the ground and told the mule to get into the hole. His plan was to bury the mule alive. As Farmer Gray began shoveling dirt into the hole, the mule would just shake it off, stomp it down, and step on top of the newly packed soil. This happened over and over again. After a while, Farmer Gray had shoveled so much dirt into the hole that the mule was standing on the same level as the farmer. Finally, while Farmer Gray was bending down, the mule kicked him "right where it hurt" to teach him a lesson.

The crowd laughed at the conclusion of the story about Farmer Gray and the mule, and J. Gilliam Brown immediately offered the following interpretive commentary, which attempts to illustrate the similar stifling effects of various kinds of bigotry:

So, why does the storyteller tell you this story? Let me tell you why--because sometimes in life you will have an idea of something wonderful you want to do, but, people will tell you, "You can't do that because you've waited too late. You should have thought of that earlier." [age] "You want to fly a huge jet? You can't do that because you're a woman." "You gonna open a chain of stores selling doll houses? You can't do that--you're a man." [gender] "You can't do that--you're too old." "You're too young." [age] "You love the wrong sex." [sexual identity] "You're born in the wrong country." [nationality] "You're the wrong race." They have all sorts of dirt

they're gonna throw on you. But if you have an idea of how to make yourself a better person, if you have an idea of what you want to become when you grow up, whatever the dirt is that they throw on you, you have to [she dramatizes each phrase with her movements] shake it off, stomp it down, and move on up a little higher. You have to shake it off, stomp it down, and move on up a little higher. Say it with me now [audience joins in]. You have to shake it off, stomp it down, and move on up a little higher.

In addition to their participation and the messages they conveyed, what is equally striking about the pivotal role that women storytellers play in the Tarrytown Pinkster festival is that it is rarely made the object of public attention. Women's leadership in the construction and presentation of the festival is unannounced. Instead, the focus of the celebration is on race and, secondarily, on class. When gender commentary emerges, it is usually within the larger context of racially defined oppression. The storytellers and other entertainers use their performances to make positive statements about their African heritage and encourage their audiences to resist the forces of racism. Rather than the traditions and customs of the wealthy Dutch landowners, the festival highlights the stories, song, dance, and foodways of the people they exploited and enslaved. Tenant farmers are represented by performers who demonstrate English country dancing, candle-making, dyeing and spinning yarn, and the care of cattle and sheep. Except for a harp player who occasionally performs at the festival, no one represents the wealthy elite.

Related to other African American holidays such as emancipation celebrations, John Canoe festivities, Kwanzaa, and Odunde, the Tarrytown festival is historic recreation from the standpoint of those who have been relegated to the margins, contemporary African Americans reinterpreting the past in light of present social and political dynamics, reclaiming and reinventing the spirit of Pinkster that came alive in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>14</sup> These celebrations represent part of a larger struggle of cultural resistance by people of color who are intent on establishing the revaluation of their ancestors and historical traditions (Fernandez, 1993, p. 5).<sup>15</sup> However, gender relations and the leadership role of African American women--either in celebrating Pinkster festivals in the past or in designing the contemporary event--are never publicly articulated.

Instead, African American women strategically use their influence to shape the event so that it focuses on racial issues. I have never heard them use the term "feminism" in discussing the festival, nor do the storytellers tell many tales that deal overtly with the status of women. Instead, while situating themselves in positions of authority at the event, Mason and Brown tell stories that address bigotry and oppression in general.

One of the prevalent encoded themes in their narratives is: don't trust the seemingly good intentions of (white) people, for to do so is to put oneself in a position of vulnerability and, potentially, danger. In 1994 J. Gilliam Brown also told a parable about a snake and a possum. The possum is walking along and sees a hole in the ground with a snake in it. Noticing that the snake, which is poisonous, has a brick on his back and cannot move, the possum quickly walks away. He hears the snake crying for help and turns back. The snake tells the possum that the brick is very uncomfortable and persuades the possum to remove the brick. Even though he knows better, the possum obliges. The snake responds, "It's very damp and dark in this hole. Could you just take that branch near you and lift me up into the sun?" The possum complies with his request. The snake continues, "Would you just pick me up and put me in that pocket on your chest so that I can move along with you?" Being a trusting soul, the possum listens to the second voice in his head (which tells him it wouldn't hurt to help the poor snake) rather than the first (which tells him to leave the snake alone). Having been placed in the possum's pocket, the snake turns on the possum and delivers a deadly bite. Surprised by the attack, the possum falls to the ground, wondering in his final moments of life why the snake bit him. Callously, the snake retorts, "You knew I was a snake when you put me in your pocket!"

