In a wave of experimental programs during the Great Depression, the federal government paid relief workers to interview former slaves. Between 1936 and 1938, the Federal Writers' Project, a subset of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), recorded thousands of ex-slaves' reflections about bondage and freedom. The WPA interviews document the experiences of ex-slaves, most of whom 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. The climate of race relations in the South, the rules of racial etiquette, and the financial constraints of an elderly poor population enduring hard times shaped the narratives produced by this initiative. Not surprising, problems of authenticity, memory, and candor haunt the accounts.

Nevertheless, the Slave Narrative Collection preserves the memories of thousands of illiterate and otherwise undocumented former slaves in something that approximates their own words and offers invaluable insights into their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. The interviews are diverse and wide ranging, portraying everything from the growing self-consciousness and cultural development of a people who resisted their enslavement to the acquiescence of a seemingly contented lot. Like all sources, they must be analyzed closely; however, they are indispensible in reconstructing the world that slaves made apart from their masters and illustrating the ways they resisted white domination.

The WPA collection stands out from other slave narratives because of its size. Although the exact number of interviews with ex-slaves is difficult to ascertain because of the multiple places where state editors deposited them following the project's conclusion, roughly 4,000 WPA slave narratives have been documented, and more than
3,500 of those have been published. The WPA ex-slave interviews constitute the bulk of all recorded commentaries, autobiographies, narratives and interviews with former slaves. They also incorporate almost 4% of the still-surviving freed-slave population in the mid-1930s (an adjusted estimate based on Yetman 1967, 534).

Although the WPA slave narratives are voluminous, they are not necessarily representative of the former slave population. Federal writers did not scientifically sample ex-slaves. Instead, they frequently interviewed those they knew, who knew someone they knew, or who lived relatively near to them. According to historian Norman Yetman, the collection overrepresents urban areas, although most elderly blacks were rural (1984, 188). The extreme longevity of the former slaves interviewed also suggests that the WPA ex-slaves were atypical and perhaps received better treatment than their enslaved peers. While slaves born in 1850 typically lived fewer than 50 years, scholar John Blassingame points out that almost two-thirds of the WPA interviewees were 80 or older (1977, li).

Still, the WPA ex-slave interviews are more representative than many other published slave narratives. The collection includes narratives of slaves from wide-ranging occupations, plantation size, and type of master. Rather than being limited to fugitive slaves from the upper South, as is the case in many written slave narratives, the WPA collection includes the memories and perceptions of individuals who had been enslaved or originally lived in 17 former slave states, eight free states, three sections of the territories that would later become states, and Great Britain. Like most African Americans prior to Emancipation, the vast majority of them had lived in the Deep South.

The WPA interviews also distinguish themselves based on their incorporation of the illiterate and working class. This discrepancy not only draws attention to a previously underdocumented population but also uncovers narratives that differ from what the literary scholar Charles J. Heglar describes as classical male “narratives of transformation” embodied in Frederick Douglass’s autobiography (2001 1-19). Instead of emphasizing an individual and linear ascent from slavery to freedom, the WPA narratives highlight the complicated relationship between bondage and freedom that many former slaves experienced. The interviewees tend to situate their experiences within the context of their friends’ and family’s accounts, as well as accentuating the role that community and culture played in preserving their identity during slavery. They also recount their current economic troubles and question how free they are as largely elderly southern blacks enduring the depths of the Great Depression.

In addition to emphasizing new narrative structures, the WPA slave collection further sets itself apart through its gender inclusivity. Roughly half of the collection records women’s voices. In contrast, Blassingame contended that black women penned less than 12% of written slave accounts (xlii). A widely accepted opposition to women speaking in public and an assumption that women were submissive and domestic meant that most abolitionists pursued male fugitive slaves, encouraging them to speak on the lecture circuit and then to write and publish their recollections of slavery’s hardships. By interviewing former slaves regardless of their literacy or abolitionist tendencies, the federal writers created a richer record than other published slave narratives.
This essay proposes a tentative framework for analyzing the Slave Narrative Collection, with the aim of maximizing its rich potential while lessening its complications. It examines the origins and development of the collection to reveal some of the competing agendas shaping the collection. It then analyzes the WPA narratives according to four problems they pose to researchers—authenticity, bias, memory, and candor—offering techniques to overcome such challenges. Finally, it suggests avenues for future research on the collection.

**History of the Slave Narrative Collection**

By the late 1920s and 1930s, when efforts to interview former slaves began in earnest, a racist narrative of slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction had become paradigmatic under the influence of southern historian U. B. Phillips. Relying on sources created by slave owners and aristocrats, Phillips argued that slavery was a benign institution that civilized blacks. To counter his interpretation, scholars working at all-black colleges and universities in the South turned to former slaves. Collectively, Yetman reported that they gathered 550 interviews (1967, 540–541).

