

A PECULIAR PROJECT:

Ethics and Analysis of the WPA Slave Narrative
Collection of Oklahoma

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The Work Progress Administration's (WPA) Slave Narrative Collection has long been source of contention for historians in researching American slavery and the culture of enslaved people during the antebellum period. Due to the lack of contemporary records, the Federal Writers' Project's initiative in documenting the stories of formerly enslaved African-Americans seemed a blessing to researchers. And in the project's intentions, the WPA Slave Narrative Collection attempted to serve as a culmination of representation and inclusion for enslaved peoples' narratives from which researchers could discern the conditions of life under the institution of slavery. The Oklahoma narratives collected under director William Cunningham stand out among the states' contributions, as the Oklahoma City headquarters maintained handwritten notes, drafts, and office memoranda related to the interviews in addition to the final scripts included in the federal project. However, several issues arise in analyzing the ethics and situations present in retrospect from the federal project and in-depth reviews of the narratives themselves. The Oklahoma narratives are historically valid sources for investigating and understanding the lives of African Americans, and certainly contribute to the qualitative analysis of enslaved people's culture and daily experiences. However, the violated ethics in the undertaking of this public history project as well as the information present in these narratives suggest that the WPA Slave Narrative Collection failed to represent enslaved people's lives and to appropriately include the voices of the informant-authors.

The WPA Slave Narrative Collection capitalized on the success of smaller, localized projects, particularly those from Southern University and Fisk University of the 1920s. These earlier endeavors at historically black universities (headed by historian John B. Cade and sociologist Charles S. Johnson, respectively) recorded the experiences of living formerly-enslaved people in African-American neighborhoods adjacent to the universities in order to

directly address the controversy over the nature of slavery in the rural South as well as the plantation as a social institution.¹ These projects, while small, garnered great success in preserving firsthand accounts, and several researchers involved in these endeavors suggested that federal funds be devoted to the collection of narratives, though it took several years before the idea gained attention at a federal level.

As part of the New Deal, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt instituted Federal Project Number One, better known as the Federal Arts Project. One of many employment programs for jobless white-collar workers, the Federal Arts Project assisted unemployed writers, artists and musicians by providing employment that would utilize their skills.² The Federal Writers' Project fell under jurisdiction of the Folklore Division of the Federal Arts Project of the New Deal, which intended to document American life and culture through visual arts, music and theatre. While the WPA conducted several oral history projects during this time, the Slave Narrative Collection is one of the few actually published for public viewing. Compiled from 1936 to 1938, the WPA study produced the most comprehensive collection of these narratives, with over two thousand interviews from seventeen states in total, with seventy-five from the state of Oklahoma.³ Directed by the Folklore Division, the National Advisor on Folklore and Folkways for the Federal Writers' Project John A. Lomax sought to take advantage of the revitalized interest in slave narratives and African-American culture by interviewing the diminishing number of formerly enslaved people. After Lomax's retirement, folklore editor Benjamin Botkin finished the remaining editing and indexing of the narratives, and selected those best fitted for

¹ Donna J. Spindel, "Assessing Memory: Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives Reconsidered," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 27, no. 2 (1996): 247, accessed April 12, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/205156>.

² "The WPA and Americans' Life Histories," Slave Narratives: An Introduction to the WPA Slave Narrative Collection, accessed April 12, 2015, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snintro07.html>

³ Lindsay T. Baker, *The WPA Oklahoma Slave Narratives* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), 4.

publication.⁴ The termination of the Federal Writers' Project in 1939 delayed any national publication for several years. However, today the narratives are available in the Library of Congress or on microfilm, as well as in several volumes and publications by researchers. In addition, individual states' historical societies, such as the Oklahoma Historical Society, have maintained original copies of the documents in their respective archives.

