

MEMORY, PERFORMANCE AND AUTHENTIC SELF-TELLING: RE-APPRAISING AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPRESSION IN AUDIO RECORDED SLAVE NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT

America during the 1930s was in the middle of a crippling economic depression. Splintered by economic hardship, racism and social unrest American society lay fractured. Yet, from this destitute period, a collective effort to seek and define America as a culture emerged. As part of this nationalist reawakening, thousands of Slave narratives were collected by individuals such as John and Alan Lomax; a father and son who have lamented their place as prominent American folklorists.

This research project, reappraises black sources through the implementation of oral history theory; looking beyond the face value of transcribed narratives. This approach has led to the analysis of a small collection of audio recorded interviews from 1935 to 1941. This research method, has emphasised African-American expression, giving agency to a narrative that has so commonly been drowned out by racial biases. Giving precedence to the narratives crafted by former slaves has been at the forefront of this research project; highlighting a dynamic evidence base, borne out of the raw, authentic self-telling's of former slaves.

By studying a small collection of recordings from two of America's most prominent folklorists; this research has contributed to recent scholarly reinterpretations of slavery; which have challenged traditional white narrative's whilst re-appraising black sources.

By appreciating the unique nature of 'interviews' as historical events; we gain an unparalleled history and evidentiary base, not available in a written source.

INTRODUCTION

Surely the words of the slaves themselves constitute the best source on the black experience of slavery (Escott, 1979: xiii).

Slave narratives collected in the southern states of America during the Depression era (1929-1939), have 'become one of the most widely used evidentiary streams' for the study of American slavery (Sánchez-Eppler, 2017: 27). The majority of these narratives have survived in the form of transcriptions. As transcriptions, these sources do not exist in their original form, in that they are interpretations of an event (the interview). This is significant as these accounts were, for the majority, transcribed by white educated researchers. Subconsciously or consciously these interpretations were shaped by the context of the period, a period disproportionately shaped by white perceptions of slavery. As such, these narratives have been "refracted through the lens of another individual" which has in turn altered the integrity of their intent (Zafar 1991, cited in Sheila, 2016: 198). Scholarly debate on African-American experience

has predominantly focused on white interpretations of a largely white source base. The current research reinstates the inherent value of black sources in the re-fabrication of black experience, and an overall black narrative.

This paper will summarise key findings surrounding memory, performance and the interview as a historical event, whilst offering reflective interpretations on the significance of the research within history. Specifically, the importance in history of the continual re-evaluation of sources and the interpretations and narratives they contribute to creating.

By analysing slave narratives as audio recordings, not transcriptions, the current paper offers an emotive evidence base for historians to interpret; an evidence base that offers oral testimony from those that experienced first-hand the legacy of chattel slavery and a discriminatory racial caste system.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical scholarship surrounding slave narratives, especially the WPA narratives¹, is expansive, yet, there has been little work on the audio recorded interviews which form the sample of this research paper. Both the

¹ WPA- Work Projects Administration- was a government agency set up as part of the New Deal

to employ millions of job-seekers to actively carry out social projects on behalf of government.

sample and the WPA slave narratives are linked by the period in which they were produced, and the roles that the Lomax family had in their creation and preservation². Significantly, this research paper has focused primarily on the audio-recorded sources, as opposed to reviewing secondary materials that do not directly address the sample. As such this literature review will focus exclusively on the Depression Era, perceptions of oral sources and traditional criticisms of slave narratives.

There has been little debate, in historical scholarship around the use of audio-recorded narratives as an evidentiary base. As Ira Berlin argued, transcribed narratives have become the 'standard source for the study of slavery'; historians have given 'little attention to the sound recordings of the ex-slaves' (Berlin, 2011: xx). Blasingame suggested that this shortcoming may have been the result of historians having no 'methodological tools which are applicable' to the study of these narratives' (Blasingame, 1975: 480-481). This lacuna in historical literature is intriguing, given the 'allegorical' nature of these slave narratives expressed by White as they say 'one thing and [mean] another' (White, 1984: 8). Given the context in which the majority of slave narratives were transcribed, in a 'way that showed concern for the reader', this is a significantly limiting factor in historians methodological approach (Hill, 1998: 64). This concern for the reader has set the agenda for how narratives were transcribed and subsequently used as a historical evidence. As is explained in Berlin's text, transcriptions have not been produced as verbatim accounts as they're encumbered by the 'sort of verbiage that is typical of spoken language' (Berlin, 2011: LI). Whilst transcriptions offer a comparatively quick overview of slave narratives to the audio recording, they offer a distinctly objective evidence base. These limitations in historical research, traditional criticisms and the lacuna in secondary literature surrounding the audio-recorded slave narratives have set the precedence for this research project.