In 1934, historian Lawrence Reddick, who had interviewed ex-slaves as a student at Fisk University, approached one of the first agencies that President Franklin Delano Roosevelt established to address unemployment, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), and proposed hiring black college graduates to interview the remaining ex-slave population. Between September and July, Reddick hired twelve black interviewers in Indiana and Kentucky who interviewed 250 former slaves. But FERA cut funding to the project after less than a year because, as Yetman concluded, of problems with its training, administration, and finances (Yetman 1967, 540–541).

The prospect of interviewing the dwindling population of freed slaves nevertheless remained compelling. In 1936, without prompting from the national office of the Writers’ Project, federal writers in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia spontaneously began to interview ex-slaves. The narratives they submitted to Washington, D.C., especially those collected by federal writer Zora Neale Hurston in Florida, captured the attention and enthusiasm of national administrators. That April, folklorist John Lomax formally initiated the Slave Narrative Collection when he sent a 20-question interview script to the Writers’ Project’s state directors to “get the Negro interested in talking about the days of slavery” (Yetman 1967, 548). Lomax asked federal writers to gather information about the slave world, in terms of their treatment by masters, their religious experiences, and their memories of the Civil War and Emancipation. As a folklorist, he was particularly interested in recording the former slaves’ folkways, stories, and songs. In his interview script he wrote: “Can you tell a funny story you have heard or something funny that happened to you? Tell about the ghosts you have seen” (Musher 2001, 8).
The difference in tone and content is marked between Lomax’s initial questionnaire and two others that appear to have been written by director of the Negro Affairs Committee Sterling Brown and folklorist Benjamin A. Botkin while Lomax was on a 90-day furlough. On July 30, three months after Lomax distributed his interview script, director of the Writers’ Project Henry Alsberg sent a new version to regional directors. It prefaced Lomax’s questions with ten additional ones focused on former slaves’ awareness, organization of, and response to slave rebellions, Reconstruction, black suffrage, political office holding, and secret societies (Musher 2001, 9–10). An even more detailed and politically assertive interview script was distributed shortly thereafter. This one contained 333 questions intended to serve as a guide for interviewing ex-slaves. Queries addressed the punishment and sale of slaves; their experiences of sexual intercourse (among slaves, with masters, conjugal and nonconjugal), marriage, childbirth (including abortion, miscarriage, and contraception), divorce, and death; the treatment of “mulatto or near-white babies” and those “thought to be the master’s”; education, religion, songs, and dances; interactions with Native Americans, Creoles, and slaves born in the West Indies or Africa; responses to southern racial etiquette; intraracial distinctions based on gender, pigmentation, and occupation; distinctions concerning the work and punishment of men versus women; and experiences with the Ku Klux Klan, suffrage, education, and religion after emancipation (Perdue et al. 1976, 367–376).

A close reading of the interviews with ex-slaves conducted in Mississippi reveals that most interviewers used only Lomax’s initial interview script. Some interviewers used both that script and also Brown and Botkin’s addendum, at times returning to the same former slaves to ask them the second set of questions. None of the narratives, however, appears to have used the extensive third interview script (Musher 2001, 12). Even the all-black unit of federal writers in Virginia does not appear to have drawn questions from the longer questionnaire, which was found among the papers of the unit’s director, Roscoe Lewis, a chemistry professor at the all-black Hampton Institute. Instead, those under Lewis’s supervision probed the former slaves’ feelings regarding slavery and freedom, asking them how slavery helped or hindered them after Emancipation (Perdue et al. 1976, xxxvi).

New Deal administrators always intended to publish the Slave Narrative Collection. The Federal Writers’ Project needed to prove its productivity to justify its existence. In fact, historian Jerrold Hirsch argues that federal writers largely stopped collecting interviews with ex-slaves by 1939 because budget cuts and political turmoil forced them to focus on the publication of state guides over more potentially controversial and less immediately publishable projects (2003, 138–139). In 1941, Botkin collected and organized the roughly 2,300 interviews that federal writers had sent to Washington, D.C. and deposited them in the Library of Congress’ Manuscript Division. Four years later, he edited a volume of the narratives aimed to popularize the collection (1945). But until the 1970s, scholars rarely approached the interviews. Because of their quest for objectivity, academics remained uncomfortable with oral history. They feared that the interviews were unreliable because of the nostalgia that peppered them and the loss of memory by the aging former slaves interviewed. Advances in social, oral, and
women's history in the 1970s, however, led researchers to reconsider the Slave Narrative Collection.

