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Nathan Alexander Moore

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Constructing National Memory:

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When investigating history, it is just as important to realize those who have been left out of the narrative. How Americans largely remember slavery is through the records of slave owners or through the words of literate slaves who committed their memories to print. Although both of these media can be very helpful, they are fashioned in two privileged spheres: the first is one of domination and social power; the second is one of literacy. Largely, the stories gathered from the mouths of ex-slaves have been forlorn and forgotten. Historians have pointed out the many ways in which the ex-slave narratives gathered by the Works Progress Associations have tremendous flaws. One being that many of those interviewed would have been children at the time of their enslavement, and that their memory is not very likely to be trusted. Furthermore, the social setting in which the interviews took place also call into question their veracity: As many of the interviewers were the descendants of white slave owners. In this light, the need to construct stories in a way that made them palatable to a white audience was undoubtedly present, as is the long history of former slaves retelling their lives under subjugation. As James C. Scott notes in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*: “The theatrical imperatives that normally prevail in situations of domination produce a public transcript in close conformity with how the dominant group would wish to have things appear. The dominant never control the stage absolutely, but their wishes normally prevail” (4). Lastly, interviewers were charged with the task of making

these narratives exciting and readable to a wide American audience. In essence, these stories worked as spectacle and entertainment for a more than likely largely White reader pool. Also, there is evidence that some of the narratives were edited, revised, or had portions excised from them. With this in mind, these stories cannot serve as simply historical documents, but as works of literature. That mix semi-autobiographical text with prose and sometimes obscuring specificity.

In this way, I would argue that these texts need not be read as a clear, linear, completely factual account of American slavery—but as a matrix within which issues of forming a national memory and ethnic identity clash. These texts can be used as interpretive tools that serve both to fashion former slaves' subjectivity, and a snapshot of African American culture as a whole, for and by White American citizens. But also, these texts serve as working through a language of tension and struggle. In this way, they serve as texts that are both colluding with and subverting institutional racism. Even though some of the narratives have been edited, one must not overlook/dismiss the resistance that shines through in some of these narratives. It must be especially noted the ways in which some former slaves openly critiqued their masters or left open-ended their opinions.

Sharon Ann Musher suggests that “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 dangers” (25). It is the richness of these stories that intrigued me, as they range from very straight-forward interviews to longer, more constructed narratives to songs. They serve as valuable cultural artifacts that serve both the overarching white supremacist structure of the United States and the personal agendas of the

slaves to preserve and document their lives. Yet, the potential danger of these texts is to read them through a singular gaze, one which wishes to examine them only as historical/factual documents or one that simply disregards them as corrupted sources of information. I found myself facing the same dilemma of how to read and interpret these stories. In the end, I view these texts as cross-cultural forms of communication. In this way, they serve both the White and Black Americans as ways to remember the constrained history of slavery. Even though the voices are those of former slaves, it must be remembered that they are speaking to a White audience via proxy of a White interviewers. Within this framework, any testimony of these slaves is one of resistance and collusion, expression and repression, remembrance and willful forgetting. That is why I have chosen to examine excerpts from these interviews that I feel show both subtle and explicit ways in which former slaves resisted the erasure of the violence and trauma of their lives under enslavement. Additionally, as Toni Morrison describes “in shaping the experience to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it, they were silent about many things, and they “forgot” many other things. There was a careful selection of the instances that they would record and a careful rendering of those that they chose to describe” (91). The certain ways in which former slaves constructed their answers illuminates the many ways African Americans had to navigate systems of power during slavery and after the Emancipation Proclamation.

Becky Roberts writes that “The WPA narratives overlap disciplinary boundaries, and scholars who approach them either as autobiography or as historical data usually express ambivalence about their value and undermine the authority of their voices. The challenge is to develop a critical reading hermeneutic that will enable us simultaneously to recognize the historical dimensions of these narrative[s] and to be attentive to their linguistic complexity and

