Contesting “The Way the Almighty Wants It”: Crafting Memories of Ex-Slaves in the Slave Narrative Collection

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Between 1937 and 1939, seventeen state branches of the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP) interviewed more than two thousand ex-slaves, approximately 2 percent of the total ex-slave population.¹ Federal employees gathered a number of interviews collected by this Ex-Slave Studies program into a rare book housed in the Library of Congress. The Slave Narrative Collection, which emerged out of this effort, has played an important role in shaping the narratives written by folklorists, sociologists, and historians about slave culture and the master-slave relationship.² Most academics acknowledge the problematic nature of these sources, since they generally resulted from encounters in the Jim Crow South between white southerners and elderly blacks, many of whom were children at the time of Emancipation and octogenarians when they were interviewed. Few academics, however, have explored how the narratives came into being, a process which reveals not only the biases of the ex-slave interviews as sources but also the operations of racism in the early twentieth century.

Two versions of an interview that Federal Writer Esther de Sola conducted with Charlie Moses, an ex-slave from Brookhaven, Mississippi, illustrate how the interviews gathered in the Slave Narrative Collection resulted from contestations over the memory of slavery. The original transcript of Moses’ interview depicts him as one of the most articulate, angry, and, as de Sola put it, “exceptionally intelligent” ex-slaves.³ In his concluding comments, Moses, true to his prophetic name, argued poignantly against the “harsh treatment” that slaves

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received and called upon God to maintain free blacks in a state of redemption and freedom. “I want to tell you now,” Moses avowed,

I pray the Lord to let us be free always. God almighty nevah ment human beings to be lak animals. Us niggahs has a soul, an’ a heart, an’ a mine an we isn’t lak a dawg or a horse. I didn’t spec’ nothin’ outten freedom septin’ peace an’ happiness an’ the right to go my way as I please. An’ that is the way the Almighty wants it.“4

Before submitting this potent statement to the national office of the Writers’ Project, Mississippi state editors Pauline Loveless and Clara E. Stokes removed de Sola’s complimentary editorialization and tamed Moses’ criticism of slavery by adding the following words to his assertion: “If all marsters had been good like some, the slaves would all a-been happy. But marsters like mine ought never been allowed to own Niggers.”5 By inserting into the text a dichotomy between good and bad masters, the state editors replaced Moses’ criticism of slavery as an institution with a reproach of his own “bad” ex-master, who deviated from the “good” master norm; thus, they implied that Moses’ experience departed from the more typical paternalistic and consensual relationships between slaves and masters.

Loveless and Stokes’s revision of Moses’ testimony was atypical. In his investigation of interviews with ex-slaves that state editors failed to submit to Washington, George Rawick found that editors in only six states revised interviews before sending them to the national office, and the state editors in five of those states changed an average of only eight interviews before submission.6 According to Rawick, most of the editorial revisions were benign, such as shortening interviews and minor alterations in the recorded dialect, which had no clear explanation other than, perhaps, employing additional federal writers. Texas and Mississippi, however, deviated from this norm.

Before submitting their interviews to Washington, Texas state editors revised the majority of their collection (275 out of 591 interviews).7 One editor selected the interviews to be altered, and then a small team of interviewers rewrote them.8 According to Rawick, the Texas revisions “help[ed to] make the narratives conform more closely with the accepted version of proper race relations of the time [and also] flatten[ed] out the portrait of the individual narrator, making him or her much less 3-D.”9 Stylistically, the editors shortened the interviews and removed logistical information about the interview such as the location
of the meeting and the name of the interviewer. They also deleted evidence of masters treating slaves poorly, of freedmen existing during slavery, of black religious practices and games, of blacks contributing to the war effort, and of post-war life, including experiences of Reconstruction and encounters with the KKK.10

State editors in Mississippi, like those in Texas, altered most of the interviews they submitted to Washington (twenty-one out of twenty-six), but more significantly they monitored which interviews would go to the national office and which would languish in state files. Despite at least two requests from the national office that they send in their entire collection, Mississippi editors submitted only twenty-six interviews to the national office.11 Given the size of the state’s populations both before Emancipation and during the 1930s, historian George Rawick was wary of the seemingly sparse collection and, in the 1970s, began to investigate the situation. Working with civil rights and political activists Ken Lawrence and Jan Hillegas, Rawick uncovered in the Mississippi State Archives some twenty-four hundred pages of ex-slave accounts that state editors had not submitted to Washington.12 Their finding means that Mississippi gathered the third greatest number of interviews (526), yet submitted one of the smallest collections to Washington.

From 1973 to 1979, Rawick rescued such previously “lost” documents from obscurity by publishing *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*. His series consists of forty-one volumes, including his analysis of slavery based on the oral histories in the Slave Narrative Collection (volume 1), the interviews sent to the national office and then deposited in the Rare Book Room of the Library of Congress (volumes 2–17), interviews collected at Fisk University during the late 1920s (volumes 18–19), and ex-slave narratives that Rawick and his research team found in the Archive of Folk Song at the Library of Congress and in state archives, such as Mississippi’s (supplement series I, volumes 1–12 and supplement series II, volumes 1–9). Since *The American Slave* includes both those interviews sent to Washington and those that remained in state archives, it is possible to compare the two sets of documents from each state.

Mississippi was one of fourteen states that did not submit all of its documents to Washington. Rawick explains the “misplacement” of documents in all states except for Mississippi as resulting from the states’ exclusion from the initial project; their participation in alterna-
tive projects, such as the Indian Pioneer one; their disorganization on the local and state levels; their late submission of documents; and their having sent to Washington revised versions of the documents they left in state files. In contrast, Rawick suggests that the Mississippi documents “were deliberately held back.” “The reasons,” he explains, “may be either that those responsible for the collection thought the material “too hot” to handle if it ever became public, as it would have been if World War II had not intervened . . . or that others in the state exerted pressure upon them to hold the material.” Rawick’s loosely supported assertion demands that the type of further investigation that his exhaustive research makes possible be done.

The interviews sent to Washington differed from those that remained in Mississippi in both form and content. The Washington interviews tended to be longer than their Mississippi counterparts, they were written in the first person and in black dialect rather than in the third person, and they were more likely to have resulted from multiple interviews than from a single encounter. Requests from Washington that the interviewers conduct multiple interviews with a few of the “more interesting and intelligent” ex-slaves and record the interchanges “word for word” probably encouraged state editors to leave in Mississippi the documents that did not abide by such regulations. Primary sources that remained in Mississippi include newspaper clippings of the ex-slaves who still lived on Jefferson Davis’s plantation, obituaries of “black Mammies” who had recently passed away, and first person accounts by educated blacks who spoke without a stereotypical black dialect.

Despite these differences in format, the basic content of the interviews in both archives is fairly similar. They both include nostalgic tales of white masters who provided slaves with “plen’y to eat,” and “clo’es to wear.” More surprisingly, they both contain accounts of violence and of interracial sex. Approximately half of the interviews in Washington depict such controversial acts as when a slave filled a shovel “full o’ red hot coals” and threw it at an overseer, when a white master “whumped an’ chained [his slaves] . . . ’til de blood come, ’til dey back split all to pieces,” and when a white bartender “burnt . . . up” Walter Riley because he was “a-courtin’ a yaller woman.” In addition, three of the interviews deposited in Washington openly challenge the legitimacy of slavery as an institution.
The main difference between the two collections is that the Washington files contain rewritten versions of some of the most articulate and engaging accounts from Mississippi, whereas the documents that remained in Mississippi escaped the editor’s red pen. By examining the textuality, or the nature and quality, of the interviews with ex-slaves, it is possible to illustrate the way in which contestations among black and white interviewers, state editors, and Washington officials mediated the federal government’s interpretation of Southern history.