If scholars began collecting interviews with former slaves to counter U. B. Phillips's interpretation of slavery at the beginning of the twentieth century, they rediscovered and began to mine those interviews later in the century in response to another scholar's conception of slavery: Stanley Elkins. According to Elkins (1959), slavery was so individually and socially debilitating that the enslaved literally could not rebel. In order to disprove Elkins's thesis, scholars turned to the Slave Narrative Collection to reveal slaves' perspectives on their bondage and resistance.

Historian and activist George Rawick played a pioneering role both in the recovery of the Slave Narrative Collection and in countering Elkins's thesis by reconstructing slave life, as he put it, from "sundown to sunup." In 1972, Rawick oversaw the publication of The American Slave, which included the 16 volumes worth of the material Botkin had placed in the Library of Congress, plus an introductory volume by Rawick, and an additional volume containing interviews with ex-slaves that black scholars at Fisk University collected in the 1920s and 1930s. Rawick then published two supplementary series, the first one in 1977 included materials and interviews deposited in the Library of Congress's Archive of Folk Song and its WPA storage unit. The second series published in 1979 included records that government employees had left in state repositories and archives rather than submitting to national headquarters in Washington, D.C. When it was completed, the entire series included 40 volumes and approximately 3,300 interviews with ex-slaves.

Rawick's The American Slave included the vast majority of the WPA interviews, but it excluded three critical sets of interviews: those conducted by all-black units in Virginia, Louisiana, and Florida (Louisiana Writers' Project 1945; Clayton 1990; and Perdue et al. 1976). In addition, he did not incorporate transcripts of tape-recorded interviews with former slaves gathered by John and his wife Ruby Lomax, Zora Neale Hurston, Stetson Kennedy, or Roscoe Lewis (for evidence of these, see Mormino 1988, 399–419, and White and White 2001). Despite the shortcomings of Rawick's collection of WPA former slave narratives, his project—and the two scholarly indexes that supplement it—have markedly enhanced the interviews' availability to scholars (Jacobs 1981).

Since the early 1990s, historians, folklorists, and lay writers have revised, reorganized, and republished the WPA interviews, simplifying dialects and narratives to make them attractive for lay readers (for examples, see Howell 1995 and Berlin, Favreau, and Miller 1998). In the twenty-first century, the WPA interviews have moved even farther into popular consciousness through the Library of Congress's creation in 2001 of "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938." This is a searchable online version of the 2,300 narratives that Botkin deposited with them in 1941. It includes the interviews published in Rawick's initial volumes but not the supplementary materials. An HBO documentary released two years later, Unchained Memories, with Whoopi Goldberg, Oprah Winfrey, and other renowned actors further brought the narratives to life (Bell and Lennon 2003). The proliferation of works focused on the WPA's interviews fulfill New Deal administrators' goal of widely circulating the interviews.
The popularization of the Slave Narrative Collection makes assessing its strengths and weaknesses all the more important. The WPA slave narratives raise four primary problems: authenticity, bias, memory, and candor. How closely do the interviews replicate the actual words spoken by the former slaves? How do the biases of ex-slaves, federal writers, state editors, and Washington, D.C. based bureaucrats color the narratives? How reliable are the memories of the elderly about their childhood experiences? And, finally, how should scholars interpret former slaves' use of irony and distortion in responding to the federal writers' questions? To understand how to avoid the collections' weaknesses, researchers will want to look closely at who the former slaves and interviewers were, how their identities and biases affected the content and structure of the narratives, and how the editors at both the state and federal levels further shaped those accounts.

**AUTHENTICITY**

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.
To select the WPA narratives that most closely approximate the former slaves’ words and experiences, researchers should use the earliest drafts of interviews, typically those submitted to state offices. Scholars should not begin with the interviews that were sent to national headquarters, since fourteen state editors did not submit all of their interviews to Washington, D.C. despite multiple requests for them to do so, and at least five state editors revised the manuscripts before sending them to the national offices (Rawick 1977, xxxvi–xxviii). Special care should be taken with interviews from Mississippi and Texas, where 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 2001, 9–10).

To find the earliest versions of WPA interviews, researchers should consult one of the two indexes to Rawick’s multivolume work. There, they will find information regarding how many times individual ex-slaves were interviewed and where in Rawick those interviews can be found. In general, scholars should rely on Rawick’s Second Supplementary Series containing the interviews that remained in states’ files and archives rather than the original series, which includes those deposited in Washington, D.C.

