Constructing A National Memory

The Problematics of Resistance & Remembrance of Slavery

Nathan Alexander Moore
Narratives of slavery re-opened the wounds of the antebellum period: the political, cultural and military battles for abolition; the daily violence of forced labor; the armed resistance of slaves in the U.S. and Haiti; the violence against black women and their families through rape, forced breeding and the domestic slave trade. (Roberts 1)
While the WPA narratives may indeed be limited as historical data or literary works, they are nonetheless extremely significant texts because they indicate just how much is outside the bounds of representation in print culture. (Roberts 22)
Intentions

- Some slaves may have lied or only told have truths to protect themselves from societal retaliation.

- State editors modified the narratives:
  - They attempted to illustrate that ex-slaves remembered slavery as having been a paternalistic institution
  - They sought to create texts that appeared authentic
  - They strove to write stories that would be entertaining and eminently readable.
Former slaves had good reason to be wary about the violent border crossing between race, class and literacy. (Roberts 141)

Therefore, I suggest that slaves constructed hidden meanings in their interviews.

Using the techniques of dissemblance & signifyin’ to critique systems of power but appear ostensibly neutral in response.
Creating a distance between themselves and the retold event, action, or situation.
- Using “hear-say” spoken by others to be the foundation of their interview answers.

Dissembling, hiding the truth through partial narratives
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.