Since the Slave Narrative Collection was constructed on the national and state levels, this article will trace how the national project reinforced essentialist assumptions, while state and local officials, such as those in Mississippi, edited and rewrote the slave narratives based on three unstated principles: paternalism, authenticity, and readability. Such findings not only indicate the ways in which biases inherent in the collection have shaped past scholarly work but also suggest a new approach to the sources for future research.

Cultural Contestation vs. Essentialism

The Ex-Slave Studies were the first federally funded and directed attempt to gather the remembrances of slaves; however, efforts to collect slave stories began in the eighteenth century when both whites and blacks told, wrote, and used such accounts in order to justify or to condemn American slavery. The historical context in which the Slave Narrative Collection emerged and the organizational structure and development of the project itself explain, in part, the content of the stories that the Writers’ Project staff recorded, edited, and submitted to Washington.

Since the eighteenth century, slave narratives in America have fluctuated between damning and defending the institution of slavery. During the antebellum period, black and white abolitionists used slave accounts to challenge descriptions of slavery as benevolent and of slaves as pollyannish, passive, and unselfconscious. In contrast to such anti-slavery tracts, pro-slavery Southerners produced most slave narratives after Emancipation in order to affirm a nostalgic and consensual image of slavery. Contemporary scholars lent credence to the paternalistic interpretation of the master-slave relationship that such slave narratives propounded. For example, in his seminal book, American Negro Slavery (1918), Ulrich B. Phillips argued that although slavery
had not been financially viable, the South had defended the institution for cultural reasons, including its role in civilizing “Sambo,” the “American Negro” who was naturally “impulsive and inconstant, sociable and amorous, voluble, dilatory, and negligent, but robust, amiable, obedient, and contented.”20 Norman Yetman aptly described the intellectual environment of the time when he wrote: “Seldom before has racism been so pervasive and so academically respectable in America as during the early years of the twentieth century.”21

In the late 1920s, five black academics began research projects that challenged Phillips’s interpretation of the slaves’ passivity and of the congenial nature of the master-slave relationship. In search of a “usable past,” one which might foster self respect and group identity among blacks, anthropologists Paul Radin and A. P. Watson, historian John Cade, and sociologists Charles Johnson and Ophelia Settle Egypt worked with graduate students at private black universities to interview more than five hundred ex-slaves. While Cade’s research described the material conditions of slavery, the work of Johnson and Egypt explored not only slaves’ outward well-being but also the ex-slaves’ feelings, attitudes, and experiences during slavery, Reconstruction, and at the time of the interview.22 The research of Watson and Radin similarly focused on the ex-slaves’ personal experiences by concentrating on religious conversion.

In 1934, Lawrence Reddick, a faculty member at Kentucky State University who had participated in Johnson’s project as a graduate student, suggested that Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) might use interviews with ex-slaves to employ black college graduates in need of relief during the Great Depression. FERA endorsed a pilot study conducted by twelve blacks in Kentucky who collected 250 interviews between September 1934 and July 1935. The project never realized Reddick’s conception of employing five hundred blacks and systematically interviewing the entire ex-slave population in the southern region; instead, it stalled during the transition of FERA to the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which was created by Executive Order on 6 May 1935.23 A new effort to gather ex-slave interviews was not initiated on the national level until the Writers’ Project adopted the program in April 1937, two years after the Kentucky project ended.24

It was during this administrative transition that the staff and leadership of those who gathered the ex-slave interviews shifted from the
hands of black academics, college graduates, and graduate students primarily to those of white government bureaucrats and relief workers. Like many New Deal organizations, the Writer's Project allowed state and local branches to determine their own hiring policies, a policy that thus permitted them to exclude blacks from many staff positions. According to a 1937 report prepared by the Negro Affairs Office, there were only 106 black Federal One workers in New York City out of a total staff of forty-five hundred people. Nonetheless, several states hired at least one black interviewer and two states, Virginia and Florida, employed a majority of black workers.

It was the work of such black staff members that instigated the Ex-Slaves Studies project. Negro Units of the Writers' Project in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia, on their own initiative, collected interviews with ex-slaves after the Kentucky project was terminated. In March 1937, when Florida's division sent Washington a number of ex-slave narratives, including interviews gathered by anthropologist and novelist Zora Neale Hurston, three government officials reviewed the documents: John A. Lomax, director of the Folklore Division of the Writers' Project, George Cronyn, associate director of the Writers' Project, and Sterling A. Brown, director of the Office of Negro Affairs. Lomax, whose son Alan had collected folk music with Hurston two years earlier, was particularly impressed by the materials. He promoted the project and implemented it on a national level.

Lomax's leadership in large measure explains the focus of the interviews with ex-slaves on daily life, folk songs, and superstitious practices. As a pre-eminent American folklorist who had been the honorary curator of the Archives of American Folk Songs in the Library of Congress before assuming his new position, Lomax encouraged the interviewers to explore the folklore of slavery more than the themes that had interested black interviewers: racial uplift, slave resistance, and attitudes toward freedom. On 22 April 1937, he distributed an ethnographically directed questionnaire, which consisted of nineteen questions, to regional branches of the Writers' Project. The interview script investigated slaves' biographical information, their memories of the Civil War and of the year afterwards, and their attitudes toward prominent white and black men. Most of the questions Lomax asked in this questionnaire, and also in the 333 additional questions he distributed a few months later, interrogated the daily
experiences of slaves. For example, question four of the first interview reads: “What did you eat and how was it cooked? Any possums? Rabbits? Fish? What food did you like best? Did the slaves have their own gardens?” The interview script also asked about the slaves’ clothing, church, holiday activities, life-cycle rituals, games, songs, and use of herbal medicines.

Lomax, who described himself as the “upper crust of poor white trash” in Texas, viewed collecting folklore as a means of capturing a way of life that was on the verge of extinction. For example, when gathering American ballads and folk songs for a book published three years before he began the Slave Narrative project, Lomax went to all-black, maximum-security prisons in order to record the songs of people who had only minimally been “contaminated” by jazz, radio, black educational and religious leaders, and white people. Lomax’s approach to documenting black culture mirrored that of Ruth Benedict and Hurston, who, despite the Second Great Migration, privileged black rural culture, which they viewed as representing an “aesthetically purified version of blackness,” over black urban culture. They did not espouse the conception of culture developed by Benedict and Hurston’s teacher, the pre-eminent early-twentieth-century anthropologist Franz Boas, who understood culture as a process of diffusion, borrowing and interpretation. Rather than investigating the changes in black culture as slaves and ex-slaves interacted with Southern and Northern whites, Native Americans, and Mexicans, Lomax thought of culture as an evolutionist might; as Benjamin Filene explains, “Evolutionists tended to study folk song to demonstrate the vitality of America’s past. They offered little sense of any present-day possibilities for these cultural forms. . . . Folk song, in the evolutionists’ conception, was a delicate remnant from a bygone era and the folklorists’ job was to preserve it from being trampled by the pernicious forces of change.” The way in which Lomax phrased a question about voodoo in his initial interview script illustrates his evolutionist perspective and shows how it led him at times to promote racial stereotypes. “What do you think of voodoo?” he wrote in an interview script, “. . . Can you tell a funny story you have heard or something funny that happened to you? Tell about the ghosts you have seen.”