If readers consult the Library of Congress’s American Memory site, Born in Slavery, they should be aware that those include the most revised drafts of interviews. They should also recognize that they do not include many of the most reliable interviews, such as those gathered by all-black units in Florida, Louisiana, and Virginia. Thus, scholars should not use the website alone, but instead ought at least to double check their work against one of the indexes to determine whether earlier versions of interviews exist. If they do exist, researchers should review them to avoid unwittingly attributing editors’ comments and revisions to the former slaves.

Readers should also avoid using the slave narratives to study the former slaves’ speech. Three factors raise serious questions regarding their linguistic authenticity: First, most of the interviews were translated too many times—from the former slaves, to interviewers’ notes, to typists’ accounts—to accurately represent nuances in dialect. Second, New Deal administrators, including the black poet Sterling Brown, deterred federal writers from directly documenting the ex-slaves’ language. Instead, they encouraged them to simplify local dialects to create uniform, accessible, and readable narratives suitable for publication in a single volume (Musher 2001, 19–20).

Finally, dialects were a politically sensitive subject that many upwardly mobile African Americans considered demeaning. While some black interviewers, such as Florida-based Zora Neale Hurston, carefully recorded local cadences, others, including Arkansas’ Samuel S. Taylor, erased black dialect, even if the former slave spoke with one, to highlight racial progress. White interviewers both recorded the dialects they heard and also imposed them on former slaves to suggest their inferiority. The range of spellings and pronunciation in the WPA interviews makes the collection appear to represent a wide range of dialects. But with the exception of the few audiorecorded interviews or those written by federal writers, such as Hurston, who were well attuned to preserve local dialects, the collection does not accurately reflect the former slaves’ speech patterns.
The organization of the WPA collection also shapes its content. When Botkin arranged the interviews before depositing them in the Library of Congress, he filed them according to the state where former slaves lived when they were interviewed rather than the place where they had been held in bondage. Thus, if you are looking for interviews with individuals who were enslaved in Arkansas, you should not turn to Rawick’s volumes on Arkansas or click on the map of Arkansas in the Library of Congress’ *Born in Slavery* section, where the American Memory editors suggest you “browse by state”; instead you should consult researcher Howard E. Potts’s index (1997), which is listed according to the state where the former slaves were enslaved. In the rare case of Arkansas, you might also pick up *Bearing Witness*, an edited volume by folklorist and local historian George E. Lankford (2003), who reviewed Rawick’s collection and published an assortment of interviews with former slaves who had been held in bondage in Arkansas as opposed to those who moved there once free.

Because so many intermediaries shaped the WPA’s slave narratives, scholars should not view them as the unadulterated words of former slaves. Instead, they should recognize the multiple dialogues and encounters that formed them, trying as much as possible to recover the initial encounter(s) between federal writers and former slaves, decode the interpersonal dynamics between the two, and identify the ways in which editors might have further shaped the final narrative.

**Bias**

Given the context of racial relations in the Jim Crow South, the average age of the former slaves interviewed, and the fact that most of their interviewers were white, it goes without saying that the WPA slave narratives are biased. But how did the biases of the various players—the former slaves, federal writers, state and national editors—shape the narratives? And how might scholars work around, against, and with such subjectivities to draw reliable conclusions from the interviews?

For most of the former slaves, the practical struggles for daily survival were more salient than the abstract goal of recording memories of their past. When federal writers showed up on their doorstep asking to hear about slave days, many of the former slaves assumed that they were social workers who could help them apply for old-age pensions. They did not want to alienate potential allies who, they believed, might be able to alleviate their poverty. Thus, they framed their accounts, particularly those told to white interviewers, by descriptions of their current need, illustrations of their worthiness for government assistance, and often expressions of gratitude toward their former masters and mistresses for providing them with some of the basic necessities that they now struggle to obtain as freed people.

The federal writers’ attitudes toward former slaves differed based on their race, gender, and geographical location. Black federal writers tended to view the interviews as opportunities to set the record straight regarding the challenges slaves faced and the
achievements they made following emancipation. According to Paul Escott, black interviewers were more likely than Caucasians to elicit from former slaves "negative feelings about their treatment and masters and their willingness to act upon those feelings" (1979, 9-10). Several states had at least one black interviewer. All or predominantly black units in Virginia, Florida, and Louisiana collected many of the most revealing slave narratives. Particularly noteworthy are the 150 interviews gathered by black federal writer Susie R.C. Byrd, who collected almost half of Virginia's collection. Unlike most federal writers, Byrd's technique was impressive, including "numerous visits to the same informants, ingratiating herself with them,... gathering them together at one time to create a more spontaneous situation, and then [taking] notes and sometimes [making] phonograph recordings" (Perdue et al. 1976, xlii). Black federal writers working in other states, especially Arkansas and Oklahoma, gathered similarly rich collections. The sheer number of interviews gathered by Arkansas's Samuel Taylor and Pernella Anderson, who jointly recorded 416 interviews, make that selection particularly appealing (Cantrell 2004, 49).