In developing the guidelines of intent for the WPA Slave Narrative Project, Lomax looked to previous first-person accounts of slavery. Those particularly of the antebellum period were written with a specific goal in mind – to challenge the proslavery justification by publishing their narratives in abolitionist journals. The antebellum narrative often emphasized the dramatization of self-liberated individuals' experiences under slavery and the aftermath of their escape. After the Civil War and Reconstruction, interest waned in recording the lives of African-Americans under slavery, as this justification was a moot point. In the twentieth century, the interest in the slave narrative revived due to a renewed interest in African-American culture, especially following the Harlem Renaissance and the cultural and artistic celebration of African American arts and artists such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston.

Lomax turned away from this dramatization of slave narratives in literary tradition, and instead inquired about “average” rather than exceptional enslaved experiences. By collecting qualitative data about enslaved people's daily life, Lomax intended to piece together their stories and memories. Lomax insisted in his questionnaire that interviewers obtain faithful, verbatim accounts, cautioning interviewers that “the worker should not censor any material collected, regardless of its nature.”⁵ He provided a sample of twenty questions within the administrative

⁴ Benjamin Botkin, foreword to *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States From Interviews with Former Slaves*, by the Library of Congress Project Work Projects Administration (Washington: Library of Congress, 1941), v.

⁵*Ibid.*, xx.

files, asking questions about daily life in a plantation, information about experiences during the Civil War, and views on slavery in retrospect. In documenting these personal experiences of enslavement, Lomax expected to create an opportunity for the voices of informant-authors to be heard as part of the history of the antebellum South. And in turn, researchers would be able to establish not necessarily revisionist histories of slavery, but to inform the portrayal of enslaved peoples' culture and community. As Benjamin Botkin, folklore editor following Lomax's retirement, wrote for the accompanying introduction to the *Slave Narratives* published in 1941, "for the first and last time, a large number of surviving slaves...have been permitted to tell their own story, in their own way."⁶

According to the administrative files accompanying the published slave narratives in 1941, the omitted materials include interviews with informant-authors born too late to remember anything of significance, unidentified manuscripts, and the supplementary information gathered for the narratives.⁷ The administrative files identify the obvious limitations in the project – bias, fallibility, and unskilled interviewers were the main issues of concern – but also emphasize that "this saga must remain the most authentic and colorful source of our knowledge of the lives and thoughts of thousands of slaves, of their attitudes towards one another, toward their masters, mistresses, and overseers, toward poor whites, North and South, the Civil War, Emancipation, Reconstruction, religion, education, and virtually every phase of Negro life in the south."⁸

From the perspective of public historians, the first issue in evaluating the federal project lies in the difficulty of Lomax's intent. He wanted the interviews collected for the narrative to contribute to the documentation of American culture as a whole, which resulted in generalizations without truly taking into account the individual lives. As director of the Folklore

⁶ Ibid., viii-ix.

⁷ Ibid., vii.

⁸ Ibid., ix.

Division, Lomax's interests lay in the cultural value of the narratives, and so his questions cover a broad period of time and concepts. More often than not, these questions centered on general statements, and gave informant-authors little opportunity to discuss anything more than moments of their lives. This is clear to present-day readers of the narratives; very little is gleaned of an individual's background or history, but rather presented as a vignette that fails to characterize the narrative or allow for extensive analysis of any one person. For example, Lomax asks informant-authors to "tell about your master, mistress, their children, the house they lived in, the overseer or driver, poor white neighbors."⁹ Most of the respondents, rather than going into detail about their relationships with their masters' families, simply name the owner's family and give a brief, generalized statement about their feelings towards their family. In Charley Williams's interview, he states only the following: "Old Master name was John Williams, and old Mistress name was Miss Betty, and she was a Campbell before she married. Young Missy was named Betty after her mommy, and Young Master was named Frank, but I don't know who after."¹⁰ Williams provides a bit more information about his relationship with his overseer, Mr. Simmons: "He was might smart and had a lot of patience, but he wouldn't take no talk nor foolishness. He didn't whup nobody very often, but he only had to whup 'em jest one time!"¹¹ In order to cover the multiple questions, however, Williams does not expand on his relationship with the family or overseer, moving onto describing the size of a plantation, some of his experiences while enslaved, and his time after war. None of these descriptions is particularly striking, and lack the background information on the dynamics of master-slave interactions on this plantation make it difficult for a reader to understand why the informant-author felt this story was an important one to tell.

