

The Literary Mind of a Cornfield Journalist: Joel Chandler Harris's 1904 Negro Question Articles

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There may be more to the man whose black dialect folk tales have been deemed paternalistic, even derogatory. In particular, Harris's Saturday Evening Post series sheds more light on his views about race and the power of education to transform minds

While touring The Wren's Nest, the historic house museum of Joel Chandler Harris, famed author of the Uncle Remus and Brer Rabbit tales, I had an epiphany. Noticing four color sketches of black children learning to read and spell hanging on the wall facing Harris's bed, I thought: Perhaps a broader, more complex understanding of Harris's interest in and understanding of the black experience could be achieved through further examination of his journalistic writings. As an African-American journalism educator, I thought aspects of the damaged legacy of the man—whose black dialect folk tales have been deemed offensive by some—might warrant further consideration.

The lingering shadow of Disney's *Song of the South*, released in 1946, long after Harris's 1908 death, significantly darkened his reputation. Based on plot motifs from *The Tales of Uncle Remus*, the film, for some, was and still is deemed offensive because of its portrayals of "idyllic master-slave" relationships.¹ And yet within this charming Victorian house museum, which once barred black visitors, one encounters endearing images of unmistakably black children learning to read and spell that convey something about Harris's belief in the power of the written word, whether literature or journalism, to transform and liberate minds.²

Touring Harris's former home, a short walking distance from the largest consortium of privately operated historically black institutions of higher learning founded after the Civil War,³ I became increasingly curious about how Harris weighed in on the "Negro Question" dialogue prevalent from the post-slavery Reconstruction era through the early decades of the twentieth century. Also, what did he think of these colleges founded to uplift formerly enslaved men and women that occupy one of the city's highest hills, where Union and Confederate troops faced off during the 1864 siege of Atlanta? What were his editorial thoughts on education as a strategy for Negro advancement? How did this New South editor describe the social complexities of his changing world? This paper explores the contexts in which Harris considered these questions.

Throughout Harris's career, including twenty-four years at the *Atlanta Constitution* as associate editor and lead editorial writer, he denounced racism among southern whites, condemned lynching as barbaric, recognized the legitimacy of black suffrage and economic advancement, and supported higher education for blacks. The earliest study of Harris's representative journalistic work was conducted by his daughter-in-law and biographer, Julia Collier Harris, who published two seminal works, *The Life and Letters of Joel Chandler Harris* (1918), and *Joel Chandler Harris: Editor and Essayist* (1931). Both works contain substantive examples of Harris's commentaries on these issues.⁴ Recently I examined Harris's social

commentaries within the context of the Atlanta University-sponsored Negro problem studies, Atlanta's racial tensions during the late 1890s and early 1900s, and the extent to which his views of liberal learning resonated with educators who promoted intellectual autonomy as the primary means of black uplift.⁵

Harris's literary works and the criticisms they garnered in the wake of *Song of the South* unfortunately obscure his journalistic writings. Capturing the paradox of this misperception of Harris's work and the relative obscurity of his journalism, R. Bruce Bickley, Jr., explains that:

Harris' importance as the recreator of the Uncle Remus stories and as a major southern local colorist often overshadows his role as associate editor for the *Constitution*, where, in thousands of signed and unsigned editorials over a twenty-four-year period, Harris set a national tone for reconciliation between North and South after the Civil War.⁶

A complex understanding of the intended impact of Harris's journalism begins with examining his stated and demonstrated editorial philosophy.

