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TUNING IN THE BOILER ROOM AND THE COTTON
PATCH: NEW DIRECTIONS IN THE STUDY
OF AFRO-AMERICAN FOLKLORE ¹

By DARYL C. DANCE

The author of what is considered by many the classic early collection of Black American folklore affirmed in the introduction to the 1901 edition of *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* that the teller of the Brer Rabbit tales "has nothing but pleasant memories of the discipline of slavery"² and that Brer Rabbit is moved not by "malice, but mischievousness."³ In 1974 the author of what must be considered the definitive study of the Black toast insisted in the discussion of Shine in his book "*Get Your Ass in the Water and Swim Like Me*" that the white man is not presented as the enemy in this toast and that "Shine expresses little hostility toward the whites."⁴ So what's new in the study of Afro-American folklore? Not much. The highly recognized and broadly disseminated studies of Black American folklore are still by and large being done by white scholars whose interpretations of that material all too often represent their own biased perceptions and preconceptions of things Black. Jan Harold Brunvand's recent publication, *Folklore: A Study and Research Guide* (St. Martin's, 1976) notes in the discussion of Black American Folklore only works by Richard M. Dorson, Ruth Finnegan, Alan Dundes, and Bruce Jackson (all of whom are white authors). The works of J. Mason Brewer, Zora Neale Hurston, and Langston Hughes are not even mentioned.

¹This paper was delivered at the Thirty-Seventh Annual Convention of the College Language Association in Jackson, Mississippi, on April 21, 1977. Much of the material in it is based upon a study of Black American folklore, which was completed with the support of a research grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

²Joel Chandler Harris, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*, new and rev. ed. (New York, 1901 [originally published in 1881]), p. xvii.

³*Ibid.*, p. xiv.

⁴Bruce Jackson, "*Get Your Ass in the Water and Swim Like Me*": *Narrative Poetry from Black Oral Tradition* (Cambridge, 1974), p. 36.

One of the first problems in the study of folklore is, of course, the collection of materials. In almost every area of Black folklore, the collecting was initiated by whites. As I have noted elsewhere, "Black folk forms seem to thrive quietly and abashedly in the Black community as items of private enjoyment and public shame until they are 'discovered' by whites who legitimize them for the American public—Black and white. Such has been the case with the general folk tales (the animal tales, the etiological myths, the Slave John tales, etc.), the spirituals, and the blues. The latest discovery made by white Americans has been that most obscene, perverse, and militant—and most carefully concealed—of all Black folk expressions—the toast."⁵

Many of the collections of Black folk materials are not representative of the prevalent popular lore, either because the collectors sought only certain types of material or because the informants related to them only selected materials, because of their race. As Zora Neale Hurston put it:

Folklore is not as easy to collect as it sounds. The best source is where there are the least outside influences and these people, being usually under-privileged, are the shyest. They are most reluctant at times to reveal that which the soul lives by. And the Negro, in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive. You see we are a polite people and we do not say to our questioner, "Get out of here!" We smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn't know what he is missing. The Indian resists curiosity by a stony silence. The Negro offers a feather-bed resistance. That is, we let the probe enter, but it never comes out. It gets smothered under a lot of laughter and pleasantries.

The theory behind our tactics: "The white man is always trying to know into somebody else's business. All right, I'll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song."⁶

⁵ Daryl C. Dance, Review of Bruce Jackson's "*Get Your Ass in the Water and Swim Like Me*," *American Humor*, III (Spring, 1976), 17.

⁶ Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (New York, 1935), pp. 18-19.

Compounding the problem is the fact that earlier white collectors tended almost invariably to seek out the most illiterate Blacks in the most remote areas, and contemporary researchers tend to seek out those Blacks in prisons and ghettos. Further, occasionally *earlier* texts in particular appear to suffer from exaggerated dialect. A comparison of even Bruce Jackson's texts with his recordings suggests that his ear was apparently attuned to expected variations in Black speech and not to others—though he certainly should not be accused of *exaggerating* Black dialect in his transcriptions.