⁹ Ibid., xxi.

¹⁰ Lindsay Baker, "Charley Williams," in *The WPA Oklahoma Slave Narratives* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), 473-4.

¹¹ Baker, "Charley Williams," 474.

Instead of validating varied experiences, the federal project essentially directed all the narratives to a consistent but shallow portrayal of slavery without context.

In addition, unlike other contemporary projects undertaken to document enslaved people's experiences, the Federal Writers' Project was established in accordance with a white sociological frame. The Fisk and Southern University projects, by contract, were developed and undertaken by black individuals to promote the serious study of black history, and a chance to recreate the past on their own terms without white interference. Lomax (a white Southerner) and the WPA Federal Writers' Project, however, tasked themselves with preparing a "comprehensive and panoramic 'American Guide,' a geographical-social-historical-portrait of the states, cities, and localities of the entire United States" to appreciate folk elements and culture.¹² While Lomax was careful throughout his management of the project to include voices and views of informant-authors, he pursued the investigation of black culture from a white perspective.

Modern scholars consider the racial identity of the fieldworkers employed under the Federal Writers Project, and the ways in which race of the interviewers may have affected the testimony of the informant-authors. In the case of the Oklahoma narratives, nine reporters – three African-Americans, one American Indian, and six white individuals – interviewed the elderly African-Americans in that state.¹³ Not trained in interview techniques and limited by the hierarchical nature of race relations etiquette that impeded interracial communication, much of the dialogue in the interviews is distorted. While unclear due to the typescript format of these narratives, the interviews suggest that leading questions and intimidation by white interviewers directed conversations to the traditional paternalistic perspective of slavery. For example, one of Lomax's questions asked about the end of slavery and the importance of religion in their lives

¹² "The WPA and Americans' Life Histories," *Slave Narratives: An Introduction to the WPA Slave Narrative Collection*, accessed April 12, 2015, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snintro07.html>

¹³ Baker, introduction, 8.

since abolition – “Now that slavery is ended what do you think of it? Tell why you joined a church and why you think all people should be religious?”¹⁴ The two seemingly unrelated questions placed together directed the conversation of slavery into a discussion of religion, and implied that religion was an important aspect for enduring enslavement and handling its material consequences and political legacies in the present. For example, William Curtis elaborated that his Masters had offered him a good life, so much so that he “didn’t want to leave [our] old Master and [our] old home” at the end of the war. Curtis then transitioned into this discussion of religion, claiming that “I don’t know where the world is much better now, that it has everything or then when we didn’t have hardly nothing, but I believe there was more religion then. We always went to church and I’ve seen ‘em baptize from in the early morning ‘till afternoon in the Chatahooche river.”¹⁵ He then goes on to discuss how the next generation lacks the same devotion to Christianity. His positive religious experience and relationship with the Master, while endearing, seem directly influenced by the wording of the question above. Similarly, Alice Douglass’ narrative, mentions her experiences at the “white folks’ church, and that her introduction to religion during enslavement convinced her that hard work and abstinence from sin would help her to heaven.¹⁶ This seemingly innocent investigation of enslaved people’s spiritual culture and feelings on slavery appears to have confused some of the informant-authors, and shaped their narratives in a way that positively represented their lives, even when other aspects of their narrative directly contradict this statement.

Today, oral history transcripts read much like the interview itself, documented as a conversation between interviewer and interviewee. However, the transcriptions of the Oklahoma narratives were written in long-narrative form without the interviewer’s input, presumably in

¹⁴ Botkin, foreword, xxii.

¹⁵ Baker, “William Curtis,” 98.

