Enabling Access to the Federal Writers' Project Slave Narratives: A Case Study in Digital Archive Design

by

Cate Peter

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Abstract

In the 1930s, over 2 300 former enslaved people were interviewed, taped, and photographed as part of the American Federal Writers' Project (FWP). No other initiative recorded to such a great extent the voices of the formerly enslaved. Although this collection has great utility for scholarly research and public education, the current online archive from the Library of Congress is poorly designed and difficult to use. For my Master's thesis, I have worked to conceptualize what an ethical, accessible online archive for the FWP Slave Narratives might look like. I have approached this task in three parts: a consideration, and emphatic rejection, of the principles of neutrality; extensive study of the history and complexity of the Narratives; and examination of how the affordances of digital archives could be used to make the Narratives more accessible. This work functions as a case study of the challenges in designing online archives for complicated historical documents.

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List of Abbreviations

FERA: Federal Emergency Relief Administration

FWP: Federal Writers Project

LOC: Library of Congress

NWU: Negro Writers Unit

OCR: Optical Character Recognition

UDC: United Daughters of the Confederacy

UI: User Interface

UX: User Experience

WPA: Writers Project Administration

Introduction

In my first conference presentation on the Federal Writers' Project Slave Narratives I ended with a poorly Photoshopped slide of the Library of Congress on fire. I created this slide after spending hours on the Library of Congress's clunky website trying to read the Narratives.[1] Though my personal vitriol against the Library of Congress has softened over time, my interest in the Narratives has only grown.

The Federal Writers' Project (FWP) Slave Narratives are a fascinating and rich collection of historical documents that few people have ever heard of. During the 1930s, writers working under President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal interviewed thousands of African Americans who had been born into slavery.[2] These interviews were sent from state offices to the Library of Congress (LOC), which compiled them into the FWP Slave Narrative Collection and stored them in the Rare Book Room. This massive collection, which includes audio recordings and photographs, contains over 10 000 pages of interview transcripts with over 2 300 individuals. To cite three historians who have studied the Narratives, Norman Yetman described it as "a unique and virtually unsurpassed collective portrait of a historical population"; David Brion Davis called it "indisputably unique among former slave-holding nations"; and George Rawick stated that it is

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[1] I recognize that there are many wonderful, radical librarians working within the Library and doing good work. However, I remain leery of an institution that originated from the library of a slaveholder (Thomas Jefferson) and continues to be tied to discriminatory ideologies. I am also concerned with the Library of Congress's funding structure and how it is tied to the political agendas and racist biases of Congress, as exemplified by Congress's attempts to block the Library from changing the subject heading "illegal aliens" to "noncitizens."
Lisa Peet, " Library of Congress Drops Illegal Alien Subject Heading, Provokes Backlash Legislation," *Library Journal,* June 13, 2016,
https://www.libraryjournal.com/?detailStory=library-of-congress-drops-illegal-alien-subject-heading-provokes-backlash-legislation.

[2] While I will commonly be using "slavery" in this article to refer to "transatlantic slavery" for brevity's sake, I would like to recognize that slavery has existed across countries and centuries in many different forms, and it continues to exist.

"the most significant source of material on the lives of the slaves, their communities, and their struggles." [3] No other project recorded to such a great extent the voices of the formerly enslaved.

Despite the significance of these Narratives and their potential for research and public education, the LOC's current online archive is poorly designed (hence, my poorly Photoshopped flames). The collection is hosted in several locations, forcing the user to navigate through different parts of the LOC's web domain to find associated multimedia files. There is no classification metadata or categorization other than the state where the interview occurred. I know that these Narratives contain information about health care, dancing, runaway slaves, and much more; unless I want to manually click through the thumbnails, I cannot find that information on this website. There is no built-in search function. The best way to look through the Narratives is to download a PDF of them and then use the Optical Character Recognition (OCR) software built into the PDF reader to search for keywords. However, the PDF files are frequently too dirty for OCR to work, and unless you happen to be an expert in 1930s dialect spellings you frequently will not know how to spell the word that you are looking for. Additionally, because dialect spellings are not standardized in the corpus, you would have to spell the word many different ways in order to catch every instance of it. Insufficient and outdated supporting documentation further exacerbate these design flaws.[4]

For my Master's thesis, I have worked to conceptualize what an ethical, accessible online archive for the FWP Slave Narratives might look like. I have approached this task in three parts:

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[3] Norman Yetman, ed,. *When I Was a Slave: Memoirs from the Slave Narratives Collection* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2002), v; David Brion Davis, "Slavery and the Post-World War II Historians," *Daedalus* 103 (Spring 1974): 7; George Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (Westport: Greenwood, 1972), p. 163.