The white framework within which the slave narratives were created has cast an understandable amount of doubt over their reliability and application in refashioning traditional narratives³. Historians have come to some agreement that the 'Great Depression' loomed 'large in these narratives' (Shaw, 2003: 626). Escott explains that within the interviews the 'substance of the slave's feelings generally lay hidden from white eye[s]' (Escott, 1979: 22). Expanding on this further Sánchez-Eppler reflected on the fact some of the interviewees 'believed that their cooperation might earn their pension checks' (Sánchez-Eppler, 2017: 33). As such, Historians have argued that the social conditions during the 1930s, which were 'nearly as oppressive as slavery', and the consequent racial

hierarchy in which the interviews took place were not conducive for honest dialogue, and saw informants giving 'priority to appeasing' the interviewer (Escott, 1979: 7-8). The contextual backdrop of a racist American society is as significant, if not more significant to consider now when considering these sources as it was in the 1930s. Yet, whilst the generic themes within American society have been studied in the creation of these white narratives, the ideals of individuals who were directly involved in the creation of these sources have not been studied as readily. As Filene contends, 'historians have essentially ignored the Lomaxes' role, as interviewers, within the creation of these narratives (Filene, 1991: 604). This paper in response has studied the personal agendas of the researchers, challenging generic prejudices of American society through their personal motivations and ideals.

METHODOLOGY

A small number of audio recordings with former slaves survive in their original form as part of a Library of Congress (LOC) collection; 'Voices Remembering Slavery: Freed People Tell Their Stories' (VRS) (Library of Congress, 2019). The recordings themselves were collected from over nine states, by a number of different contributors from the period 1932 to 1975. A comparative approach was taken: through the analysis of the whole collection- to gain a foundational understanding of the whole collection. From this analysis came the formation of my sample; ten interviews with five interviewees, conducted primarily by either John and Ruby Lomax or Alan Lomax (1935-1940). In the analysis of the sample, attention was placed on the oral characteristics, features and dynamics which gave meaning to the dialogue exchanged. This method allowed for an emotive and dynamic evidentiary base; emphasising how stories, songs, facts or poems were presented by former slaves. Both the LOC transcriptions and the transcriptions of Guy Bailey were implemented in my research as a guide when needed.

As a historical field, oral history can be seen as a 'subjective methodology', which traditionally, has been mistrusted by historians (Abrams, 2016: 17). This research project, using qualitative analysis, has investigated the distinct differences in the evidence available from a written transcript, compared with the evidence available from an audio-recorded interview. As Samuel expressed, 'Grammatical forms... have little in common with those of the human tongue' (Samuel, 1972: 19). In emphasizing 'orality' in audio recorded slave narratives, this article will highlight the exciting potential of oral history when explored using the correct methods and theory. This research paper argues that whilst 'oral

² The Lomax family were well known and infamous folklorists who contributed greatly to American Folk Music and culture during the 20th century.

³ 'White framework'- this term refers to some fundamental factors that contributed to the creation of the narratives. The social context around the time the interviews took place, whereby, African-Americans were socially inferior to white Americans as the remnants of the racist hierarchy

founded within a slave society still formed the basis of social interactions. Importantly, however, this legacy has had an indirect impact on historical scholarship; parallels can still be made between the majority of researchers being white educated individuals to the majority of the leading academics and historians who's interpretations hold the most agency to this day.

sources must be judged differently from conventional materials, this 'in no way detracts from their veracity and utility' (Abrams, 2016: 17). By examining oral sources as complex historical events, 'that [contain] many layers of meaning', this paper has put emphasis on the oral qualities of audio recorded narratives; illustrating the plethora of evidence that is available to the historian as a direct consequence of an oral history approach (Abrams, 2016: 27).

Significantly, this method has inadvertently constructed 'a second level narrative based upon, but at the same time, reshaping the first' (Abrams, 2016: 25) While this may seem at odds with the fundamental critique of audio transcription laid out above.; this approach has looked to infer and not assert opinions, giving agency to the voices of former slaves through their own expression and experience. Understandably certain limitations have been identified with this research paper, namely; the differing lengths of each interview, the lack of context about each interviewee or interview, the age of each interviewee and the incentives to participate with the interviewers and the small sample size. It also important to note that due to the idiosyncratic nature of the sample and its size, the experiences shared in these interviews are by no means representative of the African-American population.

