

Get Your Ass in the Water and Swim Like Me. By Bruce Jackson. Pp. xvi + 245, bibliography, index of names and of first lines, cassette tape. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974. Cloth \$12.50.

Reviewed by C. Jason Dotson

To say Afro-American (Negro, Negra, Nigger, Colored) in academia (or almost anywhere else) is like saying Merrill, Lynch or E. F. Hutton in the world of finance: everybody listens. Black, as it adjectifies a people, has few, if any, peers in the economic market place or in the academic print-or-perish arena. Since much is published, one must therefore sift through much nonsense in order to find an Afro-American-related publication that stimulates any but the olfactory sense. Fortunately, Bruce Jackson's book has much to recommend itself; it also has some shortcomings.

The first order of business, then, revolves around the author's integrity of presentation, his understanding of his text and his understanding of the culture from which his text was extracted. Like Roger Abrahams (Deep Down in the Jungle, 1964), Bruce Jackson lacks that certain and necessary insight into the cultural diction of the performer (toast-teller). Although Jackson discusses the tradition of toast-telling with a certain degree of intelligence, he still lacks the requisite knowledge of Afro-American cultural autonomy and dynamism. Especially when dealing with oral tradition, words must be understood in their historical-cultural meaning. Jackson's bracketed statement (p. 28) should make the point. He states that "cock sucker" generally has something to do with fellatio. Precisely the converse is true in *Black Talk*. That is, "cock" is "penis" for whites (which I suspect has something to do with a rooster); but "cock" is vagina ("pussy") for Blacks. Surely, Jackson should have known that; perhaps it was just a slip of the tongue. And for the same reason, it is not likely that toast number 83 was created by a Black. Other examples include the term "nigger rich" which, according to Jackson, means "one who spends too freely." In *Black Talk*, this term is more likely to denote the acquisition of a small sum of money or the possession of a small sum of money. "Sounding" to Jackson means "playing the dozens." "Sounding" has traditionally meant positioning a woman, smooth-talking (conning) someone, or simply requesting something of someone (even advice). To be sure, sounding may lead to the dozens. Although this kind of word definition recognition is elementary, its importance can hardly be over stressed when the author presumes to instruct, to interpret or to elucidate the material for the reader, particularly when the reader is not likely to come from Afro-American culture. And, of course, we all know that experts are instantly created by the reading of one book--or at least the reader is likely to assign expertise to the writer.

Bruce Jackson does do a credible job of discussing the toast and the toast-teller. His approach is social-functional rather than psycho-functional, which was Abrahams' approach. Even so, a "context" dimension is missing (one does not get the feel of theatre or of performance). Collecting from prisoners may have precluded "context" collecting, however. The sociological analysis depends too heavily on the tired and even spurious psycho-social interpretation of Liebow. My objection is not so much to Jackson's use of Liebow as to the false premises upon which Liebow based much of his pronouncements.

Jackson takes issue with both Roger Abrahams' and Richard Dorson's interpretations of "Stackolee" (Stagalee) and of "Shine" in the Titanic toast. Stackolee is allowed to be simply a "bad nigger" without regard to race, sex, or sincerity of apology for offense committed. Race and racism are seldom the focus or text of a toast which came from Afro-American oral tradition per se; Kipling's "Gunga Din" and the "John" toasts might fit under such rubrics. Jackson admirably defends "Shine" against Abrahams' untenable interpretation that because "Shine" abandoned a doomed, sinking ship (the Titanic) without offering to carry at least one white woman piggy-back and because "Shine" (who by this time was doing a cool float in the icy ocean) refused the wonderful and lavish offers of too much sex and money to climb back aboard the sinking ship, "Shine" saw the White Man as his enemy (of course, he was--after all, would a "friend" ask to be joined in a certain drowning?).

The "poetry" contained in the book came out of the hustlers' culture, a culture which is as alien to the majority of Afro-Americans as the dozens is to the majority of White Americans. The term "toast," which is the subject and text of Jackson's book, refers, however, to much more than the risqué material in the book. A toast-telling session ranges over a wide field of oral tradition; these include jokes (some performers call "toasts" jokes), ballads, poetry, and party-jokes, i.e., ballads of rhymed and unrhymed tales which have ostensibly ordinary characters performing in or being involved in some extraordinary feat or circumstance. For example, favorite toasts in the tradition are Rudyard Kipling's "Gunga Din," Edgar Allen Poe's "The Raven," H. A. D'Arcy's "The Face On The Barroom Floor," and others which Jackson tells us he heard recited by Blacks. None of these "literary" adoptions were included in his text, however, and one may only assume that Jackson omitted them because they did not fit the made-in-Black-America mold. The point is that all the texts recited or performed by toast-tellers that have been passed on via word of mouth by active performers are an important part of Black oral tradition. To omit material or texts so integral to the tradition suggests a lack of understanding regarding the tradition, given that we are talking about toasts and their tellers. It would be misleading to suggest that Jackson overlooked this part of the tradition in his book. On the contrary, he does a credible job in that he does discuss, however briefly, toasts which are not usually mentioned in texts (papers, books) dealing with toasts. Neither Abrahams, Dorson, nor Dundes, for example, mention such old favorites as "The Girl With The Blue Velvet Band," "Lure of the Tropics (Down and Out)," and "The Raven."

In light of Jackson's two books on histlers and hustling (Outside the Law, 1969; In the Life, 1972), I am somewhat amused at his introductory remarks regarding pimps and pimp toasts. Although he unshackles the pimp from Abrahams' children's den, he could still speak of the pimp as being more interested in a woman's "submission than her income." Women are a pimp's business, his livelihood. That a woman would give him her income presupposes her submission; earnings are not more important than submission, nor is submission more important than earnings--one does not occur without the other. Jackson does not allow the description to hang there, however, he discusses the subject with greater insight later on in his book.