[4] The LOC archive only has two short contextualizing articles: "An Introduction to the WPA Slave Narratives" and "A Note on the Language of the Narratives." The former is written by Yetman; the author of the second is unclear.

a consideration, and emphatic rejection, of the principles of neutrality; extensive study of the history and complexity of the Narratives; and examination of how the affordances of digital archives could be used to make the Narratives more accessible. This work functions as a case study of the challenges in designing online archives for complicated historical documents.

Making historical information more accessible through technology—especially when it is the history of a marginalized community—is a unique public good. However, the technical skills required to put content in useful and engaging formats must be combined with a nuanced understanding of the corpus' historical context and significance in order to properly frame and mediate the information. This approach is especially crucial for the FWP Slave Narratives.

The earliest African American slave narratives were written in the 18th century; however the majority were published in three decades preceding the Civil War. This increase in publishing happened for a variety of reasons, from the proliferation of more powerful and influential abolitionist groups to a moral debate over slavery that was increasingly taking place in literature.[5] These antebellum slave narratives were predominantly written by educated African American men with connections to publishers, especially through abolitionist organizations. Some famous examples of these narratives include the autobiographies of Olaudah Equiano and Frederick Douglas. The narrative of Harriet Jacobs is a rare example from this time period of a slave narrative written by a woman. That most of these narratives were published by abolitionist groups is revealing: they were written to educate and galvanize a sympathetic white audience and to challenge the idealized depiction of slavery as a benign, paternalistic system. These explicitly political texts were meant to end slavery. As a result, they have several stylistic tendencies and

[5] For a comprehensive collection of slave narratives, see: John W. Blassingame, ed. Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies (Louisiana State University Press, 1977).

motifs to better appeal to their white, predominantly Christian audience.[6] After the Civil War, slave narratives greatly decreased in popularity.

Antebellum slave narratives help situate the importance of the FWP Slave Narratives Project. Unlike the antebellum precedents, the FWP Narratives represent a wide diversity of experiences. Approximately half of the people interviewed for the Narratives were female, providing significant insight into the gendered experience of slavery. The interviews took place across seventeen states, and the interviewees ranged from illiterate farm workers to university professors. This range in education, occupations, and other life experiences make the Narratives an unparalleled collective portrait of multiple generations. While this corpus is officially called a "Slave Narrative Collection" and I will continue to refer to it as such for the purposes of this thesis, it is so much more. The generation interviewed were born into slavery, but also lived through Reconstruction, the Gay Nineties, the turn of the century, Jim Crow, World War I, the Great Migration, the Roaring Twenties, the Harlem Renaissance, and the Great Depression. This generation witnessed incredible political, military, and cultural shifts over their lives, and their Narratives are rich with information.

The content of the Narratives was greatly impacted by the Depression-era context within which they were collected. In 1935, the Federal Relief Administration (FERA) was succeeded by the Works Project Administration (WPA), which established to provide federally organized work relief and social security. Under the WPA, artists, musicians, actors, and writers found employment through Federal Project Number One (Federal One). The FWP was created under

[6] One trope that I find particularly egregious is the customary "introduction letter" from a white person confirming that the black author, indeed, was capable of writing the narrative.

Federal One in order to employ writers and generate literature about American culture and history; the FWP Slave Narratives were collected as part of this mandate.

The FWP Slave Narrative Collection was a massive project with hundreds of editors and thousands of interviews. The project was started by federal Folklore Director John A. Lomax in 1936 and followed on the precedent of similar black-led oral history projects. Seventeen states participated: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. The hierarchy of the project included: the federal FWP office, which distributed interview guidelines and compiled the Narratives; the state offices, which followed the guidelines with varying levels of fidelity and edited the interviews before they were sent to the federal office; and local offices, whose employees conducted the interviews and where the interviews underwent their first round of edits and transformation. Black writers employed under the FWP were segregated into Negro Writing Units (NWUs), which frequently had different writing and editing styles than their counterpart white offices. However, the interviews created by both black and white local offices passed through state editors before being sent to the federal level. The federal FWP office also included the Office of Negro Affairs, which was created after significant black protest to ensure that "the Negro [was] not neglected in any of the publications written by or sponsored by the Writers' Project." [7] Sterling Brown, a well-known academic, left his position as an English professor, poet, and critic at Howard University to become the director of the Office of Negro Affairs. Brown, a man of godlike patience, endured state directors who

