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Teaching the History of Slavery in the United States with Interviews: *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938*

JEFF STRICKLAND

THIS ESSAY OFFERS a practical approach to teaching with the *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers Project, 1936–1938* collection available on the Library of Congress's American Memory website.¹ The essay begins with background on the Works Progress Administration (WPA) interviews and proceeds to a discussion of the historical debate about their reliability. The essay concludes with two instructional methods: an individual activity and a group activity. It attempts to reach a broad audience that includes postsecondary and K–12 educators.

The WPA slave interviews offer an innovative approach to engage students with the history of slavery in the United States. History educators at all levels rely on primary sources, and well-planned implementation of the WPA interviews has tremendous potential to develop analytical and writing skills. Instructors should encourage students to question the sources, contextualize them with the secondary literature, and develop interpretations. The overall goal of the activities outlined in the following pages entails the facilitation of active student learning in history; that is, “doing history.”

BACKGROUND

The *Born in Slavery* collection contains more than two thousand interviews of former slaves, in seventeen states. The Federal Writers' Project, a WPA program, hired a variety of specialists to interview ex-slaves. Between 1936 and 1938, interviewers, overwhelmingly white, interviewed former slaves. Historians have debated their usefulness for as long as the interviews have existed, in the same way they questioned the validity of the antebellum slave autobiographies. In 1941, the interviews were published as the *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves*, a seventeen-volume

microfilmed set. Until the 1970s, however, historians tended to believe that the autobiographies, such as Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* (Buffalo, NY, 1853), had greater historical value than the interviews.² In 1972, sociologist George P. Rawick edited the interviews into sixteen volumes in a nineteen-volume set, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Greenwood, CT, 1972). Historians Ira Berlin, Mark Favreau, and Steven F. Miller edited *Remembering Slavery*, a group of the interviews published as a companion to a radio documentary in 1998 (Washington, DC, 1998). In 2001, the Library of Congress digitized the WPA interviews in the *Born in Slavery* collection, including both scanned images of the typewritten originals and transcriptions.

HISTORICAL DEBATE

For many years, detractors argued that the slave interviews had too many flaws for inclusion in objective historical scholarship. John Blassingame was the best-known historian to reject the WPA interviews, and he excluded them from *Slave Testimony* (Baton Rouge, 1977) and *Slave Community* (New York, 1979). Blassingame cited three major problems with the interviews. First, the interview scenario was disadvantageous to obtain an oral history of slavery because most interviewers were white, and that led to a litany of problems related to the history of race and racism. Second, many of the interviewers edited or revised the original interviews so they were not verbatim accounts of the slave experience. Finally, the average age of the former slaves was over eighty years, raising questions about memory loss, and the overwhelming majority toiled under slavery as children.³

Many historians expressed varying degrees of ambivalence toward the interviews. Historian C. Vann Woodward wrote: "Slave narratives can be mined for evidence to prove almost anything about slavery."⁴ Every type of slavery scenario was included in the interviews: skilled and unskilled labor, urban and rural slavery, small farms and large plantations, small slaveholdings and large slaveholdings. Woodward focused on their weaknesses. One-third of the interviews were conducted in Arkansas, although only three-and-five-tenths percent of slaves labored there. Border States received meager attention, and no interviews were conducted in Louisiana. Only two percent of the total ex-slaves still alive were interviewed. In that sample, WPA field agents interviewed more urban slaves than rural slaves, more men than women, and more house servants than field hands. Woodward

also expressed the concern mentioned above, that the former slaves were elderly, and that most had been slave children. The interviewers were primarily white Southerners, and former slaves tended to defer and avoid conflict during the interview. When African American interviewers were present, the ex-slaves were more candid and often expressed resentment about the slavery experience. Woodward thought historians should approach the interviews with the same scrutiny they applied to other historical sources. “The norm for historical sources is a mess, a confusing mess, and the task of the historian is to make sense of it. . . . Confusing and contradictory as they are, they represent the voices of the normally voiceless, the inarticulate masses whose silence historians are forever lamenting,” Woodward concluded.⁵

Several scholars endorsed the WPA ex-slave interviews as important sources for the study of slavery, and they published edited volumes with introductory essays that addressed the strengths and weaknesses of the interviews. Historian Norman R. Yetman understood the challenges the interviews posed, but he believed there were several uses for them. First, they offered a rich resource for the study of antebellum slavery, emancipation, and Reconstruction. Second, the interviews were excellent literary sources for social scientists, including ethnographers. Finally, the interviews gave the slaves a voice and told the story of slavery from their perspective, something that had been largely missing from the historiography. Instead, historians had tended to portray the slaves as passive victims.⁶ Sociologist George P. Rawick agreed there were problems with the interviews but argued they were “essentially no different from any other oral history collection. . . . If we carefully avoid drawing conclusions that demand precision from these materials, they can be useful.” Rawick focused on the ways the interviews depicted a slave community.⁷ Historian Paul D. Escott reasoned that “[m]any of the interviews—particularly those taken by sympathetic interviewers—evoked compelling remembrances of slavery of the sort it is impossible to fabricate. . . . [T]he narratives were like every other historical source: they had strengths and weaknesses.” Escott encouraged historians to critique each interview as they would other historical sources. He believed the interviews portrayed a vibrant slave community in which slaves “had a deeply ingrained awareness of themselves as an oppressed racial group and that this awareness reinforced their community while it guided them in their relationships with whites during slavery and Reconstruction.”⁸ Today, most historians accept the interviews as an important resource while understanding the aforementioned problems.⁹