¹⁶ Baker, “Alice Douglass,” 127.

order to give a more personal touch to the written interview text. This decision allowed for modifications in the presentation of the interviews – accents or slang were removed, lines were edited for clarification, and notes were organized in a way that presents the highlights of a particular interview. Federal guidelines encouraged these modifications, especially those of language, in order to have the transcriptions read clearly. Substantial edits to the transcriptions can be found in these narratives, as many reporters tailored and shaped the transcriptions to fit the standards of the national project. “Uncle” George G. King’s narrative, unique for its third-person transcription, was commended by the state administrator for the project as “among the best [interviews] that we have received.”¹⁷ While fruitful in its information and certainly representative of the violence of the era, the narrative’s structure reads more like a newspaper article than a personal account. In describing his relationship to the master and mistress of the Roll plantation, King’s actual words are not present, but replaced with the paraphrasing of the interview by an unidentified field worker. King’s only true quotations refer to his experience during and after the Civil War – not those times under enslavement.

Additionally, fifty-five narratives collected from Oklahoma were not sent to Washington for inclusion in the federal project, presumably due to racially sensitive information.¹⁸ These excluded narratives often describe abusive slaveholders and devastating circumstances, providing much more information and depth to the situation. Joe Bean, formerly of Arkansas, recounted in detail his memories of whippings and efforts by slaveowners to reclaim fugitive slaves. “When I get to thinking about slave days I always remember of the slaves that run away,” he explains. While his master never whipped him, Bean describes the use of whipping by another plantation: “He was a new slave...and the overseer said the whipping was ‘just to break him in!’

¹⁷ Baker, “George G. King,” 239.

¹⁸ Baker, introduction, 4.

First they beat him with a whip, then with strap, after tieing [sic] him to a log. Peeled off his shirt and laid on with the whip, and then pour salt and pepper water over him so's his back would sting and burn."¹⁹ Bean's narrative spans three pages, describing much of his life during the Civil War and the effect it had on him as a young teenager and the Bean family. For unknown reasons, the Joe Bean was never sent to the project headquarters in Washington.

On the other hand, Bean's ex-wife, Nancy Rogers, was also interviewed, though her narrative is but a few paragraphs. She too identifies a whipping and life during the Civil War, though her description lacks the passion and interaction present in her ex-husband's narrative. Her narrative, while interesting, fails to contribute any more or different information to the Oklahoma collection, and spends more time talking about the lives of the Rogers family in which she was raised than her personal experiences. By removing these narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, interviewers made a conscious decision to present an alternative view of slavery, one that was better supported by the accounts of slave owners and white perspectives already in existence. Ultimately, in the careful selection of the narratives for publication, the WPA Slave Narrative Collection reinforced the plantation legend it initially set out to dismantle.

The primary concern raised by scholars today about the reliability of the WPA narratives centers on the age of the informant-authors. At the time of the interviews, the formerly enslaved individuals ranged from 72 to 108 years of age, with over two-thirds at least 80 years old. Their recollections of enslavement refer to their early childhood years or stories that were passed on by older relatives. The informant-authors refer to their age as a justification for their memory lapse several times throughout the collection. Lacking any real depth or focus, a majority of interviews feature a line referencing their inability to remember such early and insignificant moments of their lives.

¹⁹ Baker, "Joe Bean," 47.

These historical concerns are supported by psychological literature – as Donna Spindel’s article, “Assessing Memory” notes, though memory loss is not a consistent factor among elderly people, the historical method requires critical analysis of their validity.²⁰ The ability to remember the day-to-day existence under enslavement would be a challenging task for most octogenarians – never mind that these informant-authors had been raised in a period of impoverishment, were generally uneducated, and lacked access to quality medical care during and after their childhood. Their capacity for remembering this period would have been severely limited. However, their experiences and documents should not be dismissed as a result of their age or poverty-related issues, but it does showcase one of many factors that influenced the recorded text of the WPA narratives.