For white federal writers, those who held the bulk of the relief jobs, interviewing ex-slaves may have been a way to pay the bills, learn about a world different from their own, recall nostalgically the black "mammy" who had raised them or their parents, prove that their ancestors did not mistreat their slaves, or a combination of these. White women tended to be more sympathetic toward the former slaves than Caucasian men, and they gathered strong interviews with former slaves, particularly in Georgia, North Carolina, and Arkansas. In contrast, states with federal writers who were primarily white and male, such as South Carolina, gathered weak collections, in which former slaves clearly told federal writers what they believed they wanted to hear about the good old slave days (Blassingame 1977, liii).

Editors on both the state and national levels also brought their biases to the Slave Narrative Collection. Southern state editors, particularly those in the Deep South, tended to want to record folk traditions that they believed modernity, industrialization, and the northern migration of a younger generation were erasing. The southern folklorist John Lomax, who initially directed the collection of WPA slave narratives, largely echoed that nostalgia as he sought to capture the folkways and songs of a world that was rapidly fading away. In contrast, the other national editors tended to view interviewing ex-slaves as activist more than sentimental. They sought to diversify American culture and traditions by drawing attention to previously forgotten individuals, especially the working class and those from racial and ethnic minorities. Director of the Negro Affairs division of the Writers' Project Sterling Brown further saw the project as an opportunity to employ out-of-work, college-educated blacks, preserve former slaves' stories and language, and use their accounts to challenge racist interpretations of slave days (Hirsch 2003, 24-29).

Close readings of the WPA narratives reveal some of the biases of their creators. Introductions to each interview provide particularly rich clues as to the relationship between federal writers and former slaves. Despite requests by administrators in Washington, D.C. to avoid editorializing, federal writers prefaced their interviews with
introductions that evaluated the former slaves, replicating the authenticating documents that other slave narratives used to verify their author's credibility and the interviews' facts. For example, such introductions indicate whether the federal writer knew the former slave prior to the interview. Their language, especially demeaning references, such as "auntie," "darkie," or "nigger," further reveals the interviewer's racial attitudes and indicates the power-dynamic between federal writer and former slave.

Questions embedded within the WPA narratives also offer hints regarding the sources' creators. Here, again, it is important to analyze the earliest drafts of the interviews, since federal writers, typists, and editors routinely removed such questions from final narratives. When they remain in the text, the phrasing of questions, particularly leading ones, can indicate what federal administrators and locally placed federal writers wanted to hear. For example, in his initial interview script, Lomax prompted federal writers to ask former slaves to "[t]ell why you joined a church. And why you think all people should be religious" (Questionnaire). As Harvard psychologist Daniel L. Schacter argues, leading questions encourage answers that confirm interviewers' suppositions (2001, 40). Thus, identifying leading questions will help scholars judge the reliability of particular interviews.

In addition to reading individual interviews closely, scholars should read across the collection. Indexes created by Potts and Donald M. Jacobs help researchers to identify common patterns of behavior, events, or sentiments. Scholars might, for example, analyze interviews that discuss a similar theme, such as slave punishment, miscegenation, or the Freedman's Bureau. As they identify empirical trends, researchers should trace similarities and differences based on characteristics among the former slaves, such as the size of their plantation, their occupation, gender, and geographical location. They might also want to compare the findings among ex-slaves who were interviewed by the same federal writers or who had the same masters. An additional approach would be to compare the patterns they find in the slave narratives to those in other similar sources, such as interviews with former slaves that journalists, teachers, missionaries, and the American Freedman's Inquiry Commission collected during and immediately after the Civil War.

As scholars research the interviews, they should keep in mind the various players that helped form them and consider how their biases shaped the narratives. They can do this by carefully analyzing the interviews, comparing them to other WPA interviews, and analogizing them to other sources. In addition, to increase the reliability of the sources, scholars should concentrate on interviews with former slaves recorded primarily by African Americans.