INSTRUCTIONAL METHOD

First, instructors will provide their students with adequate background on the history of slavery in North America. Instructors with content deficiencies often glance over the history or rely on their textbooks. This can prove a mistake since many textbooks contain factual errors or merely provide surface-level treatment.¹⁰ Instructors interested in improving their content knowledge might consider reading Peter Kolchin's *American Slavery, 1619–1877* (New York, 1993) or Ira Berlin's *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge, MA, 2003).

Instructors also should consult some of the classic histories that used the WPA interviews: Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World That Slaves Made* (New York, 1974), Herbert Gutman's *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (New York, 1976), Lawrence Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (New York, 1977), and Leon Litwack's *Been in the Storm So Long* (New York, 1979). Each of the above-listed historians portrayed the slaves as active agents who formed stable communities and families under repressive circumstances. The key to the success of these accounts was that the historians balanced (to varying degrees) their use of the WPA interviews with a multitude of other original sources. By the late 1970s, slavery historians had come to rely on the WPA interviews. Historian Charles Joyner trusted them in *Down by the Riverside* (Urbana, IL, 1984), and historians have continued to depend on them since the 1980s.

Second, instructors will teach their students to question the validity of the WPA interviews and to understand the historical debate surrounding their usefulness. Educators should talk about the historians who have debated the reliability of the interviews and inform their students about the kinds of information (valuable and disadvantageous) the interviews contain. The instructor might share some of the examples that follow:

Some slaves recalled the violent repression of slavery, while other slaves evoked memories of benevolent masters:

Sallie Crane: I been whipped from sunup till sundown. Off and on, you know. They whip me till they got tired and they go and rest and come out and start again. They kept a bowl filled with vinegar and salt and pepper settin' nearby, and when they had whipped me till the blood come, they would take the mop and sponge the cuts with this stuff so that they would hurt more.¹¹

G. Leland Sumner: My master was good to his slaves. He give them plenty to eat, good place to sleep and plenty of clothes. The young men would hunt lots, rabbits, possums, and birds. My white folks had a big garden and we had eats from it. They was good cooks, too, and lived good.¹²

Aaron Ford: Just like I tell you, Zonia Rogers was my boss en he wasn't so bad. He whip me a few times when I did things that I oughtened to do. Sometimes I was pesty en he whip me wid a switch, but he never whip so hard. I tell de truth, Zonia Rogers was a good man.¹³

Some slaves recollected their masters did not sell slaves, possibly because they were too young to remember the events or perhaps older slaves shielded them from the traumatic experience of the migration generation of slaves from the southeast into the southwest:

Nellie Smith: As Marse Jack's sons married off he give each one of 'em a home and two slaves, but he never did sell none of his slaves, and he told them boys they better not sell none neither.¹⁴

Ambrose Douglass: Yatsuh, I been sold a lot of times," the old man states. . . . "I was a young man," he continues, "and didn't see why I should be anybody's slave. I'd run away every chance I got. Sometimes they near killed me, but mostly they just sold me. I guess I was pretty husky, at that."¹⁵

Zack Herndon: Atter Mr. Herndon died, I was sold at de sale at Lockhart, to Dr. Tom Bates from Santuc. He bought me for \$1800 so as dey allus told me. Marse Zack had a hundred slaves on dat plantation. Stout, healthy ones, burng from \$1,000 on up to \$2,000 a head.¹⁶

RESEARCH PAPERS

Students tend to produce better essays when they research specific topics. Students will identify the narratives that best answer their research questions. Historian Patrick Rael's *Reading, Writing, and Researching for History: A Guide for College Students* includes a section on "How to Ask Good Questions" that will help students to develop a research question.¹⁷ The students will analyze and interpret the documents and contextualize the interviews within the larger literature on the history of slavery. In this case, instructors should point to the classic studies mentioned at the beginning of this essay.

Typically, I assign a ten-page double-spaced paper plus notes and bibliography, essentially a conference paper. I emphasize to the students that

they should avoid the encyclopedic approach to history. This is not a book report, I tell them. Students tend to deal with a document at a time, offering analysis in a single paragraph and stringing the documents together. For that reason, instructors should encourage a thematic approach to the documents. Some possible themes include violence, family, community, labor, gender roles, religion, and mortality.