If Brown, the son of an emancipated slave, had directed the Ex-Slave Studies project rather than Lomax, the interviews might have focused less on folklore and more on ex-slaves’ perceptions of slavery and
freedom. When Lomax initiated the project on a national level, Brown had temporarily left his position as an English professor, poet, and critic at Howard University in order to direct the Office of Negro Affairs, a national agency that sought to ensure that “‘the Negro [was] not neglected in any of the publications written by or sponsored by the Writers’ Project.’” As director of the Office of Negro Affairs, Brown supported the efforts of the only all-black division that interviewed ex-slaves. The three hundred interviews, which Roscoe Lewis, director of the Negro Unit of the Virginia Project, used as primary sources for the book the unit produced, entitled The Negro in Virginia (1940), focused on the ex-slaves’ memories about the experience of slavery. The book does not essentialize the experiences of black folk in Virginia but rather explores how autonomous individuals act independent of their social conditioning. Lewis explained the aim of his project in the following manner:

There are questions about the slave system that can be answered only by one who has experienced slavery. How did it “feel” to be owned? What were the pleasures and sufferings of the slave? What was the slave’s attitude toward his owner, toward the white man’s assumption of superiority, toward the white man’s God? Did the slaves want to be free? Did they feel that it was their right to be free?

Brown, like Lewis, did not believe that the interviews with ex-slaves should document primarily the daily practices of a people nearing extinction, but rather that they should record individuals’ responses to varying conditions of slavery and freedom. In a March 1972 interview with folklorist Gladys-Marie Fry, Brown criticized the project’s concentration on the “quaint and eccentric.” Although his comment may be marked by retrospection, Brown’s actions in 1937 suggest that he did try to reorient the project at the time. When Lomax went on a ninety-day furlough, Brown worked with Botkin to rewrite Lomax’s interview script. On 30 July, three months after Lomax sent out his first questionnaire, Alsberg distributed the edited interview script to the regional branches involved in the project. The new draft consisted of Lomax’s old questionnaire prefaced by ten additional questions that focused on themes similar to those covered by Lewis’s history. For example, Brown suggested that interviewers ask ex-slaves what they thought about and whether or not they were aware of slave rebellions, Reconstruction, blacks’ voting, holding office, and organizing secret
Brown’s questions focused both on ex-slaves’ historical experiences and on their perceptions of that past. His orientation to change over time and to individual autonomy might have raised ex-slaves’ consciousness and educated contemporary Americans about African American history. Rather than essentializing the culture of black folks, Brown might have helped to deconstruct such racial categories by illustrating their historically specific location.

Despite Brown’s attempts, his suggestions had little impact, at least on the Mississippi slave narratives. Based on the original texts of the Mississippi interviews, it appears as if the interviewers used Lomax’s initial script for the first of all twenty-six interviews. Interviewers asked Brown’s additional questions in nine of the eleven supplementary interviews, which interviewers conducted based on a recommendation that “a second visit, a few days after the first one, is important, so as to gather all the worth while recollections that the first talk has aroused.”44 Even when interviewers asked Brown’s questions, state editors often excised the ex-slaves’ responses unless they portrayed blacks as confessing their own social or political incompetence. For example, the transcripts sent to Washington include only a few answers to Brown’s questions, such as those describing contemporary young blacks negatively or black political action during Reconstruction where blacks either supported democrats or were punished by the KKK and others for their support of Republicans.45

Lomax’s interview script appears to have shaped not only the questions interviewers asked (and failed to ask) but also the way in which state editors restructured interviews before submitting them to Washington. When the state editors rewrote the eleven transcripts recording more than one interview with a single ex-slave, they did not merely join the two interviews into a single text but rather cut and pasted sentences, reordered, rewrote, and deleted sections in order to conform to the interview script that Lomax suggested in his questionnaire.

The placement of ex-slaves’ attitudes toward religion, which Lomax inquired about in one of his final questions, illustrates this point. “Now
that slavery is ended,” he wrote, “what do you think of it? Tell why you joined the Baptist Church and why you think all people should be religious?”46 The wording of Lomax’s question implies a connection between the ex-slaves “finding” religion and reconciling their experience with slavery. Ten of the twenty-six interviews submitted to Washington concluded with references to the church, religious beliefs, or God, such as ex-slave Wayne Holiday’s assertion. “I’se thankful,” attested Holiday, “I ain’t got no sad mem’ries bout slavery times and dat I and my folks is done as well as dey have. Tis de wuk of de Lawd.”47 In three of the twenty-six accounts, when ex-slaves did not voluntarily conclude their narratives with religious references, state editors imposed a Christian resolution onto the transcripts.48 In one instance, according to the original draft of ex-slave Nettie Henry’s interview with Marjorie Woods Austin, Henry concluded her interview by explaining that she had just returned from the hospital after her son had been placed in an asylum for stabbing her. She then stated that she lives alone in a house that another son of hers bought so that she would not have to “die a slave” living with her daughter-in-law. State editors deleted this entire section of Henry’s interview; instead, they closed her account with a Christian moral that they invented but attributed to Henry’s late mistress. “I tries,” Henry asserts in the edition of her interview submitted to Washington “to live lak a Christian an’ do jus’ lak Old Mistis say. Den when I die I can go to Heaven.”49 Both the phrasing and the placement of Lomax’s questions encouraged the interviewers, the interviewees, and the state editors to craft narratives that concluded with a note of reconciliation rather than one of anger, pain, or rebellion.

Although Lomax’s interview script shaped the questions Mississippi interviewers asked and the answers editors allowed ex-slaves to give, it did not standardize the Slave Narrative Collection. The interviews reflect the writing experiences and biases of the interviewers and editors as well as the particular conditions of slavery and freedom that ex-slaves across geographical regions experienced.50 Nonetheless, the collection tends to focus on ex-slaves’ accommodation to daily life rather than their attitudes toward slavery, freedom, and rebellion. In this sense, Lomax’s interview script facilitated the project’s transition from one that sought to contest racist assumptions about slavery to one that unemployed white-collar workers could use to record nostalgically the passing away of a generation.
In contrast to the renowned artists, educators, and administrators who worked in the national office, like Lomax and Brown, the primarily female interviewers and editors who participated in the Ex-Slave Studies project on the state level came from markedly less prestigious backgrounds. Government regulations required that 90 percent of federal writers be on relief and be local residents for two to three years before they could work for the organization. Thus, with the exception of those states where literary talent was concentrated, like New York and Chicago, many federal writers were down-and-out local whites who were literate but certainly not unemployed professional writers.51