THE INTERVIEW

This sections considers the interview as a 'three-way conversation', whereby the interviewee 'engages in a conversation with his or herself, the interviewer and with the culture'(Abrams, 2016: 86). Furthermore, it considers how, the interview, a dynamic multilateral conversation, was influenced and shaped by the racial dynamics of the period (Titon, 2016, 488).

In the post-emancipation South, race relations were so turbulent that blacks often 'withdrew to develop their own all-black communities' (Graham, 1991:152). The interviewees seem to have been chosen because they were well known around certain communities. As Bailey explains, most of the former slaves had a 'long presence in one place' which he argues gave them more 'leeway in what they were able to say' (Bailey, 1991: 13). Thus, as outsiders the interviewers occasionally faced a hostile reception. Faulk in a letter to Alan Lomax describes how 'One is immediately struck with the ugly, suspicious expression that constantly lurks about' the faces of white residents, commenting that black people probably 'enjoy about the same prestige' as strangers within the community (Brewer, 1991: 168). Within the sample it is apparent that most interviews had been recorded in a local area to the interviewee. For example, Uncle Bob tells John and Ruby how he was "born not far from this place" (Uncle Bob Ledbetter, 1940: [00:23-00:35]), whilst Wallace Quarterman tells his interviewers how he's from "the state of Georgia" ([1]Wallace Quarterman, 1935: [01:42-01:46]. Location, as noted by the Lomaxes had an impact on the content and coherency of the interview. In John Lomax's autobiography he recollects meeting Uncle Billy. John recalls how he 'spent two evenings in my hotel room' being recorded, noting how he 'talked and sang most freely when we were seated under the shade in front of his cabin' (Lomax, 1947: 276). The Lomaxes, through their research, reflect the very paradoxical nature of American society. Both John and Alan, driven by their ethical and moral principles, wanted to gain 'a greater

humanity' within the interviews they conducted (Taylor, 2015). Yet, they were blind to the limiting factors of being white southerners, who 'as outsiders might influence the ways in which black southerners responded to them' (Filene, 1991: 617-618).

Escott argued that for black Americans 'the injustice of bondage' formed the basis of their interactions with white Americans, whilst for white Southerners 'racism set the bounds for their dealing with blacks' (Escott, 1979: 22). Thus, as Blassingame questions 'whether the interview situation was conducive for an accurate and open narrative, as the 'caste etiquette generally impeded honest communication', can be explored within the sample (Blassingame, 1975: 481). Throughout the interviews the rules of racial etiquette set the tone and dynamic between the former slaves and interviewers. Most notably, Uncle Bob Ledbetter directly addressed John Lomax as 'sir' a total of 11 times (Uncle Bob Ledbetter, 1940: [01:02-10:50]). Furthermore, in part 1 of Uncle Billy McCrea's narrative he addresses John Lomax as "Sir" five times ([1] Uncle Billy McCrae, 1940: [00:15-12:48]. As Ritterhouse explains this etiquette 'often was a black person's appreciation of the fact that if he or she did not say "yes, sir" to a white man', they may respond with racial epithets and violence (Ritterhouse, 2006: 4). Blassingame argues that the interviews followed a 'rigid plantation etiquette' in that the interviewer referred to the interviewee's as 'darkeys, niggers, aunteys, mammie and uncles' (Blassingame, 1975: 483).

In considering the interview as a historical event, it is apparent that the interactions are shaped by the racial, social and contextual dynamics of wider society. By placing emphasis on the voices within the interview, through the oral recordings, the historian gains a broader and more accurate understanding of the construction of the narrative, and its subsequent value as a unique unrefracted piece of evidence.

Memory

Memory is at the core of oral history and must be treated, much like the interview, as a 'complex, creative and fluid' phenomenon' (Abrams, 2016: 75, 108). In recent years, memory has become a topic of interdisciplinary debate; as academics have questioned how it is constructed, conceived and applied. As Abrams explored, memory is subjective, in that it is defined and interpreted 'through the medium of one's mind' (Abrams, 2016: 33). In this capacity memory itself should not be evaluated on the criteria of its validity; whether it is factually correct or incorrect. The focus instead should be placed on the idea that memories have a 'truth value' to the individual who is sharing their memories as an inherent part of their 'identity', which is 'grounded in our memory of the past' (Abrams, 2016: 88). As the narrator recreates their memories, they actively pursue an agenda through the 'negotiation, construction and at time[s], manipulation of what is assumed to have occurred in the past' (Obradović, 2017: 209). Thus, it is as much about how one both individually and collectively, creates their memories with the researcher that is of value to the oral historian. In short, memory should not be perceived as an 'objective reality', instead it should be perceived as a 'social construction' (Obradović, 2017: 211). Each individual memory is situated within a much wider web of social and collective

memories that offer reflections on the wider cultural and societal trends.