The changing legacy of the WPA Slave Narrative Collection within historiography of African-American history and the study of the antebellum period has divided scholars since the publication of the narratives in the 1940s. Norman Yetman, a clear supporter of the use of the collection, noted that one of the most important contributions of the project was the preservation of black oral tradition as an insight into black culture.²¹ He also noted the varied composition furthered historiography of slavery, and allowed researchers a glimpse of the personal reactions of enslaved people.

John Blassingame, a pioneering historian of American slavery, refused to use the narratives in his research. His 1975 article in *The Journal of Southern History* condemns the use of any narrative from the WPA Slave Narrative Collection, noting that antebellum narratives had three distinct advantages over the interviews: the age at time of recording, age at time of

²⁰ Ibid., 260.

²¹ Norman R. Yetman, “Ex-Slave Interviews and the Historiography of Slavery,” *American Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (1984): 182, accessed April 15, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2712724>.

slavery/freedom, and the length of interviews.²² The informant-authors interviewed for the project failed to represent the “typical” life of enslaved individuals, and the interviewers’ use of leading questions and lack of training distorted and limited the information presented to them.

Most scholarship on the WPA Slave Narrative Collection falls somewhere between the two ends of Yetman and Blassingame. However, it should be noted that any serious historian recognizes the difficulty in using primary sources such as these, and should apply the same level of critical scrutinizing that would be applied to any historical document. In defending the use of the WPA project in her work *Closer to Freedom*, Stephanie Camp noted that most sources from or about the antebellum period present some difficulties in interpretation. Paraphrasing her words, it is the summation of these varied sources that allows us to build a story out of their commonalities and investigate their differences.²³

In studying bondwomen across the South through these narratives, *Closer to Freedom* recognizes American slavery as a varied system of economic exploitation, racial formation, and racial domination. More importantly, the ability to work with the WPA narratives gave Camp the opportunity to investigate dichotomies within the established historical narrative and to investigate the history of slavery as part of women’s history – reevaluating what and how historians know the stories of plantation spaces as areas of containment and movement of enslaved people. In addition, use of the narratives clarified the process of liberation during the antebellum period, and gave insight into the unseen, public and personal power dynamics of enslaved life.

²² John W. Blassingame. “Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems,” *The Journal of Southern History* 41 no. 4 (1975): 483-486, accessed April 13, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2205559>

²³ Stephanie Camp, introduction to *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women & Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* by Stephanie Camp (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 8.

Continuing to look at gender and slavery, Daina Berry's *Swing the Sickle for the Harvest Is Ripe: Gender and Slavery in Antebellum Georgia* relied heavily on the WPA collection from Glynn and Wilkes counties. Again, Berry acknowledges the racial biases within the testimonies, but examines these sources just as cautiously as any other firsthand accounts of enslaved life. In this micro approach to gender and plantation economy, the information gleaned from the Glynn and Wilkes counties had greater implications for the antebellum agrarian South. More importantly, the use of the WPA narratives in this context allowed Berry to establish agency for enslaved families and communities despite the white patriarchal complex in which they operated.

While these narratives should not be used for great insights into the antebellum period, it has been noted by several researchers that other themes can be drawn out of these narratives. As Stephanie Shaw referenced in her article "Using the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives to Study the Impact of the Great Depression," these narratives hold merit as historical documents for studying nineteenth-century slavery despite these flaws, but may be more valuable resources relevant in other areas such as labor history, race relations, or Depression-era experiences of African-Americans.²⁴ During the Great Depression, Paul Escott notes, "many of the informant-authors were destitute and dependent upon the aid of family, white people, or government officials."²⁵ Even within Lomax's specific questions, comparisons and references to the contemporary period shine through in the narratives, revealing more about the lives of African-Americans during the Great Depression as affected by severe poverty. Shaw points to the descriptions of food and how diets during the Depression were perhaps worse than those of slavery, and the access to safe and secure housing during both times. Reading the Oklahoma contributions to the WPA Slave Narrative Collection in this light show clear input on behalf of the informant-authors. One of

²⁴ Stephanie J. Shaw, "Using the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives to Study the Impact of the Great Depression," *The Journal of Southern History* 69, no. 3 (2003): 626, accessed April 15, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30040012>

²⁵ As quoted in Shaw, "Using the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives to Study the Impact of the Great Depression," 626.

