

Category: Intellectual History and Methods

The Man Who Adores the Negro: Race and American Folklore

By Patrick B. Mullen. 2008. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press. 224 pages. ISBN: 978-0-252-03265-3 (hard cover), 978-0-252-07486-8 (soft cover).

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A mix of auto-ethnography, disciplinary history, and memoir, Patrick B. Mullen's *The Man Who Adores the Negro* is largely the exploration of a scholarly pathology—a kind of destructive romanticizing impulse common to white scholars of African American folklore. Mullen draws the title of the volume, its epigram, and its guiding question from Frantz Fanon's 1952 psychoanalytic study of black subjectivity, *Black Skin, White Masks*, in which Fanon writes that “the man who adores the negro is as ‘sick’ as the man who abominates him.” The abominator's affliction should be obvious. But the adorer's, Mullen suggests, is less so: innocence and good intention offer little of material value, and they ultimately obscure the ways in which “white lovers of black culture can destroy the very thing they love” (17).

Looking at his own career, and at the careers of folklorists Newbell Niles Puckett, Zora Neale Hurston, John and Alan Lomax, and Roger Abrahams, Mullen draws heavily on Critical Race Theory and the Writing Culture movement to explore the nuances of pathological adoration through a combination of reflexive analysis of his own past fieldwork and close readings of seminal works from his intellectual genealogy. He traces the channels through which admiration compounds misunderstanding, which in turn reinforces –prevalent racial attitudes. And in doing so, he reveals not only the mechanisms and consequences of the pathology, but variations in its progression across a variety of cases.

In writing about John Lomax, for example, Mullen describes a man committed to a vision of what constitutes an African American folk. Lomax, he writes, sought out the rural poor, outside the grasp of popular music and untouched by what he saw as the corrupting influence of jazz (68). And while his African American informants like Henry Truvillion seemingly had no reason to think ill of him, his adoration was steeped in a nineteenth-century nostalgia, a sense of authenticity that isolated black artists from their larger American context and posited slavery as the source of black creativity. Mullen writes that John Lomax was driven by “sound moral and ethical principles” and an “interest in the well being of... African Americans.” But his interest was based on “nineteenth-century cultural assumptions about blacks,” and was ultimately paternalistic in character (63).

On the other hand, writes Mullen, while Alan Lomax was influenced by his father, his relationship to blackness grew from commitment to a “twentieth century leftist liberal” ideology, combined with a personal sense that “at the core of his being [he] wanted to be black” (81, 94). More than any other case in the book, Alan Lomax seems to represent, for Mullen, the archetypal instance of adoration as pathology. He was genuinely committed to the promotion and preservation of black music. But simultaneously, his promotion of star informants like Leadbelly came with its own brand of paternalism. In the interest of racial progress, Lomax constructed his notion of folk as disenfranchised and thoroughly at the margins; and through his well-intentioned work with African Americans, he effectively shunted them into that unenviable space.

Mullen's critical eye is no less incisive when it is directed toward himself. He surveys a landscape of his own research ranging from his graduate student days, in 1967, through the present. And at every step, he is frank in his assessment. In writing about his early work with Son Brill and Junior Carter, pogie fishermen in Texas, Mullen reflects candidly on the perils of youthful idealism, recounting his misuse of “white liberal credentials”—“liberal ‘innocence’”—“to gain power in a racial situation” (28–29). While examining his work with blues musician Bongo Joe, he reflects on the degree to which his well-intentioned portrayal of the artist as a victim of the American racial landscape had the unfortunate side effect of denying him “individual dignity and self-determination,” of slotting him into an extant pattern of liberal scholarly discourse, and thus making him representative of all African American culture (125).

As an antidote to these sorts of missteps, Mullen advocates “collaborative research or reciprocal ethnography,” stating that, in the case of Brill and Carter, his research would have been “fruitless if they had not been willing to talk about

their own understanding” of their folklore and suggesting that more of that sort of discussion would have yielded better results (11, 39). But, in perhaps the most interesting turn of the book, he is also very clear about the limitations and complications of such an approach.

In the book's final chapter, Mullen writes about his experience working with Jesse Truvillion, black minister and son of John Lomax's star informant, and the ultimate failure of their collaborative relationship. Their scholarly association and their friendship ended, Mullen writes, because of a failure of communication, “because Jesse is a minister and scholar of religion and African American history” and Mullen is “a trained folklorist,” and the two “did not discuss ethnographic theories such as... the constructedness of life history except on the most informal and surface level” (184). Therefore, when terms like “fictionalization” arose in scholarly commentary on Truvillion's recollections, he understood it as an attack on his truthfulness when no such attack was intended (185). Mullen writes that despite this failure, he still believes “in the principles of collaboration and reciprocal ethnography”; but beyond any racial difference, disparities “between the theories of the scholar and the philosophical and religious beliefs of the collaborator will continue to provide stumbling blocks to the process” (185).

In *The Man Who Adores the Negro*, Mullen has written, essentially, two books. The first is a critical history of folklorists' work with African American informants—an account of the success, and failure, of well-intentioned scholars operating in a charged racial environment. And the second is a manual on ethnographic practice—a reflection on the politics of representation and on the potential value and limitations of contemporary fieldwork methodology. Neither book can be separated from the other; they work collaboratively, in tandem. And both, in the end, are well worth the read.