The Cornfield Journalist

A self-described 'cornfield journalist,' Harris, early in his newspaper career, espoused a New South editorial ideology that set him apart from his southern editor counterparts. In 1878 he stated:

An editor must have a purpose . . . when I think of the opportunities the editors in Georgia are allowing to slip by. It grieves me to see them harping steadily upon the same old prejudices and moving in the worn ruts of a period that was soul searching in its narrowness. . . . There never was a time when an editor with a purpose could accomplish more for his state and his country than just at present. What a legacy for one's conscience to know that one has been instrumental in mowing down the old prejudices that rattle in the wind like weeds.⁷

Walter Brasch's study of Harris's journalism career shows consistent efforts on the part of the editor to present balanced discussions of race relations. As does Bickley, Brasch casts Harris as a man consumed by two distinct, often warring, personalities: journalist and literary writer.⁸ In this 1899 letter to his daughters, Harris acknowledges his other storyteller voice. He told them:

You know all of us have two entities, or personalities. That is the reason you see and hear persons "talking to themselves." They are talking to the other fellow. I have often asked my other fellow where he gets all his information, and how he can remember, in the nick of time, things that I have forgotten long ago; but he never satisfies my curiosity. He is simply a spectator of my folly until I seize a pen, and then he comes forward and takes charge. . . . I go on writing editorials, and presently my other fellow says

sourly: *What about that story?* Then, when night comes, I take up my pen, surrender unconditionally to my other fellow, and out comes the story, and if it is a good story I am as much surprised as the people who read it...⁹

Written in March of that year, this letter was an uncanny foreshadowing of what was perhaps the most ideologically challenging period of Harris's journalism career, a time when that other voice, the editor's voice, had to say or advocate views he himself apparently despised. Less than one month later, Harris, known as a progressive-minded editor who opposed lynching and advocated social rights for blacks, and the *Atlanta Constitution* editorial staff produced inflammatory editorials that may have incited the torture and lynching of Sam Hose, a black farm worker.

In my analysis of the *Constitution's* coverage of this mob-driven murder, I discuss the dissonance Harris undoubtedly experienced in perpetuating coverage that resulted in the lynching.¹⁰ In a similar vein, Wayne Mixon notes: "To understand his difficulties in presenting his iconoclastic views on race, one must remember that Harris was a white man working for a major southern newspaper during the South's most viciously racist era. In that capacity, he sometimes did what was expected of him."¹¹ Jay Martin says that Harris was constrained by his public responsibilities as an editor of a major newspaper and could not always say what he believed.¹²

By early 1900, Harris, along with his seemingly warring selves, resigned from the newspaper to pursue other writing projects. The sense of being half-journalist and half-creative writer is a tension many journalism literary figures have experienced, according to Doug Underwood, who also notes that Harris had a "front row seat on history" from his fortuitous position as an editor at a major daily.¹³ Recall those color sketches of black children on his wall. Harris's journalistic self sought to write essays and editorials that promoted mutually beneficial dialogue and understanding between the races. His creative writer self wrote Brer Rabbit trickster tales embedded with layers of meaning, and local color stories such as "Billy Sanders" and "The Chronicles of Aunt Minervy Ann," which explored the complexities of black-white relationships in the decades following the War Between the States.¹⁴ The pressing Negro Question provided the opportunity for Harris to interpret these critical issues for local and national audiences.

The Negro Question

"Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question... How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word."—W. E. B. Du Bois¹⁵

The prolific sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois and the progressive editor Harris never met. Yet both, at one time, lived in Atlanta within walking distance of each other, had mutual acquaintances, and shared a belief that race relations would improve with attitudinal changes and, that intelligent leadership of both races should pursue solutions—a theme captured in the Harris's editorial writings throughout his career.

Across the south after the Civil War, as historically black universities evolved and promulgated higher education as a vehicle for race uplift, Harris took a keen interest in the teaching and scholarly advances occurring at Atlanta University. Beginning in 1897, the university sponsored a series of studies under the aegis of Du Bois that addressed issues affecting almost every aspect of black life, from mortality to urbanization. Moreover, these Negro studies

influenced other analyses of America's race problem. Harris often cited Du Bois's work in *Atlanta Constitution* editorials, and the *Bulletin*, an Atlanta University publication that featured commentaries on political and social issues, often ran reprints of *Constitution* editorials addressing these topics.