Concerns regarding the age of the former slaves when they were interviewed and when they were in bondage raise legitimate questions regarding the reliability of the WPA narratives. Two-thirds of the ex-slaves interviewed were over 80 years old and 6% of them were older than 100, with some reporting their age to be as old as 130. Without birth certificates, it is difficult to verify age, and as many as 17% of those interviewed reported that they were unsure of their exact age. In order for former slaves to have been at least ten at the time of emancipation, they would have had to have been 82 or older when interviewed.
To control for memory problems, scholars should select interviews with former slaves who were neither too young to remember enslavement nor too old at the time of the interview to recall it. The ages of those interviewed would have affected their experiences of slavery, since youth would have been more likely to have served as house slaves rather than as field slaves. Researchers might consider setting cut off dates for the interviews they analyze, possibly between eighty two and ninety eight years old, which would have made the interviewees between 10 and 26 years old at Emancipation. Before determining such dates, scholars might want to compare some of the interviews with former slaves who are older than a certain age, say 95, with those who are in their mid to late 70s.

Even if scholars control for age, Donna J. Spindel argues advanced years will still affect the memories of former slaves (1996, 260). Researchers should familiarize themselves with the scholarship on memory to understand what the former slaves were likely to have remembered and what they were prone to forgetting. Psychologists argue that over time the vividness and unique details of significant personal events (episodic memory or autobiographical events) lessen. Cognitive aging research confirms that older adults have difficulty recalling "contextually specific episodic details...reflecting happenings, locations, perceptions, and thoughts" (B. Levine et al. 2002, 677). Thus, it would be surprising if former slaves did not have difficulty remembering names, dates, and the details of specific events. They might have misremembered the names of some of the places where they lived, the people they worked for, or the jobs they performed at specific times. Similarly, they might not have been able to recall exactly how many acres were in their former master's plantation, how many slaves were on it, and what time their day began.

Such difficulties in recalling factual information illustrate the problems inherent in quantitative analysis of WPA slave narratives. Empirical analysis on a collection as large and as variable as the WPA interviews is tempting. Researchers seeking to verify impressions with numbers frequently turn to quantitative analysis. The draw toward statistical analysis is even greater now that so much of the collection has been digitized and put online.

But before empirically investigating the collection, researchers need to reflect on the verifiability, reliability, validity, and representation of individual interviews. The narratives are not all equally reliable. Many of them overemphasize the positive experiences of slavery, such as corn shucking and holidays, and underemphasize controversial topics, such as rape. In addition, the easiest body of sources for analyzing quantitative data on the Slave Narrative Collection, the Library of Congresses' digitally searchable Born in Slavery site, is also incomplete, since it neither contains the interviews left in state archives nor those produced by all-black units.

Despite such shortcomings, quantification remains an important vehicle for assessing the collection. Statistical analysis of WPA interviews is probably best on fairly objective data, such as identifying ranges of occupations, types of food, and kinds of punishments. When forgetting interferes with data collection or when scholars want to verify the reliability of former slaves' assertions, they should consult other sources, such as city directories, censuses, newspapers, court records, and the diaries and letters written by
Whites. Ideally, one would triangulate such information, verifying it in three, preferably different, types of sources.

Although research indicates that older adults can rarely recall epic memories or refer to specific events, they maintain throughout their lives social and semantic memories: nonepisodic information that is disassociated from particular times and places (B. Levine 677; Piolino et al. 2002, 239). Instead of remembering specific autobiographical moments, older folks remember what the husband and wife team of oral historian Alice M. Hoffman and psychologist Howard S. Hoffman refer to as the “gist of what happened, or what usually happens.” The Hoffmans find that mature people reconstruct specific events based on their general knowledge combined with “inference and even sheer guesswork” (2008, 42). They retain “those memories that have been derived from what has been taught about the collective experience and the social structure of the members of various groups, including the members of one’s own group” (51). In other words, they hold onto the stories that have been transmitted to them that continue to make sense of their contemporary world.

If we think of the WPA slave narratives as oral traditions, stories transmitted from generation to generation that reflect cultural assumptions about what happened in the past and what it meant to participants, then the exact age of interviewees and the authenticity of their memories are less important than the social or collective memories they recount. Although such accounts might not be precisely accurate, they reveal familial and communal folklore. They further illustrate how contemporaries internalized slavery and freedom through the lens of popular consciousness and social expectations in ways that justified or helped them understand their current troubles. Such knowledge expands our understanding of the former slaves’ thoughts and feelings—if not their actual experiences—from slavery days through the Great Depression.

Rather than reflecting reality, social memories incorporate the imagination. They reveal the perceptions, legends, myths, fears, hopes, resistance, and aspirations of the former slaves. How did they cope with slavery and come to understand themselves in relation to their bondage? The slave narratives illustrate the ex-slaves’ self-perceptions and subjective understanding of their own experiences. They indicate what the former slaves believed, wanted, or wished had happened. They suggest the ex-slaves’ past and present emotional and material desires. Oral history, as Alessandro Portelli argues, is particularly potent at uncovering such knowledge. “The importance of oral testimony,” he explained, “may lie not in its adherence to fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism, and desire emerge” (qtd. in Hoffman and Hoffman 2008, 52).