The power dynamic between the predominantly white interviewers and the ex-slaves influenced both the selection of ex-slaves and the stories they told. “Especially in Mississippi,” Ken Lawrence explained in his introduction to Rawick’s compilation,

most of the interviews were conducted by white women upon whose goodwill the elderly blacks may have depended, directly or indirectly, for their continuing survival. Often the interviewers were descendants of the former owners of the interviewees. Even when they were not, it is likely that when the choices were being made about which elderly blacks to interview, “good” ones would be sought and “bad” ones shunned.52

The texts of the Mississippi interviews themselves illustrate the dependent nature of the relationships between white Southerners and ex-slaves. “Right now, I loves my marster an’ his wife in de grave,” Isaac Stier attested somewhat ironically. “Dey raised me an’ showed me kindness all dey lives. I was proud of dem and now I’se under treatment of young Dr. Kurtze Stowers, my marster’s grandchil’. I trusts him an’ he is good to me.”53 Perhaps one of the reasons that federal workers “enjoy[ed] collecting these stories” was that they reaffirmed such hierarchical relationships.54

In Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives, Paul D. Escott quantitatively demonstrates the type of influence that racial power dynamics had on the interviews. Escott compares the answers that ex-slaves told black interviewers to those they conveyed to white ones. He concludes that “former slaves were more likely to reveal to black interviewers than to white ones negative feelings about their treatment and masters and their willingness to act
upon those feelings."55 As we have seen, black interviewers not only recorded different answers to the same questions that their white counterparts asked but also asked the ex-slaves different questions.

The extent to which federal writers edited the interviews they collected before submitting them to Jackson is unclear. Without tape recorders, interviewers had to rely on their memories to “work-up” field notes and to record copy in “residencies, seminars, or work sessions.”56 Meridian District Supervisor Mrs. Marjorie Wood Austin told Ken Lawrence in an interview during the 1970s that she formulated her own questions for the ex-slave interviews and included everything she heard but reordered the information before writing it down.57 In contrast, Supervisor of Assignments and Files Burnette Yarbrough contended that neither she nor her staff edited the texts. In a letter she sent with ten “autobiographies” or ex-slave interviews to Eri Douglass, state director of Mississippi’s Writers’ Project, Yarbrough explained that “all of these [interviews] are in the same phraseology as recorded by the field workers. No revision,” she continued,

has been attempted other than a partially standardized form of spelling. . . .
Field workers report that they are sending in their slave stories in practically the same order as given by the Negroes. I have made no revision of form as I did not want to risk a stilted, formal, or unnatural narrative. Too, am I not correct in my supposition that Washington wants them this way?58

In contrast to Yarbrough’s hands-off approach, Jackson editors deleted relevant sections, added new sentences, and altered the sequence of stories told in all but five of the twenty-six interviews sent to Washington. Eleven of the interviews, which I referred to in the previous section, resulted from the editors’ practice of weaving two separate interviews with the same ex-slave into a single narrative. The editors of ten of the fifteen interviews in which only a single interview had been conducted either rewrote the introductions or reworked significant portions of the interviews. Thus, the majority of conscious editing appears to have occurred on the state level rather than on the local one.

The key figures in the editing of ex-slave interviews in Jackson were Pauline Loveless and Clara E. Stokes. Eleven of the twenty-six interviews sent to Washington indicate that Loveless rewrote the accounts while Stokes edited them.59 Since the manuscripts do not define the terms rewriting and editing, the nature of each woman’s responsibilities is unclear.
The scant material on Loveless and Stokes also makes it difficult to analyze their backgrounds. The only mention of Loveless in the record is when Director of the Writers’ Project Alsberg congratulated her and the field workers for sending to Washington four “ably written” ex-slave stories in September of 1937. More information is available about Stokes, who served as Mississippi’s office manager, as the contact person for district supervisors, and as the supervisor of the state’s capital, Jackson. Stokes was markedly more affluent and better educated than the majority of federal writers. In 1936, for example, she was one of four women who were paid as compensation, while the other forty-eight women on the project received money as relief. Stokes also had been trained in universities across the country.

Available sources do not reveal the meaning that the state editors attributed to their textual changes; thus, we do not know if they consciously sought to construct a heroic version of the Civil War and Reconstruction or if they believed that their revisions were merely aesthetic. Even without evidence regarding the editors’ motivations, the impact the narratives have had on research about Southern culture and history justifies a close textual analysis of the two sets of interviews. Based on the literary differences between the two narratives, the state editors modified the narratives in three primary ways: first, they attempted to illustrate that ex-slaves remembered slavery as having been a paternalistic institution; second, they sought to create texts that appeared to be authentic; and finally, they strove to write stories that would be entertaining and eminently readable.

Paternalism

The Mississippi interviews sent to Washington present a more consensual picture of slavery than did the ex-slave interviews that remained in Mississippi. The ex-slaves interviewed in twenty of the Washington interviews remembered slavery fondly. As John Cameron put it: “My old Marster was de bes’ man in de worl’. I jus’ wish I could tell, an’ make it plain, jus’ how good him an’ old Mistis was.” Retrospection and corn pone, the need to hide opinions in order to maintain one’s livelihood, probably led many of the ex-slaves to offer a paternalistic interpretation of slavery.

When ex-slaves did not acquiesce to such interpretations of the master-slave relationship, state editors sometimes imposed this under-
standing on them through textual manipulation. For example, they textually altered descriptions of slave autonomy and agency in nine interviews to suggest that slaves were not masters of their own destinies but rather depended on their masters to care for their subsistence, to prevent them from becoming (or remaining) disorderly and animal-like, and ultimately to enable them to become civilized. Such arguments reflected the paternalistic argument propounded by contemporary scholars such as Phillips.

The deletions that Mississippi editors made to an interview with Dora Franks illustrate this theme. In the interview, Franks told the story of her “Uncle Alf” whose master sent “nigger hounds” to find him when he did not return to the plantation after having “jumped de broom” with a woman from another plantation. According to the interviewer’s reconstruction of her field notes, Franks described Alf’s punishment and his response to that treatment as follows:

Dey took and give him 100 lashes wid de cat of ninety-nine tails and his back was something awful. Dey put him in de field to work right after dat too while de blood was still runnin’. He work right hard til dey left and he got up to de end of de row next to de swamp and he lit out again. Dey never found him dat time but dey tole me he found him a cave and fix him up a room whar he could live.... When de war was over and de slaves was freed he come out and I saw him. He looked like a really hairy ape, ‘thout no clothes on and hair growin’ all over his body. But he tole us he was glad he had done what he had cause he never could have stood another whuppin’ ‘thout killin’ somebody and course he knew what dat would have meant.

Loveless and Stokes edited Franks’ story by deleting the last sentence before sending it to Washington. In their account, Franks explained neither Alf’s reasons for running away nor his evaluation of his actions after he was freed from his seclusion. The re-written version minimized both Alf’s rationality—without a master he became literally ape-like—and his ability to analyze his own situation—we no longer see Alf’s evaluation that it was better for him to become an animal-like recluse than to kill a man and, as a result, be lynched. In contrast, when the final line is included, the reader understands that even if Alf’s decision made him uncivilized, it nonetheless preserved his humanity.