The *Bulletin* reprints of the *Constitution*'s February 14, 1894, editorial heralds Atlanta University's excellent "teachers, pupils and their progress" in solving the problem of colored education, and the *Constitution*'s January 1898 editorial refers to the informative nature of Du Bois's studies of Negro life and how such inquiries provide the best opportunities for understanding the conditions under which Negroes live.¹⁶ These are two of numerous examples of the attention the *Constitution* editorial staff under Harris's direction paid to the university's work, as well as acknowledgement by advocates of higher education for blacks that Harris's views resonated with theirs.

The Negro Question Articles

Three articles Harris wrote in 1904 for the *Saturday Evening Post* encapsulate his key commentaries on the Negro Question. "The Negro as the South Sees Him," "The Negro of To-day: His Prospects and His Discouragements," and "The Negro Problem: Can the South Solve It—And How?"¹⁷ reveal Harris's role as interpreter of southern views of blacks and the personalities, needs, and aspirations of blacks based on his intimate, lifelong observations. Here Harris's literary and journalistic sensibilities coalesce to convey a vivid, engaging story that captures the complexities of this transitional period in America's social history.

Born of poor white parents in 1845, Harris became a teenage apprentice to Joseph Addison Turner, a newspaper publisher and plantation owner. At that plantation, he first heard the African-inspired folk tales that would make him famous. He based the character Uncle Remus and several other African-American storytellers on slaves who worked there. In large part, these animal tales, as Harris retold them, are complex allegories of slaves' real lives. The tales often conveyed a violent, predatory world in which oppressed people struggled to survive.

Unlike his animal stories, Harris's newspaper commentaries on race and North-South factionalism were prescriptive and intended to promote reconciliation. So, too, were his *Post* articles. The theme of neighbor-knowledge, that is, the value of mutual knowledge and understanding between blacks and whites in the South, based on complex circumstances unique to the South, permeates Harris's *Post* commentaries. Within "The Negro as the South Sees Him," a rant in which Harris manages to assert the need to create a place for genuine dialogue between the races, there are recurring themes of plantation-day nostalgia and the Reconstruction's adverse effect on race relations. Referencing Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harris observes that the book features admirable characters who were the products of the system the text condemns, and that the real moral of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* "is that the possibilities of slavery anywhere and everywhere are shocking to the imagination, while the realities, under the best and happiest conditions, possess a romantic beauty and tenderness all their own."¹⁸ He explains:

We live and move in a harsh and unfeeling world; it is so hard and cold and practical that we dare not give an inkling of our real thoughts and feelings to our next door neighbor, lest we become victims of his derision. . . . And if there were ever human relations

that were romantic and picturesque they were found on the old plantation in the days of slavery.¹⁹

Writing from his direct experiences as well as popular anecdotes, Harris posits that the nature of some of the idealized old South relationships still persist and could form the basis for dialogue and understanding between the races during the twentieth century. Describing Negroes of the older generation, like the confidential family servant and Mammy, Harris says such persons possess temperaments ideal for these dialogues and still play a role in imparting valuable knowledge to the younger generations. He asserts:

[I]n Middle Georgia the relations between master and slave were as perfect as they could be under the circumstances; and down to this day . . . the negroes in that region are more intelligent, better disposed and have a clearer understanding of their responsibilities as citizens than those of any other part of the country.²⁰

Ironically, Disney's "idyllic portrayals of the master-slave relationship" in *Song of the South*, undoubtedly culled from Harris's own musings, have fueled lingering negative reactions to his much adored—by both blacks and whites—Uncle Remus stories that pre-date the film. Similarly, Darwin Turner criticizes Harris's predilection for idealizing slavery, stating, "It is not easy to organize Harris' images of Negroes into a coherent pattern because Harris himself responded to divergent magnets" and "persuaded his readers to accept them."²¹ Harris encoded the threatening, predatory world of master-slave relationships in the allegories of the animal tales, but in these essays, he apparently wanted to salvage and emphasize what he deemed valuable from the slavery era.