In this case, instructors will require that students research a specific theme apparent in the WPA interviews. If students have difficulty developing research questions on their own, some potential research questions include: What evidence of a slave community exists in the interviews? How did slaves maintain stable families? How did slaves resist slavery? How did slaves practice religion? Did life on plantations differ from life on small farms? What were some key aspects of urban slavery? Were there geographic or regional differences in the slave experience? C. Vann Woodward suggests a variety of questions, including some of the following: Who educated children to toil as “good” slaves? Who did the child view as an authority figure? How did the father relate to the family? How did the wife relate to the husband? What was the relative authority or status of the black overseer compared with the white overseer? How did the social structure of the slave community appear from the inside? How much solidarity existed in the slave community? How much division occurred in the slave community?¹⁸

GROUP ACTIVITY

Students will research various aspects of slave life using the WPA interviews. Instructors will utilize a cooperative learning technique that is more than forty years old: the Jigsaw Method. Fittingly, psychologist Elliott Aronson developed the method to assist with the integration of Austin, Texas, public schools. Professor Aronson has outlined the details on his website, but I have adopted the strategy for use with *Born in Slavery*. The instructor assigns the students to “home” groups of four. Each of the four home group members receives a unique WPA interview and an associated question (or questions), and the students break away from their home groups for intensive study in “expert” groups. The expert group members read a secondary source related to the particular WPA interview they have been assigned. The experts return to their home groups to share what they have learned about their interview. Finally, each of the home groups shares their answers, and the groups discuss their findings.

In some instances, students can engage the digital slave narratives in a computer lab setting. The digital slave narratives are keyword searchable and have been organized by state, volume, and narrator. Students can hone their research skills with focused searches.

History educators often lack significant background on American slavery. Their lack of knowledge about slavery leads them to glance over the topic, merely repeating the textbook's limited treatment. In other instances, educators, especially K–12 faculty, organize role-playing activities or contract with education firms that do the same. To put it bluntly, re-enacting slavery, with people of color acting as slaves and whites acting as masters, is outrageous and never a good idea. It might sound ridiculous to the readers of this journal to have to point out that re-enacting slavery is a bad idea, but some schools have gone so far as to re-enact slavery.¹⁹

This essay has offered several ways that K–16 educators can utilize the online *Born in Slavery* collection from the Library of Congress. Instructors should consult the classic histories that were among the first to incorporate the interviews. Instructors should familiarize themselves with the historical debate about the validity of the WPA ex-slave interviews. Then instructors should offer some examples of interviews that reveal those complications. Finally, instructors should implement an individual or group activity that engages their students with the WPA interviews.

NOTES

1. *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers Project, 1936–1938*. <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/>.

2. David Thomas Bailey, "A Divided Prism: Two Sources of Black Testimony on Slavery," *Journal of Southern History* 46, no. 3 (1980): 381–404.

3. John W. Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems," *Journal of Southern History* 41, no. 4 (1971): 482, 484, 486.

4. C. Vann Woodward, "History from Slave Sources," *American Historical Review* 79, no. 2 (1974): 475.

5. *Ibid.*, 472, 75.

6. Norman Yetman, *Voices from Slavery* (New York, 1970), 4.

7. George P. Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (Westport, CT, 1972), xviii, xix, xx.

8. Paul D. Escott, *Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1979), xiv.

9. Donna J. Spindel, "Assessing Memory: Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives Reconsidered," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 27, no. 2 (1996): 251, 259–61.

10. Peter Kolchin, "Slavery in United States Survey Textbooks," *Journal of American History* 84, no. 4 (1998): 1425–38.
11. *Born in Slavery*, Arkansas Narratives, Volume II, Part 2, Sallie Crane.
12. *Born in Slavery*, South Carolina Narratives, Volume XIV, Part 4, G. Leland Sumner.
13. *Born in Slavery*, South Carolina Narratives, Volume XIV, Part 2, Aaron Ford.
14. *Born in Slavery*, Georgia Narratives, Volume IV, Part 3, Nellie Smith.
15. *Born in Slavery*, Florida Narratives, Volume III, Ambrose Douglass.
16. *Born in Slavery*, South Carolina Narratives, Volume XIV, Part 2, Zack Herndon.
17. Patrick Rael, *Reading, Writing, and Researching for History: A Guide for College Students*, July 2004. <http://www.bowdoin.edu/writing-guides/> (accessed November 1, 2013).
18. Woodward, "History from Slave Sources," 476.
19. Steven Yablonski and Karen Lee, "Students Called 'n' Word, Chased through Woods on Field Trip," *WFSB*, October 17, 2013. <http://www.wfsb.com/story/23472914/students-called-n-word-chased-through-woods-on-field-trip> (accessed November 2, 2013); and Vanessa de la Torre, "Parent Files Complaint against Hartford Schools over Slavery Re-Enactment on Field Trip," *Courant*, September 19, 2013. http://articles.courant.com/2013-09-19/community/hc-hartford-parent-complaint-0920-20130919_1_parent-files-complaint-hartford-schools-classroom (accessed November 2, 2013).

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