While the collections of Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps, Zora Neale Hurston, and J. Mason Brewer are among the best collections of Black folktales, their work hardly matches in sheer bulk the materials of Joel Chandler Harris, Elsie Clews Parsons, A. M. Christensen, and Richard M. Dorson, to name a few white collectors. Undeniably some of the most interesting contemporary materials have been presented by whites such as Roger D. Abrahams, Bruce Jackson, and Dennis Wepman. We may question some of the conclusions and the interpretations which these scholars draw from their materials, such as Wepman's assertion that most Black toasts stem from the old west narrative tradition,⁷ but we must face the reality that *they* are collecting the materials and studying them, and their views of Black folklore are being disseminated in the universities and the nation and the world. As I looked over the nineteen collections of Black American folklore now in print, I noted that only three of them are by Black authors (Hughes and Bontemps, *Book of Negro Folklore* [Dodd, Mead, 1958], Brewer, *American Negro Folklore* [Quadrangle, 1974 (originally published in 1968)], and Julius Lester's *Black Folktales* [Grove, 1970]).

Bibliographies and indexes are necessary components of any discipline and are probably more important in folklore study than in many other fields. We are badly lacking in this area in Black American folklore. Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* (Indiana University Press, 1957) and Ernest W. Baughman's *Type and Motif-Index of the Folktales of*

⁷ Dennis Wepman, *et al.*, "Toasts: The Black Urban Folk Poetry," *JAF* (July / September, 1974), 24.

England and North America (Indiana University Folklore Series, 170.20, 1966) are the most widely used and recognized indexes of Western folk materials, but these indexes, to use an old expression, "didn't have us in mind" and are of very limited use to the scholar of Black American folklore. Numerous efforts have obviously been made in doctoral dissertations to fill this gap,⁸ but these efforts are not readily available, so the lack of classification of Black folk materials remains a serious drawback for the student of Black folklore.

The quest for bibliographical sources of Black American folklore is nearly as frustrating as the quest for indexes. Some general works in Black culture contain limited guides to folklore, but they are hardly comprehensive: a few such works are Monroe N. Work's *A Bibliography of the Negro in Africa and America* (Octagon Books, 1970); Tad Kumatz and Janyce Wolf's *The Black Experience* (The Academic Library of Brooklyn, 1971); Dorothy Porter's *A Working Bibliography on the Negro in the United States* (University Microfilms, 1969); and James McPherson *et al.*, *Blacks in America: Bibliographical Essays* (Doubleday, 1972). Other bibliographies of folk materials contain sections on Black folklore, such as Charles Hayward's *A Bibliography of North American Folklore and Folksong*, 2nd rev. ed. (Dover Publications, 1961). A few bibliographical essays help to fill the void, such as Myrtle Funkhouser's "Folklore of the American Negro: A Bibliography" (*Bulletin of Bibliography and Dramatic Index*, 16 [1937-1939]). Dundes' "Suggestions for Further Reading in American Negro Folklore" (*Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore* [Prentice-Hall, 1973]), is a useful guide. William R. Ferris' *Mississippi Black Folklore: A Research Bibliography and Discography* (University and College Press of Mississippi, 1971) is the only full length bibliographical study that I know of Black folk

⁸ These include Erastus O. Arewa, "A Classification of the Folktales of the Northern East African Cattle Area by Types," Diss. University of California, 1966; Kenneth Wendell Clarke, "A Motif Index of the Folk-Tales of Culture Area V, West Africa," Diss. Indiana University, 1958; Helen L. Flowers, "Classification of Folktales of the West Indies by Types and Motifs," Diss. Indiana University, 1952; and Winfred Lawbrecht, "A Tale Type Index for Central Africa," Diss. University of California, 1967.

materials. Ferris includes many references that deal with general materials as well as Mississippi materials, and he also cites many references which only incidentally touch on folklore. *Mississippi Black Folklore* is not a first rate bibliography, but it is an effort to fill the void. Its author is white.

Studies of Black folklore have also been and continue to be dominated by whites. Numerous Black scholars have, of course, made noteworthy studies in this field, notably W. E. B. Du Bois, Arthur Huff Fauset, Alain Locke, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, and J. Mason Brewer, to name only some of the leading scholars. The most outstanding studies of the influence of folklore on literature have certainly been made by members of this [CLA] organization, such as Sterling Brown, George Kent, and Houston Baker. Certainly two of the best studies I know of in this area are to be found in Kent's *Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture* (Third World Press, 1972), and Baker's *Long Black Song: Essays in Black American Literature and Culture* (University of Virginia Press, 1972). Bernard Bell's *The Folk Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry* (Broadside, 1974) should certainly be mentioned here also.

