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— Jay O’Callahan, npr commentator and award-winning storyteller

African-American Tales

FOLKTALES FROM THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN
APPALACHIAN TRADITION

RETOLD BY

LYN FORD

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Preface

After completing a program for a family-audience event, at a place in the designated-Appalachian region of Southern Ohio, where the audience appeared to be entirely of one culture, and where I had introduced myself as an Affrilachian and explained the meaning of that word, I was introduced to a local folklorist, who will remain appropriately unnamed. The gentleman said, “You shouldn’t use that word, what did you say, ‘Affrilachian?’ I’m a folklorist, and the local storyteller. And I’ve never heard that word before; it is not a recognized description of any Appalachian people. You shouldn’t pretend to be a folklorist . . .”

I smiled, and my mind went to one of the many wise statements that my great-grandmother used when confronted by someone else’s opinions. I often mention that when Great-Grandma Essie said, “Bless you”, she meant, “Bless you with what you truly deserve.”

I almost said, “Bless you.” But, instead, because I told myself this man may have had good intentions, I replied, “I’ve never claimed to be a folklorist. I’m a storyteller, a keeper and adapter of my family’s stories. And most of my family’s roots lie, or were transplanted, in the Appalachian region.

“If the term, ‘Affrilachian’ bothers you, you need to look up its history, and its meaning. You’ll find the history of the word’s creation at the web site of poet and Professor Frank X. Walker¹, as well as at the web site for the Affrilachian Poets². You’ll find the etymology and meaning of the word in the New Oxford American Dictionary, second edition. The word is also referenced in The Encyclopedia

of Appalachia”.

I prepared to turn to others who were waiting to chat, but I blame the trickster portion of my personality for what I said next, “Thank you for trying to preserve the past, although your version is a misinformed one. Bless you.” One does not give power to those who attempt to subvert knowledge, simply because it does not fit into their own worldview.

What were the stories I shared that day? Students of American literature and my fellow storytellers know them well. They are the tales some folks call Brer Rabbit stories. That trickster is known simply as Rabbit in my family’s versions of these centuries-old stories. Many European-Americans, some in their eighties and nineties, many from my own generation, have told me over the years that they “grew up with these stories.” Many teachers, librarians and storytellers have told me they share these stories with their children at home or at school. But some African Americans of my own generation have told me they never heard stories during their formative years. They were never introduced to stories of the trickster-rabbit, or the tortoise, and definitely not stories of the trickster-spider.

Some, born and nurtured in the same cultural heritage as I, have said they were embarrassed to hear the words “brer” and “tar baby” as they grew up. These peers say they only knew these terms as derogatory and denigrating to people of color. They also said they knew nothing of the rich history of these tales, and their direct links to our ancestors from Africa.

In my own family, the Rabbit tales were often dispatched to the back porch, where the older men and their friends told stories the womenfolk felt were too raucous or risqué for neighbors to overhear. My paternal grandmother, Edna Maclin Cooper, once said to my

maternal grandfather, Pop-Pops Byard, as well as to her own son, my dad, “You need to stop telling that child those slave stories. We don’t need to remember those things.” Fortunately for me, her admonition only prompted Dad and Pop-Pops to tell me more stories of the struggles our people faced. Some of their stories were what we would today call historical narratives, and some that also told of our history were told allegorically as the adventures of Rabbit or Spider.

And why do I consider the hearing of those stories such a fortunate thing? The stories gave me roots that I could research in my adult years. I would eventually discover for myself that these stories were carried orally from my ancestors in Africa, were blended with elements of Native American heritage and European American family folktales in Appalachia. Learning these handed-down stories gave me a sense of independence, knowing that size, strength, appearance, and the opinions of others need not deter me from making the choices that made or changed my life. The stories gave me wisdom, dressed up as fables or dressed down as proverb tales. Either way, I came to understand that the stories I heard from old folks were bejeweled with the wisdom of generations. I also came to understand that their ageless values were still potent in the 21st century. The heritage of stories handed down to me became the stories I would tell my own children. They became the grist for my programs. Those back-porch stories continue to be a blessing, passed down through families for centuries.

I heard stories of critters who are now a part of the folktale traditions of these United States: Rabbit, Bear, Turtle, Frog, Dog, Cat, Snake, and Possum. Others appeared in these tales, animals from the memories of those who crossed the oceans in the African Diaspora. These tales included Hyena and his sisters and brothers, or Spider,

who was also Ananse.

I heard stories meant to teach me about relationships, empathy and common sense, or the lack of it. Sometimes the protagonists in these stories had names like Jack, or Sistah Sarah Mae, or John. Sometimes they were just Little Girl, or a boy, or an old woman and an old man.