Rather than explaining this story to her audience, Brown exhorted them to think about its meaning as they returned to their homes that afternoon. Certainly, the parable can be interpreted as a general admonition to avoid unscrupulous people who will do or say anything to get what they want. Like Mason's story about the snake who beguiles the beautiful young woman, it reminds the listener to beware of the contradictions between appearances and actuality.<sup>16</sup> However, within the framework of Pinkster, with its heightened attention to racial conflicts and histories, it is possible to interpret the parable in another, more politicized way. Encoded for an audience of African American listeners, the story offers a message of caution about the risk of trusting people in a position to harm them. Given the long history of white domination, the tale reminds African Americans in the audience, it is foolhardy to expect that those who have oppressed you will suddenly befriend you.

Drawing on African American tradition, Brown also likes to tell stories about a small and vulnerable animal outsmarting a larger or more powerful one.<sup>17</sup> Reversing conventional hierarchies and power relations, in these tales weaker animals (such as hares, spiders, turtles, or monkeys) manipulate and humiliate stronger opponents (such as lions, foxes, or sharks). Typically, listeners identify with the weaker animals, who use wit or guile to their advantage in the face of servility and degradation (Van Sertima, 1989, pp. 104-105). The lesson could be applied to race or gender relations, but at Pinkster, because of the history of the event and its

commemoration of slavery, the emphasis is on race. Women storytellers sometimes conflate racial with gender messages, but most of their stories do not explicitly address the struggle between men and women or gender-related liberation. Rather, they revolve around themes of liberation more generally, finding ways around the system or ways to beat the system, encouraging listeners not to let oppressive structures define their sense of identity or belief in their own capabilities.

One of Brown's favorite animal trickster tales is about a buzzard who targets a young rabbit, and then a squirrel and a monkey, for his prey. On one very hot day in West Africa, the rabbit reluctantly interacts with the buzzard, despite his mother's warnings. "Sure is hot, ain't it?" asks the buzzard, who admonishes the rabbit for his hesitation: "Rabbit, you don't have to act like that. You can speak to me. I have done you no harm in the world; I'm just passin' the time. I'm trying to be nice to you." When the rabbit hesitantly engages in conversation, Buzzard offers to take the rabbit for a ride to help him cool down. The rabbit foolishly accepts. The buzzard soars through the sky with the rabbit on his back. He flies higher and higher, then suddenly plunges to the earth. Rabbit falls off the buzzard, hits the ground, breaks his neck, and is eaten by the bird. Immediately thereafter the squirrel also takes a ride and meets a similar fate.

Having secretly observed these events, the monkey is determined to outwit the buzzard. To attract attention, Monkey begins strutting through the forest, loudly proclaiming, "Sure is hot today! It is some kinda hot today!" The buzzard offers a ride to Monkey, who quickly accepts the invitation. However, when Buzzard dive-bombs toward the ground, "the monkey took his long tail--you know that tail on that monkey--and he lassoed it around the buzzard's neck, like that, and he pulled back on that tail, like that, and he said, 'Buzzard, you better straighten up and fly right!'" Gloating over his newly acquired power, Monkey makes Buzzard fly upward in the cool air for hours, breaking his spirit and exhausting him. Finally, Monkey allows the buzzard to land (gently) on the ground, where Monkey casually dismounts and walks away. From that day on, concluded J. Gilliam Brown, the buzzard could never hunt or kill his own food; instead, he became a scavenger, having to eat somebody else's discarded leftovers. The story is explanatory (why buzzards eat dead animals), but it also conveys a message about how those who appear to be in a position of powerlessness can use their intelligence to overcome those who would prey upon them. In the context of Pinkster and the history of slavery that define the event, the monkey exemplifies African American tenacity and achievement in the face of overwhelming odds.

