

The Gullah:

Rice, Slavery, and the Sierra Leone-American Connection

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A Gullah Story

"De Fox en de Crow"

This story was recorded in South Carolina about 1923 by the writer Ambrose Gonzales, and published in his collection *With Aesop along the Black Border*. The Gullah language at that time was "deeper" or more conservative than that generally spoken today. The excerpts that appear below are reproduced in the spelling system devised by Gonzales, while the Krio translations are in a system developed by the Sierra Leonean writer Thomas Decker. If universal linguistic symbols (IPA) were used, the Gullah and Krio texts would appear even more similar. The Gullah and Krio words *de/di* (the), *ooman/uman* (woman), *enty/enti* (not so?), *tief/tif* (steal), *teet/tit* (teeth), and *yez/yeys* (ears) are, in fact, pronounced in almost exactly the same ways. The reader should also note that the sentence structures are almost identical and that many grammatical elements are the same. Both languages employ *fuh/foh*, *bin fuh/bin foh*, and *duh/dey* as pre-verbal markers to indicate the infinitive, conditional, and progressive.



De Fox en de Crow tells the story of a crafty fox who manages to trick a lady crow into dropping a piece of meat clenched firmly in her jaws. The crow stole the meat from a white man, who was going to give it to his dog, and then flew to safety on the limb of a nearby tree. The fox reasons that, as a woman, the crow must like to talk; and, if he can persuade her to open her mouth and speak, she will have to drop the prize. The fox flatters the crow in various ways, praising her theft of the meat, her flying abilities, her "stylish" plumage, etc.—but the crow pretends not to listen and holds on tightly to the meat. The fox finally discovers the bird's weakness when he praises her singing voice, notoriously bad in crows. The crow lets out a long, ugly

screech, trying to impress her suitor, and drops her prize to the ground. The fox picks it up and says: "*Tengky fuh de meat, tittuh*"... "your voice is very good because it's my breakfast bell, but, as for your common sense, it ain't worth much."

Translations by the author.

Gullah

Den, Fox staat fuh talk. E say to eself, a say, "Dish yuh Crow duh ooman, enty? Ef a kin suade um fuh talk, him haffuh op'n e mout, enty? En ef e op'n e mout, enty de meat fuh drop out?"

Fox call to de Crow: "Mawnin tittuh, " e say. "Uh so glad you tief da meat fum de buckruh, cause him bin fuh trow-um-way pan de dog... E mek me bex fuh see man do shishuh ting lukkuh dat."

Crow nebbuh crack a teet! All-time Fox duh talk, Crow mout shet tight pan de meat, en a yez cock fuh lissin.

Sierra Leone Krio

Den, Fohx stat foh tohk. I sey to inself, i sey, "Dis Kro ya na uman, enti? If a kin pasweyd am foh tohk; i get foh opin in moht, enti? En if i opin in moht, enti di mit go fohdohm?"

Fohx kohl di Kro: "Mohnin titi, " i sey. A so gladi you tif da mit frohm di weytman, bikohs i bin foh trowey am to di dohg... I meyk a vex foh si man du tin leke dat."

Kro nohba opin in tit! Ohl di tem Fohx dey tohlx, Kro moht set tait pan di mit, en in yeys kak foh lisiin.

English

Then, Fox started to talk. He said to himself, he said, "This here Crow is a woman, not so? If I can persuade her to talk, she has to open her mouth, not so? And if she opens her mouth, isn't it true the meat will drop out?"

Fox called to the Crow: "Morning girl," he said. "I am so glad you stole that meat from the white man, because he would have thrown it away to the dog... It makes me vexed to see a man do such a thing as that."

Crow never cracked open her teeth! All the time Fox was talking, Crow's mouth was shut tight on the meat, and her ears were cocked to listen.