I heard stories that kept me up most of the night, delighting in the images that crept from the shadows of darker folktales into the corners of my room. Daddy told me about spookers and haints and things (pronounced “thangs”) that didn’t just go bump in the night—they bumped, and thumped, and lost their heads. Oh, how I loved being scared by those stories!

I am grateful to: my father, Edward Maclin Cooper; my mother, Jean Elizabeth Arkward Cooper Matthews; my grandfather, Byard Wilmer Arkward; my great-grandparents, Essie and Jerome Arkward; my great-grandparents’ neighbor, Miss Mary; my great-aunt, Katherine Griffin, and many elders whose names I can’t remember, for keeping the stories alive and sharing their oral traditions with me. The stories maintain a psycho-spiritual connection to ancestors, traditions of culture and faith, and a history far richer than the schools of my own childhood ever taught. The stories, and their storytellers, helped me to know and become who I am.

I am an Affrilachian storyteller. I pass on a gift of stories to my children, and to you.

1. Frank X. Walker is an associate professor in the Department of English at the University of Kentucky. His visual art is in the private collections of Spike Lee, Opal Palmer Adisa, Morris FX Jeff, and Bill and Camille Cosby. He is also a published poet and playwright, and

one of the founders of the Affrilachian Poets. Walker created the word that now describes people of African descent from the Appalachian region: Affrilachian.

2. Established in 1991, the Affrilachian Poets, based in Louisville, Kentucky, are now more than thirty members strong. Information on the Affrilachian Poets is available at <http://www.affrilachianpoets.com/>

“AFFRILACHIAN?” A Personal History

My “Home-Fried Tales,” adapted primarily from my family’s front-porch and back-porch tales, have afforded me the blessings of telling stories in 29 states and Ireland, of being published in several resources for educators and storytellers, of receiving a few awards, and of having CDs and video and audio recordings on the Internet. I won’t dwell on those developments, but if you see me smiling, you’ll know the pleasure of serendipity. When my family shared stories, we anticipated nothing of what has become my storytelling career; storytelling was simply the family’s tradition for generations.

I will try to give you a taste of the gems that await discovery by those of us who seek family connections to the history of our Appalachian ancestors in this country. Some gems of family lore are lost because folks do not know their families’ Appalachian history. Other gems are inadvertently discarded, for whatever reason, when elders are unaware of the value of passing on Appalachian stories in their families.

I speak of my family and myself as “Affrilachian”.

My mother’s family—Carters, Wilsons, and Arkwards, primarily in Virginia—eventually settled in Pennsylvania and in the hills of Southern Ohio; later, they built a house in a small valley in East Liverpool, Ohio. Ma (born Jean Elizabeth Arkward) says her folks were referred to as “West Virginia ridge-runners”, among other derogatory descriptive terms. The heritage of Cherokee and possibly Choctaw was not spoken of, but Great-Pop (Jerome Arkward, my great-

grandfather) guided me into the woods for prayer, and I heard a few words that I still remember, which turned out to be Cherokee. Nor did the family speak of the ties to the Carter plantations of Virginia, although my mother and others told me that's where some of the family began, as both indentured servants and people whose bodies were enslaved. I say their bodies were enslaved, because wise folks taught me that nobody can make a slave of your mind and spirit—unless you let them.

In his lifetime, Grandpa Byard Arkward, whom we called Pop-Pops, was a coal miner and a pottery-mill worker at a time when folks of any “color” weren't being hired to work in those factories. At other times he was a cook and maitre d', a stonemason, a carpenter, and a moonshiner who also made beer, root beer, and elderberry wine. In addition, Pop-Pops hand-cranked the best ice cream I ever tasted.

Dad was in the last graduating class of the 477th Bombardment Group of the Tuskegee Airmen, but his battle was on this side of the water, creating an “integrated” military force. Dad always worked two jobs, and we always seemed to be in some kind of financial struggle. Hard times resulted from strikes or layoffs at the steel mills, relatives in need of assistance, a roof in need of patching, or any number of other emergencies. Dad was a brilliant man who played gut-bucket guitar and sang the blues. An athlete and an artist, Dad was also skilled in predicting the weather by watching the clouds and other natural indicators of what was to come. Dad couldn't get a higher-paying job because he was a “colored” man, born in Tennessee, who had some college education but “not enough”. His name was Edward Maclin (also “Macklin” and “MacLin”) Cooper. He was my favorite storyteller. His recognition as a Tuskegee Airman is listed

in the book *Black Knights: The Story of the Tuskegee Airmen*, by Lynn M. Homan and Thomas Reilly (Pelican Publishing Co., 2001). His recognition as an Affrilachian comes only through my storytelling.