Memory studies thus suggest that researchers focus less on factual data and quantifiable observations and more on interpreting recurring imagery and stereotypes. Paul Escott illustrates well this approach when he discovers commonalities in slaves’ perceptions of bondage and attitudes toward their masters despite distinctions among the former slaves in terms of geography, occupation, and size of plantation (1979, 45). Similarly, independent writers Herbert C. Covey and Dwight Eisnach (2009) usefully examine the WPA collection to study the relationship between food and slave culture. They investigated masters’ uses of food to control, punish, and reward slaves and slaves’ efforts to
use food to develop their own independent culture. By drawing on social and semantic memory, such research capitalized on the strengths of the WPA collection.

Rather than dismissing the WPA narratives because of the former slaves' mature age and their youth prior to Emancipation, scholars should draw on memory studies to interpret former slaves' stories. Although ex-slaves might have forgotten or misremembered important factual information, they probably maintained general or semantic memories. Thus, researchers should seek to identify recurring stories and symbols and trace patterns among them.

**The Candor Problem**

Even if former slaves could recount specific memories of their bondage, they might have chosen not to recall their experiences accurately to federal writers. A number of them feared violating the South's racial etiquette. "Many of the black informants," explained Blassingame, "lived in areas where labor contracts were negotiated in jails, debt was perpetual, travel was restricted, and the threat of violence made peonage a living hell." Other former slaves did not want to alienate government officials whom they believed could provide them with much needed relief. This was particularly true of ex-slaves who remained in areas where they had been enslaved and depended on whites to collect old-age pensions (xliv).

Within this context, it is not surprising that many of the interviewees were, as Blassingame put it, "guarded (and often misleading) in their responses to certain questions" (xlv). The former slaves frequently engaged in what Mark Twain called "corn pone"—telling whites what they wanted to hear rather than what they honestly experienced. As Martin Jackson, a former slave interviewed in Texas, put it: "Lots of old slaves closes the door before they tell the truth about their days of slavery. When the door is open, they tell how kind their masters was and how rosy it all was. You can't blame them for this, because they had plenty of early discipline, making them cautious about saying anything uncomplimentary about their masters. I, myself," the ex-slave continued, "was in a little different position than most slaves and, as a consequence have no grudges or resentment. However, I can tell you the life of the average slave was not rosy" (qtd. in Blassingame 1977, xiv).

How can scholars know if former slaves were being truthful or just telling interviewers what they thought they wanted to hear? Sometimes, corn pone is obvious because of its clear exaggeration. For example, the former slaves interviewed in South Carolinian by an all-white and largely male troupe of federal writers routinely described themselves as longing to return to slave days when their masters fed and clothed them well and rarely overworked them (Blassingame 1977, liii). But corn pone is seldom that evident. Another way to identify it is to look for internal inconsistencies within the narratives and to compare the events and actions the interviewers described against the meaning they attributed to them. In fact, one of the literary devices ex-slaves used to minimize
the controversies of slavery was to offer sweeping generalizations at the beginning of
t heir interviews attesting to the goodness of their master and slave days, but then recall
experiences (either their own or others') that appear to contradict those earlier asser-
tions. For example, a former slave might insist that his master never mistreated him,
but then describe the abuse several of his fellow slaves faced. Scholars should separate
unsupported statements designed, as Escott put it, “to satisfy the racial etiquette of the
day” from the former slaves’ descriptions of their experiences and those of their peers
(1979, 43). Researchers should focus on the former slaves’ stories rather than their gen-
eral assertions.

The racial climate of the 1930s discouraged former slaves from honestly answering
their interviewers about slave days. Instead, ex-slaves frequently volunteered the infor-
mation they believed white interviewers sought. Internal inconsistencies within the
WPA slave narratives, however, illustrate that many former slaves told their interviewers
what they wanted to hear and also gave more truthful assessments.

**FUTURE SCHOLARSHIP**

Future research should capitalize on the unique attributes of the Slave Narrative
Collection. The collection raises the voices of women and children, who tend to be mar-
ginalized by other types of slave narratives. It provides insight into the hopes, fears, and
aspirations of former slaves. It illustrates the sensory and particularly the auditory world
of what researchers Shane and Graham White described as having formerly been a
“largely soundless world.” And it provides provocative tools for investigating the south-
ern racial etiquette of the 1930s. New scholarship would do well to investigate all of these
fronts.