Another important recent study of Black folklore is Gladys Fry's *Night Riders in Black Folk History* (University of Tennessee Press, 1975). Also noteworthy is Miles Fisher's *Slave Songs in the United States* (Russel, 1968; reprint of 1953 edition).

Despite these significant contributions by Blacks, studies in most areas of Black folklore have been largely dominated by whites. Certainly the most comprehensive historical survey of Black folk materials that I am familiar with is Lawrence W. Levine's recent *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford University Press, 1977). Still highly regarded as *the* definitive studies of Black urban life and folklore are Elliot Liebow's *Tally's Corner* (Little, Brown, 1967) and Roger Abrahams' *Deep Down in the Jungle* (Aldine, 1970; first revised edition) and *Positively Black* (Prentice-Hall, 1970). A more recent study is Dennis Wepman, *et al.*, *The Life, the Lore, and the Folk Poetry of the Black Hustler* (University of Pennsylvania,

1976). Certainly one of the best collections of essays on Black folklore was edited by Alan Dundes—*Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore* (Prentice-Hall, 1973). Another important collection is Bruce Jackson's *The Negro and His Folklore in Nineteenth-Century Periodicals* (*AFS Bibliographical and Special Series*, Vol. 18, 1967). While Charles Chesnutt, Zora Neale Hurston and other Black scholars have made some important studies of folk beliefs and superstitions, the only available full length study is the reprint of Newbell Niles Puckett's *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (Greenwood, 1968 [originally published in 1926]).

The field of Black American folklore is a wide and fertile field, which has still been only superficially harvested. There are numerous other areas in which, at least to my knowledge, very little work has been done. The only full length study which I know that emphasizes Black folk games is Bessie Jones and Bess Lomax Hawes' *Step It Down: Games, Plays, Songs and Stories From the Afro-American Heritage* (Har-Row, 1972). Also of interest is Beatrice Landeck's *Learn to Read: Read to Learn: Poetry and Prose from Afro-Rooted Sources* (David McKay, 1973), which includes games as well. The study of Black customs, crafts, and architecture are other areas where much needs to be done.

I have not been able to tell you much about new directions in Black folklore, but I should like to leave you with the optimistic note that the possibilities are without limit. Folklore as an academic discipline is rather new, beginning in America around the forties. And though strong graduate programs may be found at only a handful of American universities, such as Indiana University, UCLA, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Texas, most American colleges and universities now offer courses in folklore. I wonder, however, how many predominantly Black colleges have courses in Black American folklore.

With the notable exception of J. Mason Brewer, trained Black American folklorists are just now appearing on the scene. I attended this year the second meeting of a group of folklorists seeking to organize an association of African-American Folk-

lorists, the only national Black folklore association that I know of; and that group is yet only a "babe" struggling under the guidance of Stephen Henderson at Howard University. In attendance there were Gladys Fry and William Wiggins, two prominent Black folklorists. I heard papers from some promising Black graduate students. They were by and large eager for an opportunity for a forum where they could be heard as they rebel against the views of numerous interpreters of Black folklore, who are their teachers. I was pleased to see bright young Black students developing the tools and the background to enable them to begin to interpret their own and our experiences. For while I would never deny the contributions that have been made to Black American folklore by other scholars, it does appear that "it is certainly difficult, if not indeed impossible, for even the most liberal Captain to empathize with Shine or for even the most objective Fox to fully comprehend and elucidate Brer Rabbit's motives,"⁹ and I hope that we can join young scholars such as these I have mentioned, help them to get that organization off the ground, offer them the opportunities to let their voices be heard in folklore courses on our campuses, push for the development of a good journal of Black folklore, and promote other such endeavors which can make it possible to discern and disseminate the voices from the boiler room and the cotton patch.

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⁹ Daryl C. Dance, Review of Bruce Jackson's "Get Your Ass in the Water and Swim Like Me," *American Humor*, III (Spring, 1976), 19.