creative power” (22). My critical reading of these stories centralizes the authority of their oppositional voices of former slaves. Yet, this does not mean that I have completely ignored the ways in which these collections were constructed and the historical forces that were working against former slaves exposing fully the atrocities of enslavement. With this in mind, I view these texts as communal works that serve both as resistance to historical erasure and as tools to forge a national memory of slavery that is diluted and largely represented as a paternalistic institution. One should “view these documents not as exemplars of expressive culture, but material and cultural mediations of a particular historical configuration” (Roberts 6). This means that these interviews can neither be discarded nor fully venerated for their authenticity. These narratives must be viewed as having multivalent and being used for the individualized purposes of the interviewee and the national purpose of the WPA. In this way, the construction of a national memory is flawed by the institutional biases of a governmental administration and the need of former slaves to protect them from further violence. This can be evidenced in the obsequious voice of Lizzie Davis who is quoted: “Oh, I been know your father en your grandfather en all of dem. Bless mercy, child, I don' want to tell you nothin, but what to please you. Lord, I glad to see your face. It look so lovin en pleasin, just so as I is always know you. Look like dere not a wave of trouble is ever roll 'cross your peaceful bosom” (Ex-Slave Narratives, Administration). It seems the need to ease the minds of White interviewers and negotiate the narrative space of the interviews is a constant struggle.

I have compiled and critically read a few slave narratives that exemplify the ways in which this national memory has been constructed and destabilized by these stories. More often than not, slaves kept silent about the abuses or violence endured under chattel slavery. Yet, in some interviews there are glimpses into the truth of the degradation of the system. This concerted

silence serves not only to protect the former slave from backlash from their White interviewer or community members, but also serves as a form of protective dissemblance. In this way, the slave can also distance their self from the harmful memories of the past, therefore preserving their own psyche and emotional well being. On the other hand, knowing that many of the interviews were edited and revised, the lack of fully explicated retellings of violence on plantations can be attributed to administrative staff wanting to construct a certain kind of memory from the interviews, and a certain remembrance to be had for the American public writ large. 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 authentic; and finally, they strove to write stories that would be entertaining and eminently readable (Musher 14). Conversely, there is always within these same texts, the slave's intentional construction of their narrative, and the liminal power they hold to deflect or destabilize the narrative being constructed from their life history. When Millie Barber states: "You wants to know all 'bout de slavery time, de war, de Ku Kluxes and everything? My tongue too short to tell you all dat I knows. However, if it was as long as my stockin's, I could tell you a trunk full of good and easy, bad and hard, dat dis old life-stream have run over in eighty-two years" (Ex-Slave Narratives, Administration). One can view the subversive, oppositional ways in which former slaves chose to recollect their lives under enslavement. In this way, Barber signifies on the ways in which knowledge is being held in these interviews and the ways in which the state, the governmental, and the empirical ways of knowledge production are insufficient in fully telling the whole story.

The willingness for slaves to uncover partial truths is a theme that can be read throughout the collections as a whole. Willie Barber proves to be an exemplary case of partial truth-telling

when he retells the stories of his parent's voyage from Africa to America. He states: "It was 'ginst de law to bring them over here when they did, I learn since. But what is de law now and what was de law then, when bright shiny money was in sight? Money make de automobile go. Money make de train go. Money make de mare go, and at dat time I 'spect money make de ships go. Yes sir, they, my pappy and mammy, was just smuggled in dis part of de world, I bet you!" (Ex-Slave Narratives, Administration) In this moment, a slave take narrative control during the interview and, more strikingly, one must note the slave's subtle critique of the inhuman system of slavery and the continuance of American capitalism that it helped form. This critical blow may have gone unnoticed to the interviewer, as it may have been read as entertaining or circumstantial, but when reexamined it demonstrates the subversive ways in which former slaves signified on the questions being asked of them all the while protecting themselves from retaliation. This same masterfully constructed difference can also be seen in the interview by Josephine Bacchus, in which she describes slavery only as things she has heard offhand from other people. By constructing her answers in such a way, Josephine distances herself from the violence of slavery, perhaps making the retelling that much easier. But more importantly, this strategy serves to relinquish her from the responsibility of owning the narrative. That being said, her words are not her own, but come from others. Additionally, Josephine's strategy also the conditions she describes to be read as communal, largely overarching, and systemic. And it is here that a hidden critique can be read from her distanced retelling:

"My blessed a mercy, hear talk dey spill de poor nigger's blood awful much in slavery time. Hear heap of dem was free long time fore dey been know it cause de white folks, dey wanted to keep dem in bondage. Oh, my Lord, dey would cut dem so hard till dey just slash de flesh right off dem." (Ex-Slave Narratives, Administration)