A big, family-built cabin stood in East Liverpool, Ohio. Out back was an outhouse that was still in use by my Uncle Cedric Wilson's family when I was growing up. I remember going to church with my great-grandparents, whose Victorian-style house was in the same community, on the "colored" side of town. After church, I went into the woods with my great-grandfather, for silent prayer to the cardinal directions; Great-Pop also taught me to walk silently in the woods ("toe-heel, not like the white folks' heel-toe; you can hear them coming.") We also worked in the garden together, Great-Pop, Great-Grandma Essie (my great-grandfather's second wife), and I. I have forgotten more than I like to admit about gardening, but I remember spirituals we sang as we worked, breakfasts after hoeing, and good food served at the dining room table.

I remember some of the terms used for always-homemade meals: kale & "calf turds" (greens with yams); bastard bread (corn meal or flour mixed with salt, bacon fat, and water, and fried, the equivalent of a flat "fry bread"; the extra meal and bacon fat were the occasional offerings of a plantation owner who couldn't help giving a few more or better supplies to his illegitimate, half-African offspring—thus the term "bastard bread"). And I'll never forget the chant, "lie-roach-ketch-meddlers," sometimes pronounced "lie-roach-ketcha-meddle" by some of Dad's friends, and "nunya"...they both mean "eat it, be glad we got it, and don't ask what it is or where it came from".

There were days of picking dandelion greens, washing and

washing them, and making salads with onions from the garden and vinegar and oil dressing. There were tears over taking dandelion tonic (“to wash out all the bad stuff”), and not being allowed to sip dandelion wine with the big folks. There was sassafras tea early in spring, to thin the “sluggish” blood after winter; there were carefully washed wild violet blooms, dipped in crystal sugar to decorate a special cake. We didn’t order a pizza until I was well into high school.

Conversations with fellow Affrilachian storyteller Omope Carter Daboiku¹ jogged my memory about such delicacies as:

Chow-chow - green tomato relish still available in its freshest form from the Pennsylvania Dutch markets;

“Cous-cous”, which can be traced to the recipe for “coo coo” from various places in the Caribbean, or “turnmeal” from Jamaica - cornbread in buttermilk, or clabbered-with-vinegar milk;

Chitlins - the small intestines of pigs, cleaned, cooked well, and doused with Louisiana Hot Sauce. A nasty job of cleanin’, a fantastic feast for eatin’;

Fried green tomatoes, which I still make when I can, and, in Omope’s words,

“Our northern gumbo/native combo of okra, corn and tomatoes (cooked together in a skillet) and served with fried catfish. And, one of my aunts actually did eat laundry lump starch during pregnancy... just like at home in Western Africa.” That gumbo which both our families enjoyed is what other folks call by a Native-American rooted name: succotash.

Nothing was wasted. Everything tasted good. We ate it. We were glad we got it. And we didn’t ask where it came from.

What were called “healing ways”, “the old ways” and “family wis-

dom” by older folks that I knew were often called hoo-doo, superstition, witchcraft, and worse, by outsiders. That never seemed to stop folks from asking what to do when medicine and prayer didn’t resolve situations that troubled them.

Great-great Grandma Wilhelmina Wells, Pop-Pop’s grandmother, was a midwife, a “granny woman” who birthed babies and mixed and traded and passed down remedies and traditions for keeping a body healthy and a home well. Some folks called her a witch, but that didn’t keep them from coming to her when the “white folks’ medicine”, as it was called, didn’t work. Brown paper was torn, dampened, and pressed against the skin to suture a wound until it could be bandaged or stitched. Tobacco was spit on a bee sting, and the stinger easily drew out when the nasty stuff was wiped away. Ramps, truly stinking wild leeks, cleared our sinuses and our souls, and cleared a room as well if you ate too much of the stuff...but they tasted so much better than onions. Cod liver oil and castor oil supposedly cured us of...everything!

Add to my short list of remedies a few from the childhood memories of storyteller and actress Ilene Evans³ of West Virginia: ginger tea, to help young women through, or to, their menstrual cycles; asaphoetida bags (filled with an herb that is also known as Devil’s Dung, and its smell befits this name) worn on cords tied around the neck as preventive medicine, beech or birch twigs for cleaning teeth; golden seal for infections, and sage tea “for comfort”.

Fellow teller James “Sparky” Rucker³ of Tennessee told me that his family frowned upon the medicines of “those old root folk” (Sparky’s grandfather was a bishop in the Church of God), but he remembered sweet oil being put in his ear to heal an earache—it worked.

