

Long Past Slavery: Representing Race in the Federal Writers' Project

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Of all the Federal Arts Projects set up as part of the New Deal, the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) was, in the words of one contemporary, the 'ugly duckling' (p. 35). As Catherine Stewart notes in her fascinating book, the American public looked on with scepticism as unemployed writers, academics and sundry white-collar 'boondogglers' were removed from relief rolls and set to work producing copy on the history and culture of the United States. One of the many branches of the FWP was the Ex-Slave Project. Conceived in 1937, this initiative saw scores of interviewers dispatched across 17 states to gather life histories from the rapidly diminishing number of formerly enslaved African Americans. Two years later, over 2,300 interviews were sent to the Library of Congress, where they remain a monument to oral history and its ability to rescue the voices of the marginalised.

The New Social Historians of the 1970s were quick to grasp the value of the Ex-Slave Project; indeed, when Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll* was published in 1974, readers were treated to over 600 references to FWP interviews.⁽¹⁾ Yet, as primary material, the interviews are far from unproblematic. In 1940, Benjamin Botkin, the FWP's recently appointed folklore editor, composed a memorandum adumbrating the shortcomings of the interviews as historical evidence: the interviewers, he warned, were amateur, their informants senescent and, in translating recollections from word to page, 'much of the scent as well as the sense' was lost (p. 237). Passing the buck somewhat, the Harvard-educated academic decided that their historical value was a Gordian knot best 'left to the scholars' to untangle (p. 237). In the eight decades since Botkin penned this memorandum, however, critical consensus on the interviews has remained elusive. Many historians have noted that, because most of the FWP interviewers were white, African-American interviewees would have felt constrained by racial mores to downplay negative memories of slavery, resulting in rosy recollections of interracial bonhomie. Nevertheless, for historians seeking to reconstruct the lived experience of the enslaved, the interviews remain a crucial, if compromised, source of evidence.

Long Past Slavery strikes out from this debate in an important new direction. Rather than approaching the FWP interviews as sources of social history, Stewart uses them to illuminate the racial politics of the 1930s. The FWP, she argues, should be approached as a site of contested meaning, within which competing parties struggled to inscribe divergent representations of African-American identity onto the nation's consciousness. According to Stewart, debate over the place of African Americans within the body politic intensified during

the 1930s as the mass migration of black southerners to northern cities made the so-called 'Negro Problem' a national, rather than regional, concern. Drawing upon admirable archival research, Stewart marshals an array of correspondence, manuscripts and memoranda to delineate the ways in which the FWP's textual representations of black history and culture were shaped by the racial politics of its staff. Whereas the FWP's federal directors envisaged the project as a celebration of cultural pluralism, helping to underpin a reformulated national identity, white southerners saw it as an opportunity to reinforce conservative notions of African-American racial inferiority, linked to 'Lost Cause' narratives of slavery as a benevolent institution and Reconstruction as an unmitigated disaster. Conversely, Stewart argues, the FWP afforded an unprecedented opportunity for African Americans to undermine the cultural apparatus of white supremacy. Black FWP staff sought to align the project with the cause of racial assimilation; countering negative portrayals of African Americans, they emphasised the political capacity, civic commitment, and economic nous of the formerly enslaved. At the same time, the interviewees grasped the rare opportunity to make their voices heard, refuting saccharine southern nostalgia, even if only indirectly. Stewart concludes that although the egalitarian potential of the project was 'never fully realized' (p. 9) it 'helped to permanently destabilize a white monopoly on representations of black history, culture, and identity' (p. 121). The organisation of the book mirrors the contrapuntal nature of Stewart's argument. The first half details the genesis of the Ex-Slave Project and the tug-of-war between federal and state editors over the form and content of the interviews, while the latter half deals with the counter-narrative created by both black writers and African American interviewees.

The seeds of the Ex-Slave Project were sown during work on the American Guide Series, an FWP enterprise begun in 1935 to boost tourism and capitalise on the growing commercial popularity of folk culture. As federal relief administrator Harry Hopkins put it, the guides would document 'the infinite variety and rich folklore of the American scene' (p. 37). Guidebooks for every state, it was hoped, would foster an inclusive 'Americanism in the best sense of the word' (p. 38). Unsurprisingly, southerners had different ideas, painting dialect portraits of ignorant African Americans in order to reinscribe racial stereotypes underpinning Jim Crow. Two factors strengthened the southern hand: firstly, they were able to invoke the traditional assumption (discussed recently by K. Stephen Prince) that only southerners could authoritatively represent the South, thus excluding northerners from southern FWP offices; secondly, commercial pressures acted insistently to push representations of African-American folk culture towards the kind of exoticism long-favoured by 'local color' authors.⁽²⁾ The federal office of the FWP pushed for standardisation and sought to correct white southern misrepresentations, establishing the Office on Negro Affairs under the directorship of Howard University Professor Sterling A. Brown. However, although Brown bristled at 'the unsympathetic attitude and the tone of amused condescension' (p. 56) permeating white southern discourse on black folk culture, state directors were able, for the most part, to resist what they decried as 'the Washington attitude' (p. 52).