In their editing of four interviews, the state editors suggested that the paternalism they wanted the ex-slaves to embrace was gendered in that “Ol’ Miss” was needed to nurture and to care for blacks, while
“Marster” was needed to control them. In two of the interviews, the state editors minimized black agency by suggesting that blacks looked to white mistresses for caretaking rather than to themselves. In the first instance, Jane Sutton left the house where she was serving the daughter of her master to return to her old master’s house to see her family when she learned that she was free. The original text of her interview stated: “After freedom I went back to ‘Old Mis.’ I walked all de way back dar. It wuz about 20 miles. I wanted ter see my Ma, and brothers and sisters.”68 In contrast, the Washington account explains her motivations for returning to her master’s house as follows: “I wanted to see Old Mis’ an’ my Mammy an’ my brothers an’ sisters.”69 The repetition of “Old Mis’” and inclusion of her among the nuclear family members whom Sutton walked back to the old plantation in order to see suggests an intimacy between slaves and their mistresses that Sutton did not indicate in the original account of her interview. Similarly, when Dora Franks describes the slaves as having used herbal remedies to cure one another, the state editors inserted the following sentence: “Sometimes old Mistis doctored ‘em herse’f.”70

Just as the state editors changed the texts of the interviews to suggest that slaves sought their mistresses’ nurturance, they also altered the words in two ex-slaves’ descriptions of contemporary black youth to imply that blacks needed masters to discipline them. In one interview, Gabe Emannuel explained that “De Niggers today is de same as dey always was, ‘ceptin’ day’s gittin’ more money to spen’.”71 The state editors, however, added the following sentence to his interpretation: “dey ain’t got nobody to make ‘em ‘ave dese’ves an’ keep ‘em out o’ trouble now.”72 Rather than adding an additional line, the state editors made active Dora Frank’s assertion that young people “aint always been taught” right from wrong.73 The edition submitted to Washington read: “dey ain’t always had Marsters to teach them.”74

One of the ways in which masters taught slaves, according to the interviews, was through violence. As already mentioned, the state editors sent to Washington eighteen interviews in which ex-slaves described either having been beaten or having witnessed beatings. Five of the seven ex-slaves who remembered having been whipped themselves justified the master’s actions as a punishment for their own misbehavior. As James Cornelius explained, “Marse Murry . . . whipped me but I needed it. One day I tol’ him I was not goin’ to do whut he tol’ me to do—feed de mule—but when he got through wid me I wanted to feed dat mule.”75
Only four of the ex-slaves whose interviews were sent to Washington openly challenged the masters’ rationale for beating them. The state editors altered the justification given in one of these accounts to suggest that the ex-slave would have accepted violent disciplining if there had been a moral rationale behind it. Although ex-slave Berry Smith did not offer a sweeping condemnation of slavery as Moses had done, Smith did criticize the sons of his first master, who used “de bull-whip an’ de paddle” to “teach us nothin’ but work.”

By reordering Smith’s account of running away from patrollers, the state editors suggest that Smith resented the way in which he had been treated as a slave because he misunderstood the extent to which he had provoked the patrollers to punish him. The accounts in Washington and in Mississippi read as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewer’s Edition</th>
<th>Washington Edition</th>
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| We had fun in dem days. *We used to run from the paterollers*. We’d be fiddlin’ an’ dancin’ on de bridge (dat was de grown folks, but de chaps ‘ud come, too), an’ dey’d say, “Here come de paterollers! an’ we’d put out. If we could git to de marster’s house, we was all right, ‘cause Mr. Bob wouldn’ let no pateroller come on his place, nor Mr. Alf neither. Dey said it was all right if we could git home, but we’d have to take our chances. *Sometimes we’d tie a rope ‘cross de bridge an’ de paterollers’d hit it an’ go in de creek.*" | We had fun in dem days in spite o’ ever’thing. *De pranks we used to play on dem paterollers! Sometimes we tied ropes ‘crost de bridge an’ de paterollers’d hit it an’ go in de creek.* Maybe we’d be fiddlin’ an’ dancin’ on de bridge (dat was de grown folks, but de chaps ‘ud come, too) an’ dey’d say, “Here come de paterollers! Den we’d put out. If we could git to de marster’s house, we was all right. Marse Bob wouldn’ let no pateroller come on his place. Mars Alf wouldn’, neither. Dey said it was all right if we could git home widout bein’ kotched, but we have to take dat chance."

In comparing the two editions, we find that Loveless and Stokes replaced Smith’s assertion that “we used to run from the paterollers” with “De pranks we used to play on dem paterollers!” This substitution
suggests that the slaves’ pranks instigated the patrollers’ chase; thus, self-defense justified the patrollers’ actions, rather than those of the slaves, since the patrollers sought to discipline the slaves’ provocations. The state editors similarly reinforced the idea that the slaves were the inciters rather than the patrollers by moving the description of blacks tying a rope to prevent the patrollers from crossing the bridge from the end of the paragraph to the beginning of it and by making the “rope” into “ropes.” By reordering these texts and adding a few words, the Washington account changed what Smith did from self-protection to provocation and, thus, an act that merited the type of punishment he received.

By rewriting interviews, the state editors made ex-slaves “remember” slavery as having been a paternalistic institution even when they did not voluntarily offer such interpretations. Thus, their reworking of the interviews led the ex-slaves to justify slavery as a time when mistresses nurtured those slaves whose own people could not care for them and when masters controlled those unruly individuals who refused self-discipline. Such interpretations say more about the anxieties of the editors than they do about the needs of blacks during slavery.

Authenticity

While Mississippi state editors altered some of the ex-slave accounts by forcing onto them paternalist conceptions, the editors also attempted to remove obvious signs and symbols of the texts’ subjectivity. For example, they deleted the corn pone in Charlie Davenport’s overenthusiastic description of slavery times as “De best times I ebber knewed.”79 By sending to Mississippi only those texts which were written in the first person and which used black dialect, the editors sought to persuade readers that the texts accurately captured “authentic” experiences. In general, the state editors removed the comments by ex-slaves and interviewers that might lead a reader to think about the interview as a text—a representation of an interview between two individuals—so that instead the reader might consider the document to contain traces of the actual ex-slave (the referent). In this way, readers might understand the interviews to contain objective and authentic articulations of a collective ex-slave experience rather than what really are: the subjective accounts of multi-layered interactions between white Southerners and ex-slaves.
Washington’s correspondences with the state branches suggest that the national office prompted state editors to make the Washington narratives appear to be more objective then they actually were. In the supplementary instructions to Lomax’s interview script distributed to all of the regional branches participating in the project, Brown requested that interviewers not insert their bias into their descriptions. “I should like to recommend,” he wrote,

that the stories be told in the language of the ex-slave, without excessive editorializing and “artistic” introductions on the part of the interviewer. The contrast between the directness of the ex-slave speech and the roundabout and at times pompous comments of the interviewer is frequently glaring. . . . Finally, I should like to recommend that the words darky and nigger, and such expressions as “a comical little old black woman” be omitted from the editorial writing. Where the ex-slave himself used these, they should be retained.80

Combating the interviewers’ condescension was an important mission, yet Brown’s request might have had the unintended consequence of distorting black voices more than revealing actual ones. For example, his emphasis on first person narratives, stories told “in the language of the ex-slave,” might have helped to exclude from the Washington collection the narratives that the three black Mississippi federal writers recorded.81 Rather than trying to document the ex-slaves’ “authentic” voices and folk culture, these three writers focused on the achievements of notable black individuals who had worked for the “uplift” of their race as teachers, preachers, businessmen, and politicians. The black federal writers might have written in the third person without using a dialect to reflect well on their subjects, or they might have chosen to do so because they were influenced by Frederick Douglass’s comment on the minstrelization of black dialect. As Douglass put it: “When a black man’s language is quoted in order to belittle and degrade him, his ideas are put into the most grotesque and unreadable English, while the utterances of negro scholars and authors are ignored.”82 Indeed, most middle-class blacks objected to the use of dialect in writing as demeaning to blacks.83