Get Your Ass in the Water and Swim Like Me is a book of poems, narratives, jokes, and toasts (in the traditional, white sense of the term). All of these combined constitute a toast session, or at least those are some of the units which may be included in a toast-telling session. On the other hand, any one of those units may be excluded without doing violence to the tradition. What is the book all about? What significance does it have? The book is about the oral narrative tradition which dates back beyond recorded history, but which stepped full-grown into Black American oral tradition in the form of Nigger John, who was a close relative of the John in the John-Ole Marster tales. Both Johns were rural, trickster types who were either slaves on the run (Nigger John), or slaves on the plantation (Ole Marster's John). The narratives, poems, and jokes in Jackson's book, however, come almost entirely from an urban setting. Yet, there is a characteristically rural toast tradition as well. One difference between the urban-northern and the rural-southern performer (and I am aware of the southern metropolis) is that the southern toast-teller is more likely to create extemporaneously. To be sure, the rural toast-teller knows what is in the tradition, but he is not likely to perform "one of those" unless prodded to do so, whereas the northern, urban performer who introduced Poe, D'Arcy, and that whole host of non-oral poets to the oral performance tradition, prides himself or herself on the ability to render verbatim what was heard. Let me hasten to state, however, that even the northern performer will not hesitate to improvise in the "non-literary" toast, e.g., "The Signifying Monkey," "The Titanic," "Stagalee," and both johns.

Afro-American culture is by definition a subculture, but there is stratification within it, constituting still another subculture, which we may call the hustlers' culture or subculture II. In one way or another, almost all the material in Jackson's book relates to subculture II. In this light one must be cautious of Jackson's discussion as to whether women tell toasts or not. He suggests that not only does a woman not perform toasts, but that hearing one would pierce her tender, hush-your-dirty-mouth ear, and that women, moreover, were not likely to be in the area where toasts were likely to be told. Her place was (is) in the home, i.e., kitchen, bedroom, bathroom, bedroom, bathroom, kitchen . . . poppycock, balderdash, bullshit! Remember, almost all the toasts making up Jackson's text came out of subculture II. Imagine a hustler, or even a pretender, denying his "star" or his "lady" (euphemisms for prostitute or female hustler of some stripe) the rare opportunity to witness a sterling, command performance! Remember, too, that for the inhabitants of subculture II, toast-time was and is leisure-time--party time. Even in those instances where toasts were performed by non-subculture II performers, which was not infrequently, women did not lose their sense of hearing simply because men were telling "dirty jokes" in the kitchen or in the back yard. Of course women knew and know (or at the very least heard) toasts; few performed, to be sure, but so did few men.

Tying all this together, quibbles aside, and simply put, Get Your Ass in the Water and Swim Like Me is an important book for anyone, particularly folklorists interested in Afro-American oral tradition. Not only are much of the texts fresh, that is, heretofore unpublished, but the discussion and commentary is also fresh and enlightening--certainly not boring. By including short, one-verse

one-line toasts, and by including longer narratives, Jackson greatly extends the scope of and enriches the scholarship of the toast and its teller. A bonus is in store for the reader: Bruce Jackson presents his material without overburdening the reader with a lot of jargon and pseudo-erudition regarding behavior or its modification, mind-sets and fixations.

Review Editor's note: Get Your Ass in the Water and Swim Like Me is accompanied by a cassette tape of significant toasts which Jackson discusses in the book. This serves as an excellent teaching tool.

The History of Street Literature. By Leslie Shepard.  
Pp. 238, illustrations, appendix, glossary, bibliography, index of names.  
Detroit: Singing Tree Press, 1973. \$11.00.

Reviewed by Charles E. Martin

Street literature has often been regarded--rightly or wrongly--as one of the transitional bridges between the oral transmission of ballads, folktales, legends, proverbs, riddles, and superstitions and their later incorporations into published works. Leslie Shepard's The History of Street Literature is an excellent introduction to and survey of the sub-literary forms of expression in England from the 16th through the 19th centuries.

Books, for the most part, were written and printed for the upper classes up until the late 1800s. Cost was more a factor in keeping standard forms of literature out of the hands of the general populace than was literacy, since it has been estimated that between one-third and one-half of London was literate as far back as the Elizabethan period. The rest of the populace could hear news read aloud and ballads sung in the streets. Street literature evolved out of the desire of the lower classes for topical and traditional reading matter and the early broadside proclamations, which were "the official notices of new laws, intrigues, battles, and peace treaties" tacked to road posts and magistrates' doors. English broadside ballads appeared soon after in the 16th century and were prose, verse or woodcut pictures, or any combination of the three, printed on a large uncut sheet of paper or pamphlet made by some simple folding. Broadside sellers, or hawkers, walked through the streets singing the printed versions of traditional ballads or newly composed ones commemorating the latest news or rumor. News ballads usually contained lurid headlines like: LAMENTATION & CONFESSION OF J.R. JEFFERY, WHO NOW LIES UNDER SENTENCE OF DEATH, FOR THE WILFUL MURDER OF HIS LITTLE BOY (1866), or, GOOD SIR, YOU WRONG YOUR BRITCHES (1625). Broadside woodcuts lining the streets fastened to walls and fences along with illustrated handbills and lottery posters served as a poor man's art gallery.

Religious and political pamphlets gave England's poor both topical news and issues. Chapbooks (eight to thirty-two page unstitched, uncut booklets) retold old romances, ancient battles, and superstitions.