Although she couches the tale in her own unknowing and lack of memory, there is still a critical edge to the memory. Josephine declares: “Lord, pray Jesus, de white people sho been mighty proud to see dey niggers spreadin out in dem days, so dey tell me. Yes, mam, dey was glad to have a heap of colored people bout dem cause white folks couldn' work den no more den dey can work dese days like de colored people can. Reckon dey love to have dey niggers back yonder just like dey loves to have dem dese days to do what dey ain' been cut out to do.” (Ex-Slave Narratives, Administration) In this moment, Josephine signifies on the labor capable of Blacks as that compared to Whites. Although the testimony is couched in hearsay, the critique of the general laziness of the White ruling class should not be overlooked. Josephine’s tactic of maintained distance in her testimony demonstrates some of the ways in which former slaves dissembled their experiences in slavery, keeping them from telling the whole truth to a majority White audience. At the same time, little spaces of resistance and critique can be found in these interviews that speak to the tenacity and intelligence of African American former slaves to navigate potentially dangerous social relationships.

Lastly, a common topic that is prevalent throughout these collections of interviews is folklore, folk medicine, and ghost stories. These topics were largely included due to their entertainment value by white interviewers. Yet, on the other hand, a former slave’s willingness to discuss these topics can be read as a form of intervention and critique of White cultural hegemony. Most of these instances when African American interviewees speech to ghosts and folk medicine can be read as a continuation of cultural practices that have roots in West African traditions. In this way, these stories serve the White reading public as entertainment from quaint, perhaps ignorant minority populace, but to African American former slaves this can be read as their way of infiltrating White capitalist elitist spaces. These stories and anecdotes come from a

specifically Diasporically Black space of knowledge production. These stories serve as artifacts from a people whose culture was stolen from them, reformed and hidden largely from the general public. These stories also serve as resistance to Imperialist, empiricial studies of the “Other”. In this way, using their minimal agency in the contexts of these interviews, former slaves were allowed to share their own embodied knowledge and make inroads into the hegemonic structure of American national archives. Furthermore, in these folk tales and ghost stories, one can infer the ways in which African Americans subtly critique the overarching structures of oppression. In this light, when Millie Bates describes the kinds of haints she had seen, she is also constructing a veiled critique of the violence done to Black people during slavery. Millie is quoted as:

"Chile, don't axe me what I seed. Atter all dat killin' and a burnin' you know you wuz bliged to see things wid all dem spirits in distress a gwine all over de land. You see, it is like dis, when a man gits killed befo he is done what de good Lawd intended fer him to do, he comes back here and tries to find who done him wrong. I mean he don' come back hisself, but de spirit, it is what comes and wanders around. Course, it can't do nothin', so it jus scares folks and haints dem." (Ex-Slave Narratives, Administration)

Whether fictitious or grounded in reality, Millie’s statement can be interpreted as being critical of the sociocultural structures that built America: namely, slavery, capitalism and Christianity. In this brief moment, Millie speaks upon the violence done to Black Americans under enslavement and notions of Christian salvation after death. Not only does this framing utilize an African aesthetic of being in close proximity to spirits, it also serves as a foil to the Christian ideal of salvation after death. Furthermore, in this instance the violence happens within a cross-

generational setting in which descendants of the dead are still made aware of the violence and trauma of slavery.

In conclusion, I believe that the Ex-Slave Narratives serves as a grand repository for the depth and richness of African American experience. Yet, I stress that these accounts of slavery are not without their faults, and that this has not been an exhaustive exploration or reading of them. Even more importantly, it should be noted that the contexts in which these interviews were recorded and how race, class and gender contribute to any reading of these texts. Moreover, it must be noted that these stories are neither fully empirical, unbiased accounts nor totally expressive forms of literature. They are hybrid texts that must be read through a lens of critical approach that accounts of their flaws but pushed the already minimal scholarship on these texts. And as Becky Roberts states: “The social constraint under which they spoke does not fatally taint these texts; but rather testifies to the difficulty that former slaves faced claiming a voice in national culture. These signs of the near-impossibility of unfree subjects speaking “freely” should be a motivation to keep what we have from lapsing into silence” (142-143). Revisiting these narratives means that scholars must reevaluate their standards of discourse and how to critically engage texts that may be deemed problematic. But I believe that these texts are too valuable to be overlooked and obscured.

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