Folklorist Roger Abrahams has noted that many festivals offer participants access to a time-out-of-time, a setting which allows participants to express ideas and behaviors that in conventional circumstances would be

considered threatening to the status quo. A festival, Abrahams notes, an event that is "in betwixt-and-between times and places, [can] make it possible to exhibit. . . confrontation[al] behavior in a context in which these antagonisms may be usefully given voice without being regarded as politically motivated" (Abrahams, 1981, p. 312). Admittedly, Historic Hudson Valley's re-enactment of the Pinkster festival is mediated by the fact that the historical society depends on the financial support of the public, particularly wealthy white patrons. Gentrified for public consumption, the Tarrytown celebration does not involve the kind of spontaneity, African-based ritual, or overt racial satire that historically characterized Pinkster festivals.<sup>18</sup> All performances are scheduled and announced in a program that visitors receive upon their arrival at Philipsburg Manor. There is no African "first fruits ceremony," installation of an honorary "king" to rule over the festival, or an effort to collect twice the admission fee from white as from black onlookers--all Pinkster traditions practiced in the late 1700 and early 1800s (Williams-Myers, 1987b, p. 9; White, 1989a, p. 68). Nonetheless, African American organizers and performers use the occasion to convey messages about how they see themselves in the past and the present, offering a self-conscious re-presentation of slavery and a particular and politicized sense of social identity.

It is within this context that Mason and Brown assume the prestigious role of the African *griot* or oral historian, whose responsibilities include educating their people about the past and orally maintaining and interpreting the cultural record of the community (Kouyte, 1989, p. 179). By virtue of their central roles as performers and oral historians, they command positions of authority at the event. In his study of Black folk culture, Lawrence Levine notes that stories that were infused with moral messages and used for didactic purposes flourished among enslaved Africans in North America, who were denied access to most other forms of education. By reiterating moral and religious values, these tales instructed blacks about how to act and live, encouraging the development of African American identity both before and after emancipation (1977, pp. 91-92).<sup>19</sup> Mason and Brown use their stories to remind and educate people about a past that many have forgotten.

One of the notable features about their participation in the Pinkster festival, and about the event in general, is how pivotal women have become, yet how understated and unannounced their leadership is in the public presentation of the event. The focus is primarily on race, but women's agency and the reconstruction of cultural history through the lens of women's experiences are largely responsible for shaping and promoting the message. The festival offers a lesson to feminists, particularly white feminists, who insist that for all women, gender must be the primary mode of analysis in interpreting cultural expression. At the Tarrytown festival, women assume authoritative voices through their

creation of public performances that comment on social justice. Their authority derives from their work as artists, organizers, strategists, and griots for their people--calling on their audiences to re-interpret the past, question the status quo, and envision alternative forms of social interaction.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> My data come from Pinkster festivals I attended during the weekends of May 9-10, 1992, May 8-9, 1993, May 7-8, 1994, and May 13-14, 1995. Storyteller ShaRon Mason performed in 1992 and J. Gilliam Brown in 1992, 1994, and 1995.

<sup>2</sup> See White (1989a, 1989b, 1991) and Williams-Myers (1987a, 1987b, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> Robert Cantwell uses this term to describe events that are representative of marginalized communities or archaic activities, bringing them into public view in such a way that a degree of "social negotiation" must occur. During these festivities, conventional social and political hierarchies are inverted, "elevating visions of working-class, peasant, and other unofficial cultures into the precincts of elite culture and powerful institutions and to the center of the touristic gaze..." (1993, p. 244). See also Babcock (1978) for a discussion of inversion rituals and performances.

<sup>4</sup> Pinkster festival has become a celebration of "ethnomimesis" in the sense delineated by Cantwell (1993): the processes and performances through which people identify, imitate, impersonate, and incorporate their culture, signifying their group identity to themselves and to outsiders.

<sup>5</sup> In 1993 and 1994, Native American regional arts and traditions such as beadwork, dances, and material culture were also demonstrated at Tarrytown Pinkster festivals. To date, their inclusion has not been systematic or contextualized for audiences, although in 1994 Director of Programs Radiah Harper Sumler commented to me that the staff of Historic Hudson Valley has been working to make Native American participation a more central and fully integrated aspect of the festival.

<sup>6</sup> See R. Stewart (1994) for a more general discussion of African American women's contributions to the historic preservation and museum movements.

<sup>7</sup> The scholarship of A. J. Williams-Myers (1987a, 1987b, 1989) has been influential in Sumler's interpretation of African American women's lives during the colonial period. Williams-Myers notes that enslaved African American women performed "tasks which not only sustained white households, but their input into periodic household surpluses indirectly contributed to capital accumulation in the larger, colonial economy of the [Hudson River Valley]" (1987b, p. 3). He cites evidence that, in addition to working in the homes and manors of white masters, African American women in the region were responsible for raising the children of slave owners, animal husbandry, serving as translators between whites and Native Americans, operating as underground agents for both sides during the Revolutionary War, and working as activists and revolutionaries in the anti-slavery movement (Williams-Myers, 1987b). Rejecting the oppression and poverty she experienced as a slave, Sojourner Truth grew up in the Hudson River Valley and became an active proponent in the Northeast for the emancipation of enslaved peoples and all women (see Joseph, 1990; Williams-Myers, 1987b, pp. 26-27).