Brown, however, was an exception to this rule. His use of dialect and archetypal black characters in Southern Road (1932) was pivotal in changing many people’s attitudes toward dialect. Brown believed that folklore and dialect, the “speech of the people,” chronicled and expressed the socio-historical experience and the spiritual struggle of
blacks, thereby creating an aesthetic foundation for a black literary tradition. As Brown explained, “Dialect does not have to be dismissed as capable of only two stops, humor and pathos. If Daniel Webster Davis saw his folk Negro as only a huge feeder on hogmeat, the fault is Davis’, not in the medium of folk speech.” Unfortunately, although Brown may have succeeded in his poetry to “rescue . . . dialect from the wastebins of minstrelsy and the overzealous mimicry of the Dunbar school . . . [and subsequently] to capture the inflection, the timbre, and the racial sound of the vernacular,” the white interviewers in Mississippi were not as successful.

Any recorded version of a spoken dialect might flatten the original speech, yet Brown’s specific recommendations regarding dialect usage, including a long list of standard English words and their “appropriate” dialect form, further distorted the voices of the ex-slaves. In one of the interviews deposited in Washington, for example, Federal Writer Mrs. C. E. Wells recorded her entire interview with Henri Necaise in dialect, although the draft of the interview which remained in Mississippi described him as an ex-slave who “speaks distinctly, and at will can drop the dialect and speak very good English.”

Other interviewers protested the restrictions that Brown placed on the dialect they recorded. In a letter that Marjorie Wood Austin mailed to the Mississippi headquarters along with an interview that remained in Mississippi, Austin attested: “Never in my life have I ever heard a negro say de for the. To spell it so gives the wrong eye-sound. If they drop the t, they say der (deh.) However, since “de” seems to be part of Washington’s idee, fine, I am using it—under protest.” Austin’s letter, which contained five more paragraphs “correcting” Brown’s standardized dialect, illustrates how his rules inadvertently affected the nature of the language recorded.

Another significant way in which the state editors tried to make the interviews they submitted to Washington appear genuine was by rewriting texts to remove demeaning language and statements about blacks. For example, the state editors frequently eradicated diminutive references such as “the little darkie” and pejorative descriptions such as an ex-slave who was the “blackest, black Negro one ever could hope to see,” “chocolate in color,” or “has the wide nose and large mouth so truly characteristic of those negroes whose ancestry is pure African” by either erasing the statements or by replacing them with more benign terms like “he” or “pure African ancestry.” While removing the
CONTESTING “THE WAY THE ALMIGHTY WANTS IT”  21

interviewers’ editorializing, the state editors also removed subjective comments that highlighted the ex-slaves’ intelligence and dignity. State editors expunged interviewers’ notes such as “Anna is an intelligent, though an uneducated person,” and “Uncle Berry Smith is small of stature, hardly over five feet two or three, but of great dignity.” The removal of W. B. Allison’s laudatory description of “Uncle Berry Smith” from the draft submitted to Washington was particularly significant because the interviewer’s comment, if it had been maintained, might have lent credence to Smith’s critique of slavery.

Finally, the state editors removed evidence of the unequal power dynamic between the interviewer and the interviewee by deleting references to a prior relationship between interviewers and ex-slaves, interviewers’ questions, and the ex-slaves’ acknowledgments of their interviewers. For example, when Isaac Stier told Edith Wyatt Moore that “long after de war was over de white folks would ‘gage me to come ‘roun wid de band an’ call de figgers at all de big dances,” Moore obviously asked him a question that was not recorded in either account of the interview. “Yes ma’am,” replies Stier in the Mississippi draft, “dey always paid me well.” Assuming that Stier probably called the dance steps at a party that Moore attended or threw herself, Moore might have searched for confirmation that, indeed, whites had treated Stier well, and Stier might have looked at his toes and meekly responded, yes, of course you were good to me. But the edited version that was sent to Washington has Stier reply by adding in the unprompted comment that “dey always paid me well.”

Although Washington officials’ requests that editors excise intrusive and prejudicial comments made the ex-slaves’ words more authentic than without such revision, the editing process concealed the voices of black interviewers, the power dynamic between interviewers and ex-slaves, and the motivations of white interviewers to recapture “a world they had lost.” Meanwhile, state editors made the Mississippi slave narratives appear to be significantly more reliable and authentic than they actually were, an appearance that reinforced the portrayal of slavery and of race relations in the South that the Mississippi state editors sought to communicate.
Readability

While state editors altered the texts of the interviews to make the ex-slaves legible as cooperative participants in a paternalistic system, Washington editors evaluated the interviews on the basis of their “readability,” which was a code to gauge their appeal to white audiences. An emphasis on the reader led Washington officials not to question the veracity of stories that ex-slaves told if they were good storytellers. “The narratives from the State of Mississippi,” one evaluator wrote,

are colorful, interesting and most of them rich in description and color regarding slavery, plantation life, and the Civil War. They were by far the most valuable and important narratives that I accessed. Some of the narratives from Mississippi can be used as short stories as well as material for social study of slavery and plantation life.94

As this quotation suggests, liveliness minimized the question of credibility. In addition, when good story telling was combined with an appearance of authenticity, the interviews appeared to be even more convincing. Another evaluator stated: “The Mississippi narratives . . . are among the best. They average six to eight pages in length, and are full of information about slavery told in the first person in a lively, interesting manner.”95

Evaluations of the interviews submitted to Washington, which Lomax’s successor Benjamin A. Botkin inherited in 1940, further emphasized the readability of the texts by focusing on the style of the narratives rather than the interview’s content or the nature of the relationship between interviewer and ex-slave.96 For example, an editor pencilled onto Austin’s interview with Henry, the woman who had worked for Austin’s family, that the interview’s “chief value is the vivid manner in which scenes are described and the reader’s interest sustained. . . . This is such a well told narrative,” the editor continued, “it could be published as a short story.”97 In the few instances when reviewer Esther Prager challenged the veracity of individual interviews with ex-slaves, an editor critiqued her evaluation. When she suggested that the picture of slavery that John Cameron depicted where “the master had two slaves only as ‘fiddlers’ in order to ‘kep’ things perked up’ is doubtful,” her editor made her revise her comments after writing her that “doubting a doubtful statement is not sufficient proof of
reliability or unreliability.”98 Thus, the Writers’ Project’s emphasis on producing readable and publishable texts led government officials to privilege the literary qualities of the interviews above their veracity.