To furnish material for their Guide, Florida staffers conducted a number of interviews with former slaves; the FWP's federal office was so impressed by the results that, in 1937, with an eye on publication, it instructed 16 other states to follow Florida's lead, giving birth to the Ex-Slave Project. Initially conceived as a way of gathering information about slavery, the project, as Stewart demonstrates, took an increasingly ethnographic turn, focusing on the culture and character of the informants. Once again, federal directors found themselves at odds with their counterparts in state offices. Whereas liberals like Elizabeth and Alan Lomax reflected that 'for the first time in the history of literature [...] a poor and despised people are being given a chance to speak their piece', southerners saw yet another opportunity to bulwark Jim Crow (p. 68). The fact that, as Stewart shows, a number of southern FWP staff were also members of the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) speaks volumes. Again and again, the Office on Negro Affairs returned manuscripts to state directors with complaints that African Americans were being portrayed as superstitious, ignorant, and unfit for political responsibility. An especially prickly issue was the ubiquitous use of dialect to represent black speech: drawing on the work of Henry Louis Gates, Jr and Toni Morrison, Stewart argues that dialect writing was a visual representation of difference hand-in-glove with depictions of racial inferiority. Although the federal office was conscious of these problems, it felt constrained by commercial

considerations, assuming that, to a white reading public accustomed to a certain way of representing blackness, standard-English depictions of African-American speech would be unpalatable. Ultimately, commerce won the day: state directors enthusiastically dispatched exotic and entertaining interviews to the federal office; conscientious but dull interviews fell by the wayside. Racism and capitalism made for easy bedfellows.

Throughout the Ex-Slave Project, however, African-American writers struggled to present readers with an alternative representation of black history and identity. Stewart demonstrates that most black FWP employees were middle class, well-educated assimilationists who shared with Sterling Brown the conviction that interviewees '*should be shown in relation, rather than as a thing apart*' (p. 56). Eschewing cumbersome dialect, these writers emphasized the political sophistication and economic achievements of their informants. In place of comical 'Old Time Negroes' reminiscing fondly about slavery and spinning tales of the supernatural, black staff presented civic-minded businessmen and former politicians whose recollections of slavery were far from pleasant. As Stewart asserts, these writers were well aware that wresting the right to represent black culture from white supremacists was 'an essential political step toward equality' (p. 22). Yet this was no easy task: for a start, African Americans were lamentably underrepresented within the FWP, and, when they could find employment, custom and law meant that they had to work from home or in segregated Negro Writers' Units (NWUs). Furthermore, African Americans had to struggle constantly against the accusation of 'Negro bias,' the notion that black writers were too personally invested to treat the history of slavery and emancipation objectively, or to accurately portray the folk culture of the formerly enslaved (an idea reinforced by the shibboleth that blacks were emotional rather than rational).

Using Florida as a case study, Stewart describes in detail the ways in which these tensions played out. In Jacksonville, racial hierarchy manifested in the FWP accommodations: white writers were sequestered in the plush environs of the city's new Exchange building, whilst the Florida NWU operated from a working soup kitchen. It was in this inauspicious locale that the NWU assembled *The Florida Negro*, envisioned as a special Ex-Slave Project volume. Beset by accusations of 'Negro bias', the NWU struggled nonetheless to present a positive picture of African-American identity, one that would encapsulate the bootstraps ideology of its leading lights. Stewart does a good job elucidating the rhetorical techniques employed by the NWU to validate its interview material in the eyes of the sceptical state editor, Carita Corse. A future UDC member, Corse scoffed at both criticisms of slavery and recollections of black agency during Reconstruction.

Stewart devotes two chapters to the racial attitudes and influence of a pair of folklorists involved with the Ex-Slave Project, John Lomax and Zora Neale Hurston. As folklore editor, Lomax was hugely influential in determining the direction of the project. Styling himself as an intrepid 'hunter' of authentic black folk songs, Lomax's search for 'pure' music – unblemished by (white) mass culture – led him into some jaw-droppingly exploitative situations. Taking his recording equipment into segregated penitentiaries, which he imagined as incubators of hermetic black culture, Lomax had wardens force reluctant inmates to sing for him. Collecting music from prisoners had an added benefit: they were unable to seek remuneration. Lomax lined his pockets under the cover of ethnography, presenting individual compositions as collective products of the folk and publishing them under his own name. (Historians of folklore may see this as piquant illustration of D. G. Kelley's observation: "'folk" has no meaning without "modern"' (3)) As Stewart explains, Lomax's notion of authenticity was bad news for black writers on the Ex-Slave Project; he saw these middle class assimilationists as conduits for mass culture, inimical to the purity of African-American folklore. Lomax, interested in difference not similarity, steered the project away from accounts of black achievement, towards 'the note of weird' (p. 109).

