

WPA Slave Narratives: Whose story is being told?

Introduction

In the 1930s when the United States was in the depths of the Great Depression and in the grips of racist Jim Crow laws, the Federal Writers' Project (FWP), as part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), interviewed former slaves and compiled their first-person narratives. Approximately four thousand former slaves were interviewed, and the result is a collection of complex narratives that require the skills of a critical reader. Written by the interviewer and sometimes edited by FWP officials, these narratives feature the biases and perspectives of the interviewers as well the memories and views of the informants. Readers of the WPA Slave Narrative Collection must be wary of several obstacles including the authenticity of the narrative, biases of the interviewer and FWP editors, and the memory and candor of the informant.

Historian Sharon Ann Musher presents three questions for reading the WPA slave narratives ("The Other" 3):

1. Who were the former slaves and interviewers?
2. How did their identities and biases affect the content and structure of the narratives?
3. How did the editors at both the state and federal levels shape the accounts?

This lesson provides students with an opportunity to examine the motivations and multiple perspectives that can shape a historical text. Students will be asked to use critical reading skills, make predictions, and use archival documents to develop new understandings.

Standards

ELA Common Core Reading Anchor Standard 6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

Guiding Questions

How many people are involved in the writing process?

How do biases affect the speaker and the choices made in recording his/her testimony?

How can we find value in complicated and possibly unreliable texts?

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

Identify the multiple points of view that shaped the WPA slave narratives.

Negotiate the challenges related to the multiple perspectives within the WPA interviews.

Resource 1: Excerpt from Sharon Ann Musher’s “The Other Slave Narratives: The Works Progress Administration Interviews.”

Between 1936 and 1938, the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP), a subset of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), recorded thousands of interviews with ex-slaves. The Slave Narrative Collection that emerged consists of autobiographical memories that are indispensable in reconstructing the world that slaves—especially illiterate ones—made apart from their masters. Like all sources, however, the narratives are complicated. Most of the ex-slaves were octogenarians or older when interviewed and children when enslaved. They told their stories to relief workers who were primarily out-of-work, southern, Caucasian writers, librarians, and office clerks in the context of the Jim Crow South. This essay examines the origins and development of the oral-history collection to reveal some of the competing agendas shaping its formation. It offers specific techniques to overcome its problems of authenticity, bias, memory, and candor. And it suggests avenues for future research. (1)

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The WPA interviews might appear to have come literally out of the mouths of ex-slaves, but they do not represent unmediated reality. Instead, it might be more accurate to consider them third-hand or even fourth-hand accounts. Federal writers took notes either while interviewing former slaves or immediately afterward. They passed those drafts onto typists who interpreted the federal writers’ handwriting and then gave them to state editors. Such officials, a number of whom were women with literary aspirations, made further modifications to the manuscripts before generally sending them to national headquarters in Washington, D.C. National administrators then evaluated and organized the interviews. Finally, scholars and folklorists selected, reorganized, and frequently further altered the interviews before publishing them in edited volumes. Even though national administrators warned federal writers not to alter the text of their original interviews, the note-taking process encouraged revision. Thus, at least some of the WPA interviews may represent interviewers’ biases and editors’ agendas more than the ex-slaves’ actual memories.

The WPA collection is not alone in confronting an authenticity problem. Even antebellum slave narratives—the classics—were influenced by abolitionists, who used fugitive slaves’ accounts to counter benevolent descriptions of slavery and descriptions of slaves’ passivity. However, the documentation surrounding the WPA interviews allows careful scholars to investigate the authenticity of their multiple authors. Using the interview scripts, correspondence, and multiple drafts of WPA interviews, researchers can uncover the interactions among former slaves, interviewers, and state and national interviewers. By reconstructing the interviews’ production, they can determine the authenticity of individual WPA narratives and, at times, glimpse more genuine sentiments underneath the original documents. (4-5)

Activity 1: How authentic is the depiction of the speaker?: Reconstructing and understanding the many voices of the WPA Slave Narratives

Students will be able to think critically about the slave narratives and to understand that the slave narratives represent many voices and points of view, which are impacted by many factors and motivations.

Define point of view and speaker for your students. Ask students to consider the many points of view and speakers involved in the creation of the WPA slave narratives.

Define and discuss speaker bias and agenda. Ask students to explain the impact of bias and agenda on the creation of the WPA narratives.

When reading, it is crucial to understand the perspectives of the individuals involved in the creation of the WPA slave narratives.

Ask your students to use the following background information to make inferences and deductions about the authenticity of the WPA slave narrative excerpts provided.

1. **The ex-slaves:** Approximately four-thousand former slaves were interviewed for the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP), representing about 4% of the still-surviving freed slaves (Musher, “The Other” 1). All participants were 80 years of age or older, and were enslaved as children. Unlike former slave Frederick Douglass who penned his own story of his experience in slavery, the men and women interviewed for the WPA project were mostly illiterate. Many of the freed slaves lived under the harsh conditions caused by the Great Depression and by Jim Crow laws. Some were afraid to be honest, including those who believed the federal writers

interviewing them were relief workers determining aid distribution. (Musher, “Remembering” 1).

2. **The FWP workers:** Most of the federal writers conducting interviews with ex-slaves were unemployed, white, white collar workers--such as journalists, teachers, librarians, and clerks. Their interviews were informed by their own perspective, including, for some, racist beliefs in the mythology that slaves were content and that masters were kind. The majority of the interviewers were not trained historians, and they did not electronically record the interviews (McMillen 2). Often, they would ask leading questions and reconstruct dialects after the interviews.
3. **The FWP state officials:** In the 1970’s, historian George Rawick worked with civil rights and political activists to recover thousands of pages of interviews with former slaves that state editors from the FWP failed to submit to the national office in Washington, D.C. Some of those interviews were left to rot in state archives and local repositories despite multiple requests for them made by FWP administrators in the Capitol because of their controversial tone or content (Musher, “Remembering” 2). In fact, as Musher explains, before submitting the narratives from Mississippi and Texas to D.C., “state editors altered the narratives to downplay masters’ abuse of their slaves and racial violence following Emancipation and, instead, to suggest a paternalistic relationship existed between slaves and their benign masters” (Musher, “The Other” 5).
4. **The FWP Administrators in Washington, D.C.:** The administrators included John Lomax and Sterling Brown, who had conflicting agendas in the project, resulting in differences in approaches and questions. Lomax’s interests were the ex-slaves’ “daily life, folk songs, and superstitious practices” and his interview script “shows how it led him at times to promote

racial stereotypes” (Musher, “Contesting” 8). In contrast, Sterling Brown, “the son of an emancipated slave” felt the interviews should focus less on the daily lives of slaves, “but rather that they should record individuals’ responses to varying conditions of slavery and freedom” (Musher, “Contesting 9). As Musher points out, “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” (“Contesting” 11).

Works Cited

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