<sup>8</sup> In 1994, a Native American artifacts display was also staffed by a man; see note 5.

<sup>9</sup> All seven of the 1994 Tulip Queen finalists were white women between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three. The contestants, who must be residents of Albany or the surrounding townships, vie for the title, a cash prize of \$1,500, and the chance to appear at city and civic events during a one-year reign (Yu, 1994, p. B-3).

<sup>10</sup> Historian A. J. Williams-Myers reports that at the time of the first federal census in 1790, the total number of enslaved Blacks in New

- York state was 21,324, just eight thousand short of Georgia's total of 29,264 (1987b, p. 11).
- <sup>11</sup> Conversation with ShaRon Mason, May 9, 1992.
- <sup>12</sup> In 1993, for example, Pritchett asked his audience, "Ya'all know where black and white folks come from?" He explained: the first people were black: Adam, Eve (who came from Adam's rib), and later their sons, Cain and Abel. When Cain became jealous of Abel and killed him, God saw what he had done and confronted Cain about the murder. The guilty brother was so frightened by God's accusation that "the color went right out'a Cain's face. And *that's* where white people come from." For earlier renditions of this story, see Levine (1977, p. 85).
- <sup>13</sup> In her 1993 volume, Radner delineates a range of coding strategies that women use to convey gender-specific messages about themselves and their views of the world. For related analyses of coding practices based on racial or ethnic identity, see also Gates (1988); Levine (1977); Paredes (1971, 1978a, 1978b); Limon (1973, 1977, 1981, 1983, 1992, 1994); Seriff (1989, in press); and R. Flores (1992).
- <sup>14</sup> See also Wiggins (1975, 1979, 1987) for discussions of emancipation celebrations; Levin (1977, 150) for John Canoe or John Kuners festivities; Copage (1991), Y. Flores and Evanchuk (1995) Karenga (1988), McClester (1993), and Simpson (1981) for Kwanzaa; and *Philadelphia Folklore Project Works in Progress* (1992, 1993) for Odunde. Each of these festivities creates a celebratory atmosphere that turns the spaces of celebration into spaces of African-centered reunion. In his discussion of Odunde, Davis suggests that the attempt to reawaken values, beliefs, and forms of expression that have been denied to African Americans represents a step toward psychic health, one that serves a deeply therapeutic function (1992, p. 3).
- <sup>15</sup> Historical research and re-creation have become important and popularly recognized tools for African Americans, women, and other oppressed groups in their struggles for equality and autonomy. Jeffrey Stewart and Faith Davis Ruffin note that African American public history arose out of double desire to foster the community's self-esteem and challenge popular and academic white racism. They observe that because it chronicles the history of a segment of the population at odds with the status quo, African American public history is often characterized by its oppositional quality (Stewart & Ruffin, 1986, p. 307).
- <sup>16</sup> Levine (1977, p. 312) notes that this theme is common in Black folk humor, reminding the listeners that the claims and promises of those in positions of power can rarely be taken at face value.
- <sup>17</sup> For a discussion of animal trickster tales, their characteristics, and their strategic role in African American folk culture, see Dance (1978, pp. 179-83); Levine (1977, pp. 102-120); and Van Sertima (1989). Dance notes that in trickster tales told by enslaved blacks, a character such as Brer Rabbit "is a powerless creature, without weapons to protect himself against other, stronger animals. Obviously seeing their own situation mirrored in this helpless animal, the slaves adopted him and invested him with a wily cunning and a scheming nature through which he was in most cases, though not always, able to overcome other, stronger animals" (1978, p. 180).
- <sup>18</sup> See also White (1989b, p. 193) for his argument that, although influenced by African features, the Pinkster celebrations of enslaved Africans were antecedents and adaptations of the festivals of misrule, or the world-turned-upside-down festivals, that characterized early modern Europe.
- <sup>19</sup> For additional discussion of the value of storytelling for enslaved blacks who were prohibited from learning to read and write, see Dance (1978, pp. xvii-xxv).

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