Medical research is being done on the value of forest herbs once handpicked by our great-great grandmothers, and the remedies used to soothe and to heal; some of them are the ingredients of medications we use today, including treatments for heart disease, hypertension, and various forms of arthritis. White willow is a source for aspirin's salicylic acid; a mixture of honey and apple cider or products from the ginkgo tree seems to aid those with arthritic pain.

There are still active practitioners of the old ways; their service is still sought when "modern" medicine doesn't do the job. John Lee of Moncure, in the North Carolina Piedmont, is a healer who combines the heritage of Native American, European, and African folk medicine with spiritual divination. He is of mixed Lumbee, Cherokee, African, Irish, and English descent. Lee was born with a caul (the placental material wrapped around the child or over the child's face), a fact that enhances his reputation as a healer.²

I learned how to sweep a house from my great-grandmother and my great-aunt Katherine. I don't mean sweep it clean, although that was important. I mean sweep in good fortune and sweep out trouble, sweep to keep wicked or mean folks or sickness away from the front door and to protect the family. This was also called "blessing" a house. A mixture of salt and herbs was sprinkled around windows and doors before sweeping, to help make it a haven, and a home. Seems like I'm the only one who still remembers some of the old ways, and that has annoyed some family folks who want to distance themselves from the knowledge. I cherish it. I blessed our new home before we set a rug to the floor or moved one piece of furniture into it.

I also learned to listen and watch for the birds and insects, to see if a storm was coming. If the birds stopped singing and seemed to

disappear, a big storm was coming. If the flies started “biting” on a hot day, they were getting a meal before they’d have to find shelter from a storm. Dry weather was about to end when the leaves on the trees curled themselves into cups to catch the rain. These were not superstitious beliefs; they were matters of observation and common sense.

The elder healers and other wise elders I knew are gone. The cabin that became the East Liverpool homestead, as well as my great-grandparents’ Victorian home, are both gone—victims of highway development. Too many people have died, so research on our family history is becoming a harder and bigger job. And some of our kin have hidden who they are and been lost to the rest of us; with the appearance of our European American ancestors more predominant in their features, some relatives on my father’s side of the family left behind their own history, their familial connections, the realities of who they are. They “turned white”, or became “passing for white”, as folks in our neighborhood said. They tore themselves away from what they considered “poor”, “country”, and “slave-tale”, their own Affrilachian roots.

I know a little about some of them, but I’m not interested in finding or telling their stories right now. I just keep doing my best to seek, remember, research, and tell the old Affrilachian stories, because we need them, for our hearts, and for our children’s foundation.

Affrilachia is a 13-state area of 410 counties that is also the Appalachia that, in recent years, is recognizing and claiming its own multicultural diversity. In its hills and valleys, its “criks” and “hollers,” rest the origins of many African American family’s traditions on this side of the waters. It is a cultural history that is just now being claimed

by some as equally important and as interesting as the stories and songs of the Gullah on the eastern coast, and the Black Creole of Louisiana.

Those of us blessed with the oral traditions of African American Appalachia tell our personal Affrilachian stories and all the folktales that we can research and remember. Contemporary scholars are now realizing the many life lessons and moral teachings that harmonize within them. These stories of the trickster-hero Rabbit dance with the ancient tales of Hare and Turtle and Spider, a rich and enriching connection to our families' African heritage that, blessedly for me and for many others, some of our mothers and fathers, some of our grandparents and great-grandparents, some of our teachers and many of our storytellers, did not deny.

1. Omope Daboiku Carter lives in the Cincinnati Area of Ohio. She is a storyteller and actress who has been affiliated with the Ohio Arts Council as an Artist-in-Education since 1990. Omope, too is a child from a multicultural, storytelling family; her family's "cultural shift from Native to Colored" was kept as a family "genealogy" story for four generations, since it occurred in 1920.

As I searched for information about my own family, I discovered that my father, his parents and his siblings, were designated as "white" for two years on the US Census in the 1920s...somebody looked, but didn't ask.

2. <http://hubpages.com/hub/African-Slaves-Folk-Remedies>

3. Ilene Evans and James "Sparky" Rucker are fellow Affrilachian storytellers. Ilene's work preserves a portion of US history through her dramatizations of the lives of sheroes such as Harriet Tubman.

Ilene also tells folktales and shares workshops, both in her home state of West Virginia and around the world; she has shared her gifts at the Fringe Festival in Edinburg, Scotland, the Women's Universities in Saudi Arabia and Al-Babtain Library in Kuwait. Sparky and his wife, Rhonda, preserve and present music, story, and history from the blues to the songs of the Civil Rights Movement, in a schedule of performances that includes almost every week of the year; among their many venues, Sparky and Rhonda include the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, and the Smithsonian Folklife Festival.