

**John MINTON, “Big 'Fraid and Little 'Fraid” : an
Afro-American Folktale (Helsinki, Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia
Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1993, 104 pp., ISBN
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John MINTON, “*Big ‘Fraid and Little ‘Fraid’ : an Afro-American Folktale* (Helsinki, Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1993, 104 pp., ISBN 951-41-0701-2).

When I agreed to review Minton’s book, somewhere beneath the initial pleasure of being asked and the challenges it would inevitably present, I felt a little daunted. After all, I am not an Afro-Americanist by dint of either nature or nurture: it is not my area of specialization and I felt that my experiences of growing up in Lynn Valley, North Vancouver did not equip me with the delicate, intuitive coordination of the native—or at least *neighbourhood*—ethnographer which I could then bring to bear on a study of the narrative folklore of this particular cultural group.

While reading the book, however, I found myself, a little like the ubiquitous Monkey, rather precariously balanced at a vantage point from which I could survey at least the author’s part of the argument. By the end of my second reading, I had been provided with a context in which to signify. Certainly, this book has potential significance in many research contexts, and I think that it presents a thorough discussion of issues which are germane to scholars in cross-cultural studies, ethnic folklore, and folklore and literature. Although his study appears to be directed towards a fairly specialized audience, Afro-American narrative researchers, Minton’s work is a thought-provoking read which raises many questions about methodology, worldview, and the reassessment of rationale. As such, it is a timely publication which should be of interest to a range of specialists in related fields.

Minton’s book is a detailed examination of the life history and traditional placement of the single-motif tale type, 1676A/K1682.1 “Big ‘Fraid and Little ‘Fraid,” within the Afro-American folktale canon. He asserts that the inherent circularity of the historic-geographic method, and the Indo-European focus of one of its most prolific adherents in North America, Stith Thompson, inadvertently led other researchers, notably Richard Dorson, to conclude that the greater part of Afro-American folktales were of European origin. Though their methods

differed somewhat, they arrived at similar ends because they relied on the same means, the various indices which contained and perhaps compounded many of the shortcomings of the method itself. The conclusions which these unquestionably tireless and enthusiastic collectors, compilers, and annotators arrived at in turn raised several other, seemingly unanswerable questions for future Afro-Americanists. Specifically, Minton is concerned with "how and why this tale traveled across the ocean [from Europe]—or at least why it was thought to have done so" (20).

Essentially, "Big 'Fraid and Little 'Fraid" is a short anecdote which relates the misadventures of an authority figure who attempts to change the errant behaviour of a subordinate through the use of scare tactics and who is himself frightened by a trickster figure, usually a monkey, who imitates his ruse. For example, a master (or father) reprimands his lazy or dreamy slave (or son) for staying out after dark and not completing his appointed tasks, such as bringing the cows home from pasture, within a reasonable amount of time. He asks the young fellow whether he is not afraid of things which may lurk in the dark. Puzzled, the lad equates "a 'fraid" with "a ghost" or other spirit, and replies that he has never seen such a thing. His superior threatens that if he is not mindful of the time, he may be so haunted. To reinforce the threat, the man follows the youth after dark, wrapping himself in a white sheet. Undetected by the human prankster, Monkey follows at some distance, in similar attire. The man sets about the task of frightening the lad, who remarks with amazement that there are two wailing apparitions, one large and one small. The man turns to see the disguised Monkey, and believing it to be "a real ghostie," flees, with the Monkey close behind. The episode ends with the boy cheering on the runners: "Run, Big 'Fraid, or Little 'Fraid will catch you!" Sometimes, the narrative is appended to another single-motif tale, which Minton refers to as the "Fatal Imitation," in which the human joker, realizing that he has been "aped" by this mischievous lesser primate, allows the Monkey to watch him shave, and draws the *back* of the razor across his throat. Monkey's imitation is a little too realistic, resulting in his own suicide.

Minton carefully compares all of the previously documented European and Anglo-American analogues which he has been able to find, and shows that their connections are often rather tenuous at best. He notes, for instance, that many of the so-called cognate tales substitute a second human or otherworldly figure for the animal trickster, such as British tales in which an individual impersonating the devil unwittingly calls him forth. He suggests that while "Big 'Fraid and Little 'Fraid" might be more or less spuriously correlated with trickster tales from Anglo-American tradition which follow similar themes, any points of correspondence are largely idiomatic (77). Instead, he situates this tale squarely within the confluence of two Afro-American narrative traditions, the night rider and animal trickster cycles. Minton further suggests that placing the tale in this context might help explain the changes it undergoes in white narrative tradition—

the domestication of Monkey, the substitution of the pasture for a graveyard (reminiscent of European stories describing conversations that are mistaken for the demonic calculations of evil spirits “dividing souls”), and the foregrounding of the authority figure’s “lesson”—but, as he cautions:

we arrive at an impasse: while our tale permits repeated comparisons to any number of tales of this and other continents...we cannot with any certainty go back further in its history than the existence of indisputable variants over their present area, the United States, and primarily the Southern United States, where spirited blacks and white spirits, sheeted tricksters and trickster Monkeys signify quite particular meanings (81).

In the case of this tale anyway, Minton’s book suggests that: “the question of who was imitating whom, the gist of the Afro-American folktale debate” appears to have been settled in favour of genuinely Afro-American origins (64).