Lomax's questions asked informant-authors to give their opinions of prominent leaders – Abraham Lincoln, Jefferson Davis, and Booker T. Washington in particular. In referring to Washington, a number of narratives elaborated on their opinions of his legacy. Some, like Robert Grimstead, disagreed with his methods, claiming “his [Washington's] idea of education or training Negroes as servants to serve the white race appealed more to the white race than the Negroes.”²⁶ Others supported the opinion of Prince Bee, who praised Washington while claiming “the Negroes of today needs another leader like Booker Washington. Get the young folks to working, that's what they need.”²⁷ In context with the unemployment and poverty of the Depression, analyzing the answers gives a certain sense of urgency to this question. Washington's concept of industrial education, controversial at its inception as Grimstead notes in his response, may have seemed like the perfect solution to those like Bee who sought employment. Whether or not individuals agreed with Washington's views, a general consensus of the narratives saw his position as a leader an essential one, and expressed interest in having someone take over this role as a figure in the revitalization of African American communities. In reviewing the narratives through Shaw's proposed perspective, this collection offers historians new opportunities to showcase the concerns, comments, and voices of African-Americans during a period of frustration.

Public historians should look at the well-meaning intentions of Lomax and the subsequent process of the WPA Slave Narrative Collection as a guideline for how not to develop an oral history project. In looking at the project in hindsight as a wayward warning, public historians can see how ethics of the field can be manipulated and misguided. Lomax appropriated the goals of the project from small-scale initiatives that were developed by black

²⁶ Baker, “Robert Grimstead,” 182.

²⁷ Baker, “Prince Bee,” 51.

historians and sociologists trying to construct a narrative of antebellum slavery from their own communities. In doing so, he perpetuated the influence of the white patriarchal narrative within these narratives by framing the questions and language that refused to ignore the individuals' experiences in favor of the already established history. While he intended to inform this history with the interviews, it instead was a haphazard attempt that acknowledges its limitations but created unrelated vignettes difficult to parse or piece together for any one solid narrative of slavery in American history. Continued review of the WPA Slave Narrative project requires us to consider the use of oral history as representative of individual or a group of experiences, and how the meaning of that testimony can be carefully crafted by interviewer or interviewee prior to, during, or after the conversation to unknowingly or unwillingly support an intention of the project as a whole.

These testimonies should not be completely ruled out for information on antebellum life, and when combined with other firsthand accounts and sources, can be used by historians to bring light to not only this period of history, but how historians can investigate a coded history like slavery when the white patriarchal perspective dominates the framework. Despite the flaws inherent in the narratives, the text is still a valid source of qualitative information for experiences of enslaved men and women. As historians like Camp and Berry have already shown in their scholarship, these texts can be critically evaluated like any historical document and reviewed in context with other firsthand accounts of slavery for clarity, and can expand upon the dichotomies that have been developed within the research of antebellum history to study gender, labor, and power of plantation life and the antebellum South. In addition, as Shaw argues, the narratives shape an image of life for African-Americans after slavery, especially during the Great Depression and the state of race relations during that period. This allows us to see these

interviews as culturally significant in a different realm than may have been initially intended, but no less important in creating a narrative or framework for studying African-American history.

The Slave Narrative Collection is a boon to historians and researchers, though not in the way it intended to serve. As an oral history project, Lomax's ambitions were too great and failed to address the shortcomings that occurred in its implementation. However, though short and riddled with faults, these edited narratives allow us glimpses into the lives of enslaved people through the perspectives of children. More importantly, however, the narratives shape an image of life for African-Americans after slavery, especially during the Great Depression and the state of race relations during that period. While African American informant-authors lacked space for their voices to be heard in the history of enslavement during the antebellum and Civil War periods, the WPA Slave Narrative Collection documents some of their experiences and allows researchers to address the concepts of narrative and interviews.

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