Throughout the interviews the former slaves recall their 'autobiographical' memories in that they 'share the events of one's life as they are personally reconstructed in the mind' (Abrams, 2016: 86). For Uncle Billy and Uncle Bob the most basic biographical facts, one's age, caused contention. Uncle Bob, when asked about his age tells John "Well now uh, I told you about, oh, they say I'm seventy something" (Uncle Bob Ledbetter, 1940: [03:33-03:39]). Similarly, Uncle Billy responds in a surprisingly spritely tone "I, I, don't rightly know my age. But I can tell you what I go for." ([1] Uncle Billy McCrae, 1940, [11:35-11:43]. Uncle Bob recalls how his "daddy told me I was, uh, nineteen years old on eight, on the eighteenth, of, uh, December." But stresses that's all he "can go by" (Uncle Bob Ledbetter, 1940: [00:42-00:52]. Uncle Bob explains that he was born in "1880", yet, when he is asked "don't you know how to figure how much that is, that makes you know?" he poignantly replies "No sir. I'm a poor figurer" (Uncle Bob Ledbetter, 1940: [1:02-01:06]. As Shaw explains 'until the 1930's the births and deaths of southern black people of this generation were rarely recorded... by any but their former owners' (Shaw, 2003: 636). The identities of each individual interviewee were intrinsically inked to the old-plantocracy and their former masters. The most basic details that are intrinsic to one's humanity were withheld from these former slaves; a lasting legacy of the chattel system.

Paternalism became an extension of the white plantocracy's control over their subordinate slaves; creating an illusion of familial affiliation and affection. Duane argues that 'the figure of the child created a conceptual bridge that attached race to slavery, as blackness was increasingly equated with childishness (Duane, 2017: 6). This reverberated throughout the oral histories as each former slave recalled positive memories of their masters. John Lomax, the principle figure in the collection and formation of these oral histories, and thousands more, held the belief that the 'Negro was "a simple, emotional, imitative, human being", this view, argued by Mullens, 'caused him to treat black informants in a paternalistic way' (Mullen, 2000: 157). Throughout the narratives, the researchers refer to African-Americans in an array of paternalistic titles such as "boys", "girls", "sweetheart" and "Miss Girl". This influences the former slave's rhetoric as Uncle Billy reflects on his own development referring to his physical and possibly mental development at four points throughout his monologue. He makes comments explaining "I was a good size boy then" and "I was a big, big boy then. A good big boy" ([2] Uncle Billy McCrae, 1940: [01:45-05:36].

Exploring how collective, individual and social memories are presented by former slaves offers a unique insight into the process of reconstructing their childhood experiences within a paternalistic society and interview. Each recollection offers the historian an insight into the creative process of reconstructing memory. Escott argued that 'slavery created "an organic relationship so complex and ambivalent that neither could express the simplest human feelings without reference to the other" (Escott, 1979: 19). These paternalistic tendencies seeped into every aspect of African-American identity.

Performance

Abrams argues that the 'meaning or interpretation' of oral histories 'lies not merely in the content of what is said but also in the way it is said' (Abrams, 2016: 32)..

Songs were a distinctive feature of slave culture, a tradition rooted in the African homeland. As Uncle Bob tells John "oh yes sir... Everywhere you hears me you hear me singing a song" (Uncle Bob Ledbetter, 1940: [01:45-02:02]). Throughout the 10 interviews 15 songs and field hollers are performed by the interviewees. Whilst this large number may reflect the primary interests of the Lomaxes in collecting folk music, it also may reflect the medium by which these former slaves felt most comfortable expressing themselves. Uncle Billy McCrae, in his first interview performs for John and Ruby Lomax, singing songs he recalls from slavery times. Uncle Billy performs 'Blow Cornie Blow', a song sung before 'going to work' ([1] Uncle Billy McCrae, 1940: [01:42-03:27]). He sings in an emotive and rhythmic way, the song is repetitive, slow and easy to understand highlighting its practical application for slaves working. Similarly, Uncle Bob under the direction of John shared three hollers that he used to sing; "Little Joe", "I'm going home" and "No soap, no starch". These hollers, like Uncle Billy's songs, are simple in their construction and repetitive, yet are performed in a heartfelt and emotional way. These songs have inherently different meanings to the performers and the interviewees. John Lomax directs these performances with the superficiality of the audio recording in mind. In stark contrast these performances for the former slaves are expressions of their own personal and collective identities as a marginalized minority. The presentation of these songs personifies the distinct human experiences of the former slaves. Examining song within the narratives 'ultimately show us... voice remains the most promising mechanism for claiming rights' (Johnson, 2017: 247).