The Slave Narrative Collection in Historical Scholarship

Academics who turned to the Slave Narrative Collection to uncover the slaves’ own interpretation of the past in the 1970s were as attracted by the style of the interviews with ex-slaves in Mississippi as were contemporaries. In Voices from Slavery, for example, Norman R. Yetman published just over a hundred interviews from the collection including seven of the twenty-six Mississippi accounts in Washington. Yetman used the same type of literary criteria that the Library of Congress applied to determine the credibility of the interviews. In the introduction to his book, he explained his choice of interviews based on their “readability and interest; detail of content; continuity of narrative; prominence of personal experience as contrasted to mere description of slave life.”99 Yetman was not alone in using the interviews that Mississippi officials submitted to Washington. Many of the primary writers on slavery, including Ira Berlin, John Blassingame, Paul Escott, Eugene Genovese, and Leon Litwack, cited from the Mississippi interviews deposited in Washington, although Rawick published the ones he found in the Mississippi files in 1977, two years before each of these authors, except Genovese, published his account.100 The “readability” and “authenticity” of the Mississippi interviews in Washington probably encouraged historians to select these interesting, lively, vivid, and seemingly uncoerced primary sources to support their theses.

Litwack’s use of Jane Sutton’s story illustrates how the Mississippi state editors’ alterations affected a historian’s argument. The reader will recall that Jane Sutton was the woman who walked twenty miles, after Emancipation, to return to the plantation where she was born in order to rejoin her mother and her brothers and sisters. Litwack included the Mississippi state editor’s interpretation of Sutton’s story that she wanted to see her old mistress as much as her own family in order to illustrate the “close relationships that sometimes developed between slave children and the white mistress.”101 Sutton’s story, in this context, described the type of paternalistic relationships between masters and slaves that the Mississippi state editors had imposed onto the texts of the ex-slave narratives through literary manipulation.
Although criticizing Litwack’s interpretation of a single ex-slave account does not invalidate his wider thesis, it does raise questions about how scholars should use the Slave Narrative Collection. Historically, academics who argued that slavery was consensual ignored the ex-slave interviews, dismissing them—in addition to other sources that presented the slaves’ perspective, such as black newspapers, magazines, and letters from ex-slaves in the papers of the Freedmens’ Bureau’s papers—as markedly less reliable than planter’s diaries and letters. In 1929, Phillips asserted that “ex-slave narratives in general...were issued with so much abolitionist editing that as a class their authenticity is doubtful.” Approximately fifty years later, C. Van Woodward explained the continued neglect of the sources as a result of “a prevailing suspicion of the authenticity and quality of the material itself.” Although Rawick recognized that the interviews with ex-slaves were not without their biases, he attacked historians’ dismissal of the sources for allowing “masters not only [to] rule ... the past in fact [but also to] rule its written history.”

Unlike other historians who refused to acknowledge the slaves’ perspective, Genovese in Roll, Jordan, Roll used more than six hundred footnote references to the ex-slaves’ narratives to describe, to illustrate, and to bolster his argument about the interrelationship between slaves and masters. Genovese contends that slaves resisted their master’s paternalistic worldview by developing a collective black cultural identity and class-consciousness through their own family life, social traditions, religious patterns, and day-to-day struggles. The consciousness they developed, however, was limited both because the master’s ideology confined the slaves and because their own religion, which focused on joy more than alienation, inhibited them from extreme forms of rebellion and, ultimately, from developing their own spirit in the Hegelian sense. In other words, in the slaves’ internal struggle for autonomy, the masters’ will subdued that of the slaves.

In Roll, Jordan, Roll, Genovese cited the articulate critic of slavery, Charlie Moses, in order to support his argument that paternalism shaped the master-slave relationship. “The ambiguity of the slaves’ and freedmen’s talk about freedom,” Genovese wrote,

comes through two testimonies which ought to show how even embittered blacks tried to grant the whites the benefit of the gravest doubts and how the organic aspect of paternalism separated itself, to some extent from slavery as such. . . . [Genovese then goes on to cite from the version of Moses’
testimony that was deposited in Washington]. ‘Slavery days was bitter an’ I can’t forgit the sufferin’. Oh, God! I hates ‘em, hates ‘em. . . . [Genovese’s ellipse] If all marsters had been good like some, the slaves would all a-been happy. But marsters like mine ought never been allowed to own Niggers.106

Genovese used the Mississippi state editors’ rewritten version of Moses’ interview to support his argument that all slaves recognized the institution as paternalistic. The emphasis on paternalism in the state editors’ edition of Moses’ story strengthened Genovese’s argument that paternalism shaped the master-slave relationship. However, the editing of Moses’ words implies that Genovese’s quotation reveals more about white southerners’ investment in having slavery remembered as a paternalistic institution than it does about slaves’ ambivalence toward freedom or internalizations of their masters’ wills.

Understanding the biases that shaped the interviews with ex-slaves problematizes using these sources to bolster interpretations of slavery. On the one hand, academics such as Genovese, who use the interviews to argue that paternalism prevented slaves from becoming independent of their masters’ wills, ignore the way in which state editors constructed the relationship between masters and slaves through literary manipulations of the texts. On the other hand, those scholars who use the interviews to support a thesis of “resistance through culture,” one which argues that slaves were able to develop a consciousness of their oppression and their culture, fail to recognize the extent to which national administrators, state editors, and white interviewers crafted the black folklore “documented” in the interviews.107 Perhaps the greatest problem in such scholarship, however, lies not in the sources, but rather in the questions that academics have brought to these records, ones that generalize about slavery rather than using the interviews in conjunction with other primary sources to explore how slavery differed over time and space.108

As one of the few records of slaves’ thoughts and feelings, the Slave Narrative Collection is invaluable even if it contains complicated sources. The very fact that researchers have found varying accounts of slavery in the narratives suggests both their richness and, as with any primary source, their potential danger. Researchers should approach the ex-slave interviews warily, studying the biases that shaped them and cross-referencing the information they contain against other sources. They should be especially careful before using the testimonies from Mississippi and Texas that state editors sent to Washington, given the
number of interviews they withheld and/or rewrote. Finally, before using the interviews to support paternalistic explanations of slavery in America, researchers should realize that the argument itself censored the voices of ex-slaves.

**NOTES**

I wish to thank the many people who have contributed to this article’s development: Eric Foner introduced me to the Slave Narrative Collection; Alan Brinkley guided the writing of this piece from its earliest stages; participants at West Virginia University’s “Historiographical Currents: Images, Identity, and Memory” Conference responded to a paper based on an early version of this work; Tom Thurston’s Conservation in Context class at the Evander Child’s High School in the Bronx made me realize that even high school students could identify the manipulation in the Mississippi texts; comments from two anonymous readers and the editorial board at American Quarterly helped me to broaden my framework. Finally, I owe a special thanks to my husband Daniel Eisenstadt for supporting me throughout this endeavor.


3. Ibid., SSI:9:4:1597 [series, supplement I: volume 9: part 4, page 1597—all references to Rawick, American Slave, hereafter will conform to this citation style].


5. Ibid., I:7:117. (series I: volume 7: page 117)

6. Editors in Georgia rewrote thirteen interviews (Ibid., SSI:3:1:lvii–lix); editors in Missouri slightly revised two interviews (Ibid., I:2:i); Ibid., editors in Ohio rewrote ten interviews (SSI:5:i); editors in Missouri slightly revised five interviews (Ibid., SSI:12:lviii–lx); editors in Mississippi revised twenty-one interviews. All calculations in this article are based on documents published in The American Slave. Figures are meant only as approximations, since it is unclear how many interviews were lost despite Rawick’s efforts. All numbers without citations are based on my own calculations.