As I stated earlier, Minton tackles several complex problems dealing with methodology and worldview. For one thing, the tale, simultaneously a motif and a complete tale type, represents a kind of interstitial narrative which the existing classification systems are not able to handle easily and therefore: “a great deal of labor is wasted talking about different things under the same name” and vice versa (9, 13-15). He also discusses the problematic Afro-American trickster figure, who is at once a kind of culture-hero, and the stalwart—if unintentional—defender of the status quo through the use of strategies which only minimally disrupt the established power structures within the social order (63). Several scholars have made this point with regard to other forms of folk expression, such as Renwick’s analysis of English folk poetry and local song, and Diepeveen’s discussion concerning the rejection of folktales and oral traditional language and motifs by writers during the Harlem Renaissance because those forms were seen as statements of tacit acceptance rather than protest and potential achievement (Renwick 7; Diepeveen 69, 76-77).

There are a variety of possible explanations as to why these short tales were often appended—as the texts were themselves often appended to other, longer stories—to other narrative traditions. Perhaps, as Diepeveen suggests of literary rejection of folkloric materials, collectors found it difficult to recognize: “the sophisticated and various ways in which these folktales treated slavery and white oppression....The association of folktales with these unpleasant aspects of this cultural heritage created a new set of problems,” which revolved around the past heritage of Afro-Americans, black dialect and culture, and desegregation (69, 73). Minton’s examination takes into account the difficult balance that folklorists in this area have traditionally had to maintain, since the stuff of their inquiry connotes “a pattern of interpersonal conduct consequent to New World interracial

relations" which is still shifting, changing, and re-emerging, sometimes not without violence (64).

In my opinion, like the method it seeks to critique and in a limited application correct, this book has certain shortcomings. Perhaps its greatest drawback for readers who fall, like me, into rather liminal audience categories (i.e., those who are interested in narrative studies, but who are not Afro-Americanists), is the author's tendency to get caught, despite his efforts to the contrary, in the intricacies and "labyrinthine subterfuges" of the method and its tools, and to assume that his readers can negotiate their way between his critique and his articulate personal and scholarly frame of reference (13). For example, his first detailed treatment of "the Afro-American folktale question" occurs on page 17. The next time that he makes an *explicit* re-statement of it happens halfway through the book, although I realize that a specialist reading this material would be keenly aware of the debate throughout. From time to time, however, I found myself losing sight of Minton's essential purpose. In retrospect, it was rather like forgetting the story while searching for the type and motifs. Minton cuts the historic-geographic method close at times, but unlike the monkey in the story version, his imitation is not fatal. Also, a cursory review might lead the reader to believe that this was an exercise in "past masters bashing" using similar techniques of exhaustive comparative analysis, and at one point Minton concedes that perhaps he has "been unnecessarily harsh with my predecessors" (31). I do not think that it is Minton's objective to decry the contributions of any previous indexer or collector, as he admits that it is largely as a result of their efforts, Dorson's in particular, that he has a wide base of material to which he can apply his ideas. Rather, I think that he is trying to alert us to deficiencies in the methodology and its apparatus which the original developers pointed out, but which subsequent practice seems to have forgotten, and which removed certain items of folklore, like "Big 'Fraid and Little 'Fraid," from the contexts in which they belong and express more powerful meanings (9).

Minton's "Big 'Fraid and Little 'Fraid" is the analysis of a story whose primary focus is on dislocation, of a narrative, a language and a culture which, by its marginalized status, challenges the balance of power. Recent interdisciplinary feminist scholarship in our field has reinforced Babcock's assertion these are some of the very issues that our discipline has carefully avoided (391). Minton's analysis suggests that the important issues in the Afro-American debate do not necessarily come down to which tales stowed away on what voyages from the Dark Continent and the Old World. His book is useful to a wider audience of folklorists because it forces us to ask ourselves to identify those aspects of our scholarship in which we are still, for whatever reason, allowing ourselves to miss the boat. Mere imitative strategies no longer signify.

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Bill C. MALONE, *Singing Cowboys and Musical Mountaineers : Southern Culture and the Roots of Country Music* (Athens and London, University of Georgia Press, 1993, pp. x+158, foreword, preface, introduction, notes, index, ISBN 0-8203-1483-8, U.S. \$24.95 cloth).

Anyone who studies country music is deeply indebted to Bill C. Malone. The publication of Country Music U.S.A. in 1968 was a landmark, and its second edition in 1985 was a substantially refined history of America's most popular music outside of the hit parade itself. That book sits at the back of my desk in the reference section of my library. Built from Malone's dissertation in history, and originally researched from the early sixties, Country Music U.S.A. benefits from the historian's sense of narrative and detail. Between the 1968 edition and the revision of 1985, Malone developed a keener appreciation for the variety of approaches to the country music story, and especially for the contributions made by folklorists.

Malone brings a lifetime of interest, knowledge, and performance, his skills as an investigative historian, and plenty of imagination to his latest project on the early history, a pre-history really, of country music. Singing Cowboys and Musical Mountaineers is an expanded version of his talks delivered as the 34th annual Lamar Memorial Lectures at Mercer University in Macon, Georgia, in the