Slave performance was distinctive 'for its hard, full-throated and/or nasal tones with frequent exploitation of falsetto, growling and moaning' (negro spirituals, 2019) . For the white interviewer it was a spectacle, but for the black interviewee it was an extension of themselves. As Lomax recalled Uncle Billy spoiled 'a record by jumping to his feet and beginning to dance in the most dramatic moment of a song' (Lomax, 1947:276). This recollection illustrates the expressive nature of former slaves s performances. Within the interviews, songs and hollers are performed without accompaniment. During slavery, musical instruments such as drums, horns and other loud instruments were banned outright by white slave masters as part of the 1740 Negro Act. This legislation looked to appease the paranoid master class by oppressing the seemingly 'mischievous' tools of the enslaved, which were used in their view for 'wicked designs and purposes' (Dunhaime.org, 2012). These regulations were enforced up until emancipation in 1865, engraining a conflicting psyche in the expressive African American culture. Uncle Bob offers evidence of this as he explains "No sir, no sir. I couldn't make no music at all" to which John reminds him "well you could make music with your mouth" (Uncle Bob Ledbetter, 1940: [01:45-02:02]). As such slaves had to improvise using 'whatever was around to make beats: spoons, washboards... their own bodies' (No Drums allowed, 2014). This is apparent in Uncle Billy's expressive rendition of 'Ju Rawsy Row' ([1] Uncle Billy

McCrae, [05:06-06:50]). In this performance he can be heard making percussion-like noises with his mouth, described in the transcription as '[drumming]' (ibid, [06:26-06:31]). Similarly, throughout Wallace's performances a drum like beat can be heard in the background, while this is not alluded to in the transcription of the first interview, it is noted in the second '[he thumbs a washtub base and sings]'([1-transcript] Wallace Quarterman, 1935: 1).

By examining the slave narratives through the performances of the stories, songs and experiences of former slaves one can look past 'the suppressed equanimity and objectivity' of the transcript (Beard, 2007 :536) and give agency to the 'disparate and diverse voices', which embody 'humanity'(Kelly, 2011: viii).

CONCLUSION

The fluidity of oral history as a field has allowed it to 'cross disciplinary boundaries' (Abrams, 2016: 12). This research paper highlights the value of an interdisciplinary research method, for the analysis of audio recorded slave narratives. By listening to original recordings, a plethora of unique evidence has been gathered, that would not have been accessible through the analysis of written transcriptions. Slave narratives have been interpreted in an objective manner, challenging the traditionally closed readings and conceptual underpinnings; instead re-conceptualizing memory, as a social reconstruction, and performance, emphasizing how song and stories were presented. Fundamentally, this approach has granted agency to black expression; recognizing the emotive and expressive methods chosen to share their conflicted, muddled and at times painful experiences. Whilst white interviewers gave agency to black folklore, they dictated,

interpreted and refracted these experiences through the prism of their white paternalistic perceptions. By using only, the transcription as a source of evidence the historian adheres to the white framework within which the narrative was created. This article has highlighted that research 'can never be a once-and-for-all affair'; in that historians must challenge traditional interpretations, and the methods of understanding sources (Samuel, 1972: 22). As Croce stated, "Where there is no narrative, there is no history", by giving agency to the voices of former slaves, my research has attempted to shift the historical focus of these narratives from the white interviewer to the black interviewee. This consequentially, offers historians a unique evidentiary base, entwined with the emotions and experiences of former slaves. By refracting the narrative from white mis-interpretations, to the raw rhetoric of former slaves, this research paper has aimed to re-appraise black agency in conflicted sources- reinstating the value of black sources and agency, in the creation of a new multi-cultural narrative (Croce 1893, cited in White 1984, 3).

This article has highlighted a lack of consideration for the value an oral approach; highlighting the limitations of studying simple transcriptions alone. The plethora of supplementary evidence and understanding available to the historian as a result of using an oral approach; leaves one to consider how different the original recordings of thousands of transcribed narratives that form part of the WPA slave narrative collection could be. This paper offers a unique and challenging perspective on traditional conceptions of memory, performance and identity, in order to highlight the importance of a collaborative endeavour to challenge traditional frameworks, interpretations and narratives.

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