Stewart's chapter on Zora Neale Hurston is fascinating. An author and folklorist of immense personal charisma, Hurston certainly enlivened Florida's FWP, turning in peerless prose at the last minute and breaking racial etiquette by smoking insouciantly in the offices of the Exchange Building. Hurston was initially envisaged as director of Florida's NWU, but her ultimate contribution was minimal. As Stewart notes, Hurston's work was 'all but eviscerated' (p. 172) from the final manuscript of *The Florida Negro*. Indeed, her slight involvement with the FWP is reflected in the fact that it is dealt with in only five of the

chapter's 32 pages. Not only was Hurston's prose-poetry unsuited to the scientific aspirations of the project's editors but, crucially, her portrayal of folk culture as vital and evolving was also anathema to those, like Lomax, to whom folklore was the calcified remnant of a disappearing past. But there was an affinity between Hurston and Lomax, which Stewart might have brought into greater relief: both writers essentialised race and racialised culture. In searching for the essence of blackness, Hurston diverged from African American assimilationists like Sterling Brown who sought to privilege class over race. However, as Michael Sobel and others have demonstrated, cultural forms had crossed and re-crossed the permeable boundaries of ethnicity for so long and with such frequency that any search for 'Negroness' (to use Hurston's term) was bound to be chimerical.⁽⁴⁾ Neither Lomax nor Hurston discovered 'Negroness', but both helped to invent it. This is an important point (and one germane to debates over cultural appropriation), because, as K. Anthony Appiah has repeatedly warned, race may be a scientifically discredited social construct, but essentialised notions of culture threaten to smuggle it back into public discourse.⁽⁵⁾

The final chapter seeks to reclaim the agency of those formerly enslaved African Americans interviewed under the aegis of the FWP. Making intelligent use of the work of Henry Louis Gates, Jr and Gladys-Marie Fry, Stewart argues that the interviews should be seen as oral performances in which interviewees harnessed the African American tradition of 'signifying' in order to create 'counternarratives of black identity and experience' (p. 199). In the face of white interviewers asking leading questions ('Were your Master and Mistress good to you?') the formerly enslaved were able to employ indirection and other rhetorical techniques in order to undermine Lost Cause myths (p. 213). Although this is a fascinating thesis (and one that is flagged throughout the book), the chapter might have been more fully developed. To support her claims, Stewart draws upon only the Georgia and Florida ex-slave narratives: it would be interesting to see what turns up in a wider selection of interviews. Similar work has already been done by Mia Bay, who used the FWP narratives to survey the racial thought of the enslaved.⁽⁶⁾ Another cause for pause is signifying's essential slipperiness: although Stewart insists that it is 'high time' historians 'recovered the evidence' that interviewees 'intentionally left behind' (p. 228), pinning down the definitive meanings of their evasive replies is like nailing jelly to a wall. Unlike the bulk of the book, which is built upon archival research, the argument in this chapter hinges upon imported literary theory and will convince some readers more than others.

Stewart's thesis will certainly appeal to historians seeking to recover subaltern agency, but we need to be careful not to let the existence of counter-narratives obscure the relationships of power within which they were created.⁽⁷⁾ The FWP may well have helped to 'destabilize' white cultural hegemony but, as Stewart herself reminds us, African Americans remained shamefully underrepresented on the FWP staff; the Office on Negro Affairs was 'often sadly ineffectual' (p. 48); the manuscript for *The Florida Negro* remained unpublished for nearly six decades and the signifying of African American interviewees went unremarked for almost a century. Those employing the concepts of James C. Scott (as Stewart does) should remember that the weapons of the weak are fashioned to work *within* extant structures of power, they are not designed to bring them crashing down. These considerations aside, Stewart provides the most comprehensive account yet published of the Ex-Slave Project. This is a superbly researched, engaging, and insightful book, which deserves to be read by all social historians thinking of using the FWP interviews as evidence, as well as any scholars interested in American racial politics. Indispensable.

Notes

1. Norman R. Yetman, 'Ex-Slave interviews and the historiography of slavery', *American Quarterly*, 36 (1984), 199.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See K. Stephen Prince, *Stories of the South: Race and the Reconstruction of Southern Identity, 1865–1915* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2016).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. D. G. Kelley, 'Notes on deconstructing "The Folk"', *The American Historical Review*, 97 (1992), 1402.[Back to \(13\)](#)
4. See Michael Sobel, *The World They Made Together: Black and White Values in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (Princeton, NJ, 1987).[Back to \(4\)](#)

5. See *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race*, ed. K. Anthony Appiah, and Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ, 1996).[Back to \(5\)](#)
 6. See Mia Bay, *The White Image in the Black Mind: African-American Ideas about White People, 1830-1925* (Oxford, 2000).[Back to \(6\)](#)
 7. See Patrick Rael, 'The New Black Intellectual History', *Reviews in American History*, 29 (2001).[Back to \(7\)](#)
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