Indeed, Harris's penchant for advancing a progressive idea while cleaving to a paternalistic, even racist, framework is evident in the "The Negro of To-day," where he counters the view that blacks could not learn beyond their presumed limited capacity. Many of the article's thematic points are framed as his direct response to a Northern friend's prejudiced observations, which, in Harris's opinion, epitomizes the inherently misinformed, pessimistic views of black people's potential. While slow, he writes, the educational process will inevitably bear fruit in current and future generations, and it is unfair to compare the accomplishments of blacks in this regard to those of whites. He notes, that the black man "is only about three centuries from a state of barbaric slavery in Africa compared with which his term of servitude in the United States was Christian freedom."²² Optimistic that over time blacks would develop intellectual capacities in line with standards of whites, Harris challenges his white, and potentially prejudiced, readers:

If such a comparison is to be made, why not go back to the first forty years of the freedom of those who, in Great Britain, were held as serfs by England's invaders. There can be no doubt, though history has a gap here, that these English serfs were brothers to the ox, just as it has been said that the negroes are brothers to the mule. If we are to make any comparison at all, why not measure what the negro is doing with what our ancestors were doing at the same stage of development?²³

This particular article resonated with black educators,²⁴ including Booker T. Washington, president of Tuskegee Institute, who wrote to Harris on February 1, 1904:

It has been a long time since I have read anything from the pen of any man which has given me such encouragement as your article has. It has been read already by a large number of colored people, and it would surprise and delight you to hear the many pleasant things which they are saying about it. In a speech on Lincoln's Birthday which I am to deliver in New York, I am going to take the liberty to quote liberally from what you have said.²⁵

While supporting economic mobility and education for blacks, Harris did not support integration. In "The Negro Problem: Can the South Solve It—And How?" he addresses what he calls the "bugaboo" of social equality:

Judging from the protests that went up when the President dined with Booker Washington, it might be supposed that the problem which has for so long disturbed the politicians and publicists is social equality, and yet a little reflection should show the most ignorant of those who shrink back affrighted at so impalpable a ghost that social equality cannot be made a problem. For where, on the face of the earth, will you find social equality? You will not find it among the whites, nor will you find it among the negroes. It is simply a bugaboo; for there is not now, and never has been, since the dawn of civilization, such a thing as social equality except as a matter of taste and preference.²⁶

The notion of social equality is impractical, Harris posits, and the responsibility for a successful solution must be shared by both whites and the Negroes in the south through patient and constructive cooperation without Northern political interference, the latter having encouraged blacks to inappropriately thrust "themselves into places where they were not wanted."²⁷

At times, Harris is critical, even vitriolic, regarding black politicians and preachers whom he feels could better serve their race by embracing Booker T. Washington's moderate philosophy. Washington expressed his perspectives during his famous 1895 Cotton States speech in Atlanta, he urged blacks to temporarily forgo political power and insistence on civil rights and intellectual education. Instead, they should concentrate their energies on industrial education and traditional trades. Washington's conservatism resonated with many whites, including Harris, who lauded him as "wise counselor and a safe leader."²⁸

Summing up the exhaustive Negro Question in his final *Post* commentary, Harris again evokes Washington's strategy of moderation as the proper pace and example for the Negro, who "can only be advanced as he deserves to be advanced." Furthermore, "his proper level is that which he has won, and must win, through the work of his hands and his brains."²⁹ On this point, Harris's view of balanced education is more aligned with that of Du Bois who, a few years earlier, eloquently asserted that both industrial and liberal arts education were "supplementary and mutually helpful in the great end of solving the Negro problem" and that "thrift and skill among the masses" as well as "thought and cultural among the leaders"