The WPA slave narratives offer important opportunities for future research into the
otherwise underdocumented story of the experiences of children, women, and fami-
lies during slavery. Research on childhood using the WPA collection might investigate
childrearing practices in terms of who nursed, cared for, trained, educated, and discki-
plined slave children. It might further ask how children related to their masters, mist-
tresses, parents, and the other children on the plantation. Since a number of the former
slaves discussed miscegenation in a matter of fact manner (i.e., my mother’s father was
a former master) in the slave narratives, answers should provide insights into domes-
tic politics. What was the nature of multiracial (black-white-Native American) mating,
rape, and unions? How did courting, marriage, and family bonds function without legal
protections during slavery? The WPA interviews allow researchers to investigate domes-
tic politics and a personal realm that most antebellum slave narratives ignore. They also
reveal women’s experiences and provide opportunities for making gender-based com-
parisons. Researchers might investigate how men and women differed from one another
in terms of their experiences of slavery, Reconstruction, segregation, and old age during
the Great Depression. They might also search the narratives to identify gender-based
patterns in terms of how female and male African Americans both resisted and accommodated themselves to racial discrimination during slavery and afterward.

Understanding the distinction between epic and social or semantic memories also reveals new research opportunities using the WPA collection. Scholars in the past have tended to analyze the slave narratives for empirical data regarding slavery. Memory studies, however, indicate the difficulties that older people have in recalling such information. Instead (or at least in addition), researchers might focus on the type of information that older people find easier to retain: social/semantic memories or nonepisodic memories that describe the former slaves' self perceptions and ideals. They might use such memories to recreate what historian Mary Chamberlain referred to as the "imaginative structures" of former slaves' social minds, identifying the legends, myths, and symbols that made and continue to make meaningful the former slaves' world (2008, 157).

To capture former slaves' fears and desires, scholars might look to the routine and habitual happenings and discrete stories and slave-time songs, games, and anecdotes that have become embedded in the former slaves' long-term memory through frequent repetition. Building on cultural historian Lawrence Levine's important work, researchers might further investigate the religious and secular songs that abound in the collection (1993, 35–58). Such works are especially valuable because the narratives at times provide the context in which people sang songs and describe the meanings they held for the former slaves, including when they used songs as calls for secret meetings and to warn slaves of approaching patrollers. The songs also reveal an auditory world that might shed light on the borrowing and continuation of traditions from Africa, as well as the continuing development of black music in the United States. Investigations of religious songs might examine slaves' hopes and fears by studying their interpretations of Christianity, God, Jesus, the biblical heroes and heroines, and the chosen people. Scholars might also use the collection to further their analysis of devil and trickster tales in which weaker individuals outsmart stronger opponents in David and Goliath type confrontations to understand how they coped with their bondage and continued discrimination.

Finally, researchers might analyze the WPA narratives to learn more about the twentieth rather than the nineteenth century. This approach builds on Stephanie Shaw's (2003) intriguing research using the WPA narratives to study old age during the 1930s. Shaw's research should be expanded to examine the southern racial etiquette of the time based on the stories interviewers told and those they suppressed. How did the stories that former slaves told black and white federal writers compare to one another? What did they tell each especially about controversial topics, such as sexual intimacy, miscegenation, and violence? Special attention should be paid to the former slaves' silences. Which stories were too scandalous to tell? What made one story acceptable while another overstepped boundaries? In addition, researchers should examine the alterations that editors made in the slave narratives before submitting them to national headquarters in Washington, D.C. How did the editors modify stories to make them more socially acceptable?
Like many primary sources, the WPA slave narratives are complex, and they require nuanced interpretation. But they are well worth the work. At its best, the Slave Narrative Collection offers insight into the world the slaves made, largely through the eyes of former slaves. Despite their biases and shortcomings, the interviews succeed in uncovering a “bottom-up” account of slaves’ bondage, culture, and lives.

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**Note**

1. Many previous scholars have described the WPA collection as consisting of “more than 2,300 interviews.” They have underestimated the collection’s size by counting only the interviews found in Rawick, 1972. My assessment is based on this volume plus Rawick’s two supplementary series edited in 1977 and 1979. In addition, I count interviews recorded in Louisiana and Virginia that Rawick did not include (see Louisiana Writers’ Project 1945; Clayton 1990; and Perdue, Barden, and Phillips 1976). Finally, I incorporated additional unpublished but documented WPA ex-slave materials that were at least once located in the Library of Congress’s Archive of Folk Song, Florida’s Historical Society, and the University of South Florida’s Library in Tampa. Unless otherwise indicated, calculations related to the WPA collections in this essay reflect the almost 3300 interviews published in Rawick’s complete collection and were determined using the name index section of Jacobs 1981.

**References**