8. Ibid., SS2:2:1:xxx.

10. See *ibid.*, SS2:2:1:xxxix for Rawick’s examination of some of the pairs of Texas narratives. His analysis is by no means exhaustive, and he himself describes it as follows: “This discussion is meant only to be suggestive, not comprehensive, and students of the narratives are urged to do their own comparisons between the items that appear in the *Supplement, Series 2* and the narratives for the same persons appearing in volumes 4 and 5 of the original volumes of *The American Slave.*” Analyzing the 275 rewritten interviews against their originals and then against the additional 316 interviews that remained in Texas is an important project that has yet to be done.


15. The Washington interviews averaged ten pages as compared to five for those left in Mississippi. Roughly one-third of the Mississippi interviews were written in the third person or in the first person without a black dialect. In addition, eleven of the twenty-six interviews sent to Washington resulted from multiple interviews and included roughly one-third of the interviews where more than one interchange was recorded. The other twenty-four such interviews remained in Mississippi.


24. The WPA, established by Executive Order 7034 on 6 May 1935, attempted to move 3.5 million “employable” people—generally defined as healthy, unhandicapped Caucasians who were neither mothers, nor children, nor of retirement age—from direct relief to work relief to the private sector. From 1935 until 1939, approximately one-quarter of WPA funds (or $300 million) financed the Federal Arts Projects, better known as Federal One, which hired an average of thirty thousand white-collar workers to teach Americans about America through fine art, music theatre, and writing. The Ex-Slaves Studies project constituted only one of these programs. See William F. McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts: Origins and Administrative History of the Arts Projects of the Works Progress Administration* (Columbus, Oh.: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1969), 106; Linda Gordon, *Pitted But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare 1890–1935* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1994), 192; and “Unemployed Arts,” *Fortune* 15 (May 1937): 109.


26. Escott, *Slavery Remembered*, 9. Escott asserts that eight out of eleven writers in Florida and thirteen out of twenty writers in Virginia were black.
31. “Questionnaire: Stories from Ex-Slaves.”
37. “Questionnaire: Stories from Ex-Slaves.” Not all folklorists viewed folklore as an exercise in preserving cultural relics. Indeed, John Lomax’s son Alan, director of the Archives of the American Folk Song from 1937 to 1942, saw folklore as a process that was culturally created and transmitted because it served a vital function in that society. With that understanding, he attempted not only to collect but also to use folk culture to address contemporary needs and to contribute to the work of the Popular Front. See Filene, “Romancing the Folk” for more on the generational transition from father to son.
42. Penkower, Federal Writers’ Project, 144–45; Brown interview in Gabbin, Sterling A. Brown, 73.
43. Alsberg to State Directors of the Writers’ Project, in Rawick, American Slave, I:1:174.
44. Ibid.
46. “Questionnaire: Stories from Ex-Slaves.”
47. Rawick, American Slave, SS1:8:3:1032.
49. Ibid., I:7:67.
50. The two largest yet least utilized series in the Slave Narrative Collection, those from Arkansas and Texas, particularly differ from the rest of the collection since they describe people who were the ex-slaves of, or married to, Mexicans and Native Americans.


54. Douglass to Alsberg, 15 Oct. 15 1937 Mississippi Ex-Slave Stories, Correspondence Pertaining to Ex-Slave Studies, 1936–40, Records of the Writers’ Project, Records of the WPA, RG 69, NAB, Wash., D.C.


58. Yarbrough to Douglass, 19 July 1937, Mississippi Ex-Slave Stories, Correspondence Pertaining to Ex-Slave Studies.


60. Alsberg to Douglass, 29 Sept. 1937, Mississippi Ex-Slave Stories, Correspondence Pertaining to Ex-Slave Studies.


62. The following is an excerpt from Clara Stokes’s resume:

Graduate Mississippi State College for Women;
Attended Peabody College and Millsaps College, University of California, Ohio State University, University of Chicago, Columbia University Summers.
Many Years Principal of one of the High Schools in Jackson; President Mississippi Educational Association. (Ibid.)


64. Mark Twain coined the phrase “corn pone” in an essay discovered and published after his death. For more information, see Lawrence, “Introduction,” in ibid., SSI:6:1:lxxxviii.

65. The interviewer and interviewee are respectively referred to as “Mrs. Richard Kolb” and “Dora Franks” in both transcripts of their interview. Mrs. Richard Kolb’s first name is not available.


67. Ibid., I:7:51.

68. Ibid., SSI:10:5:2091.

69. Ibid., I:7:154–5.

70. Ibid., SSI:7:2:790 and I:7:52.

71. Ibid., SSI:7:2:686.

72. Ibid., I:7:47.

73. Ibid., SSI:7:1:55.

74. Ibid., I:7:2:789.

75. Ibid., SSI:7:2:502.

76. Ibid. I:7:129.

77. Ibid., SSI:10:5:1979, emphasis added.

78. Ibid., I:7:129, emphasis added.

79. Ibid., SSI:7:2:569.
80. “Notes by an editor on dialect usage in accounts by interviews with ex-slaves,” Miscellaneous, Correspondence Pertaining to Ex-Slave Studies, 1936–40, Records of the Writers’ Project, Records of the WPA, RG 69, NAB, Wash., D.C. For evidence that Brown was the author of this document, see Alsberg to State Directors in Rawick, American Slave, 174; Penkower, Federal Writers’ Project, 144–45; and Gabbin, Sterling Brown, 73.

81. Anselm Joseph Finch, Will Strong, and Ethel Fleming were the three black Writers’ Project employees.


83. Gabbin, Sterling Brown, x.

84. Ibid., 103.


86. Ibid., 4.


92. Ibid., SSI:10:5:2058.


95. Ibid.

96. Prager review of Nettie Henry interview, 10 Dec. 1940(?), Mississippi Appraisal sheets A–Y, Slave Narrative Project, Writers’ Project, WPA, Box A 900, Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress [MDLC], Wash., D.C.

97. Prager review of John Cameron interview, 11 Dec. 1940(?), Ibid.

98. Prager review of Mississippi Appraisal Sheets, A–Y, Slave Narrative Project, Writers’ Project, WPA, Box A900, MDLC, Wash., D.C.


100. Blassingame’s first edition, which was published the same year as Rawick’s original eighteen volumes of The American Slave, did not even mention the Slave Narrative Collection. His second “revised and enlarged” edition, which was published seven years later in 1979, refers to the collection and includes some of the Mississippi interviews found in Washington but none of those that remained in Mississippi. Escott similarly does not refer to any of the interviews that remained in state archives in his argument, but he does cite Rawick’s supplementary series in his bibliography. In contrast to Blassingame and Escott, the majority of the Mississippi interviews with ex-slaves cited in Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk about their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Emancipation, ed. Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, and Steven F. Miller (New York: The New Press, 1998) come from the interviews that remained in the state archives. Three of the fourteen Mississippi interviews referred to in the text, however, were drawn from the interviews submitted to Washington.

101. Litwack, Been in the Storm, 327.

103. C. Vann Woodward, “History from Slave Sources,” *American Historical Review* 79 (Apr. 1974): 471. Woodward himself did not advocate this viewpoint. He argued that the interviews were no more biased than other sources and that they ought to be consulted in historical research.