provided for the overall educational development needs of the race.³⁰

Between 1880 and 1946, Harris was held in high esteem as a writer who captured an authentic dialect in which he retold African-originated tales, publishing them in the *Atlanta Constitution* and, starting in 1881, in book form. In doing so, he helped to preserve a unique storytelling form valued by many, including black cultural leaders and educators who—long before the *Song of the South* film release and Civil Rights-era protests about The Wren’s Nest’s discriminatory practices—endorsed the Uncle Remus stories as literary masterpieces. James Weldon Johnson, famed writer of the Negro National Anthem “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” promoter of African-American arts, and an 1894 graduate of Atlanta University, said the “Uncle Remus stories constitute the greatest body of folklore that America has produced.”³¹ Stella Brewer Brookes, an African-American scholar who taught English and American literature at Clark College for forty-five years, wrote the first substantive book on Harris’s folklore and lauded his thorough knowledge of Southern black storytelling forms.³² Harris, the literary writer, compiled, retold, and published stories created by the African ancestors of black children, such as the young people learning to read in the four color sketches. He thus ensured that generations would enjoy the benefit of the stories’ wisdom, wit, and insights. A major theme in these trickster tales is that the weaker animals, like Brer Rabbit, need to use both their intelligence and their sheer determination and courage to survive. This psychological and literary sensibility, in various incarnations, also informed Harris’s editorial forays intended to promote understanding and to reconcile differences.

This analysis of Harris’s 1904 Negro Question articles reveals that he possessed earnest, albeit complex—and often conflicting—views of race. Yet, as a consciously historical and conscientious Southern editor, he used his journalism to challenge injustice and promote black advancement. Indeed, while stressing the necessity of attitudinal changes, he clung at times to his own smoldering biased views about Northern interference in Southern affairs. Still, his enduring beliefs that education transforms minds and honest dialogue improves human relationships are largely realized in the place that inspired much of his work. Today, Harris’s former Atlanta West End neighborhood is culturally diverse, and his adored Wren’s Nest is abuzz with integrated gatherings of children enthralled by the antics of Uncle Remus storytellers—as well as a healthy variety of creative writing programs open to communities of learners.³³



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Endnotes

1. The folk tales were originally published in book form in 1881. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), while acknowledging the artistic merits of the 1946 film, was a leading critic of its paternalistic and stereotyped portrayals. Quoted in Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum, 1992), 136.
2. The Wren's Nest became a museum in 1913, five years after Harris's death. For years, a group of society women ran it and maintained a whites-only admission policy until 1968, when a U.S. District Court order required the museum to admit blacks.
3. The original Atlanta University Center institutions were founded either the decade before or during Harris's tenure at the *Atlanta Constitution*: Atlanta University (1865), Clark College (1869), Morehouse College (1867), Spelman College (1881), and Morris Brown College (1881).
4. Julia Collier Harris, *The Life and Letters of Joel Chandler Harris* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918); Julia Collier Harris, ed., *Joel Chandler Harris: Editor and Essayist* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1931).
5. Cheryl Renee Gooch, "Solving the Negro Problem: Social Commentary in the Journalistic Writings of Joel Chandler Harris," *Communication and Social Change*, 1 (2007), <http://digitalcommons.auctr.edu/comsocchg/vol1/iss1/> (accessed 9 June 2009). This is the first and perhaps only analysis of Harris's journalistic commentaries within the context of: Booker T. Washington's ideology of racial compromise popularized by his 1895 Atlanta Cotton States Exposition speech; the Atlanta University-sponsored Negro problem studies under the direction of W. E. B. Du Bois; the *Atlanta Constitution's* sensationalized coverage of the 1899 lynching of Sam Hose; and racial tensions that spurred the 1906 Atlanta riot.
6. R. Bruce Bickley, Jr., "Joel Chandler Harris and the Old and New South: Paradoxes of Perception," *The Atlanta Historical Journal* (Fall-Winter 1986-87), 12.
7. This widely quoted editorial appeared in the *Sunday Gazette*, 5 October 1878. The unnumbered clipping is contained in the Joel Chandler Harris papers housed in the Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Library at Emory University.
8. Walter M. Brasch, *Brer Rabbit, Uncle Remus, and the 'Cornfield Journalist': The Tale of Joel Chandler Harris* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2000).
9. Quoted in Hugh T. Keenan, ed., *Dearest Chums and Partners: Joel Chandler Harris's Letters to His Children, A Domestic Biography* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 274.
10. Gooch, *passim*.
11. Wayne Mixon, "The Ultimate Irrelevance of Race: Joel Chandler Harris and Uncle Remus in Their Time," *The Journal of Southern History* 56 (August 1990), 461.
12. Jay Martin, "Joel Chandler Harris and the Cornfield Journalist," in R. Bruce Bickley, Jr., ed., *Critical Essays on Joel Chandler Harris* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981), 92-97.
13. Doug Underwood, *Journalism and the Novel: Truth and Fiction, 1700-2000* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 159, 172.
14. R. Bruce Bickley, Jr., *Joel Chandler Harris, A Biography and Critical Study* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), provides a detailed discussion of these trickster and local color stories. William Bradley Strickland analyzes Harris's conscious craftsmanship of layered meanings in "Stereotypes and Subversion in *The Chronicles of Aunt Minervy Ann*," *The Atlanta Historical Journal* (Fall-Winter 1986-87), 129-139.

15. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1903), <http://www.bartleby.com/114/1.html> (accessed 9 June 2009).
16. "Boston and Atlanta," *The Bulletin of Atlanta University*, February, 1894, 53; and "A Study of Negro Life in the South," *The Bulletin of Atlanta University*, November, 1898, 3.
17. Joel Chandler Harris, "The Negro as the South Sees Him," *Saturday Evening Post*, 2 January 1904, 1-2, 23; "The Negro of To-day," *Saturday Evening Post*, 30 January 1904, 2-5; "The Negro Problem: Can the South Solve It—And How?" *Saturday Evening Post*, 27 February 1904, 6-7.
18. Joel Chandler Harris, "The Negro as the South Sees Him," 2.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. Darwin. T. Turner, "Daddy Joel Harris and His Old-Time Darkies," *The Southern Literary Journal* (December 1968), 39.
22. Joel Chandler Harris, "The Negro of To-day," 3.
23. Harris, "The Negro of To-day," 4.
24. Quoted in Julia Collier Harris, 1918, 505-506. Isaac Fisher, the principal of the Branch Normal School in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, wrote to Harris complimenting him on presenting "candid and fair expressions relative to the colored people" and for expressing optimism of the race's future. R. R. Wright, a graduate of Atlanta University and president of the Georgia State Industrial College, told Harris, "I regard the article as one of the fairest and most sympathetic that I have read from the pen of any Southern man," and invited Harris to visit the school to observe its successful work in educating more than five hundred country boys.
25. Louis R. Harlan and John W. Blassingame, eds., *The Booker T. Washington Papers: Volume 1: The Autobiographical Writings* (Open Book Edition, University of Illinois), <http://www.historycooperative.org/btw/Vol.7/html/421.html> (accessed 10 June 2009)
26. Joel Chandler Harris, "The Negro Problem: Can the South Solve It—And How?" 6.
27. *Ibid.* While Harris purported to encourage reconciliation of the North and South, he never quite rid himself, as reflected in his commentaries, of the predilection for blaming the imported "carpet-bagger and the native scalawag" for encouraging Negroes to insist on social equality, and the Freedmen's Bureau for engendering dependency and irresponsibility among Negroes. See "The Negro of To-day."
28. Quoted in Julia Collier Harris, 1931, 109. The *Constitution* carried an editorial on 20 September 1895, the day after Washington's address was delivered at the Cotton States and International Exposition. Harris wrote: "The speech stamps Booker Washington as a wise counselor and a safe leader. It was a very dignified and eloquent oration, and if it could reach the hearts and touch the minds of the colored people, it would undoubtedly accomplish great good . . . what he says ought to illuminate the minds of those Northern philanthropists who imagine that the political advancement of the negro means his social advancement."
29. Joel Chandler Harris, "The Negro Problem: Can the South Solve It—And How?" 7.
30. W. E. B. Du Bois, ed. *The College-Bred Negro* (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1900), 114.
31. James Weldon Johnson, ed., *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1922), <http://www.bartleby.com/269/1000.html> (accessed 9 June 2009).
32. Stella Brewer Brookes, *Joel Chandler Harris, Folklorist* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1950).
33. The Wren's Nest website is www.wrensnestonline.com.