[7] Sterling A. Brown to Norman Yetman, interview, July 20, 1965. As found in Norman Yetman, "The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection," *American Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (1967): p. 546.

referred to him in letters with racial slurs.[8] Despite its progressive ideals, the FWP was entrenched in the systemic and structural racism of 1930s America.

As the WPA passed from federal to state control, the FWP Slave Narratives were compiled into a seventeen volume series, presented to Congress in 1939, and deposited into the Rare Books Collection of the Library of Congress. Benjamin A. Botkin — poet, English Professor, and folklorist who became the folklore director in 1938 — was an editor at the LOC and played a large role in assessing Narratives for inclusion and publication. A small selection of thirty-seven interviews from North Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia were published by the FWP in 1939 under the title *These Are Our Lives.*[9] In 1945, Botkin published *Lay My Burden Down*, a compilation of excerpts from the collection that focused primarily on anecdotes and folklore, with less than twenty of the Narratives reprinted in entirety.[10]

The Narratives remained mostly unnoticed by scholarship until the late 1960s, when the combination of the Civil Rights movement, the rise of social sciences, and the development of bottom-up history reinvigorated scholarly interest in the collection.[11] As Charles H. Nichols, author of *Many Thousands Gone*, commented in 1963, "Nearly everyone concerned with American slavery has had his say, but in our time we have forgotten the testimony of its

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[8] For more on Brown's struggle with state editors, see Catherine Stewart, *Long Past Slavery: Representing Race in the Federal Writers' Project* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), p. 51-58.
[9] Federal Writers Project, *These Are Our Lives* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939).
[10] Benjamin A. Botkin, *Lay my burden down : a folk history of slavery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945).
[11] Yetman noted: "A survey of works dealing primarily with slavery and the antebellum Negro reviewed in the *Journal of Negro History* during the period 1945-64 reveals that the Collection has gone virtually unexploited by serious scholars. Only one of these works (Kenneth M. Stampp, The Peculiar Institution, New York, 1956) refers to the Collection, although only in a general bibliography. Benjamin A. Botkin's *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery* (Chicago, 1945), which is comprised of selections and excerpts from the Collection, is cited in one-third of the works, although specific references to the narratives are infrequent." Yetman, "Background," p. 536. This is an excellent article for a more detailed historiography on the Narratives.

victims." [12] Historian George Rawick was more pointed in his criticism, arguing that historians' dismissal of slave narratives allowed "masters not only [to] rule ... the past in fact [but also to] rule its written history." [13] In 1972, Rawick published *The American Slave: A Composite Biography*, a multi-volume series which made all of the Narratives in the Rare Book Room publicly available for the first time.[14] The impact of the Narratives on scholarship during this period is difficult to overstate. Their re-discovery provided a wealth of information, facilitating new research in a wide range of subjects from the education of the enslaved to health care on plantations.[15] When John W. Blassingame published his seminal work *The Slave Community* (1972), his lack of references to the Narratives was cited as the biggest weakness of his work.[16] In contrast, Eugene Genovese's *Roll Jordan Roll* (1974) referred to the Narratives in no less than six hundred footnotes.[17] The Narratives had become one of the most significant resources for studying slavery.

The extensive study of Narratives by scholars has generated a wealth of knowledge about their content and context that we can use when designing a database. A few historians are worth singling out here. Rawick, as previously mentioned, was the first to publish the entirety of the Narratives for the public. He has spent much of his career searching through archives for

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[12] Charles H. Nichols, *Many Thousand Gone: The Ex-Slaves' Account of Their Bondage and Freedom* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1963), ix.
[13] George Rawick, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, Volume 6 (Westport: Greenwood Publications, 1972), xiv.
[14] George Rawick, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, Volumes 1-18 (Westport: Greenwood Publications, 1972).
[15] One of the best books I have ever read uses the FWP Slave Narratives to analyze constructions of health and healing on plantations. Sharla M. Fett, *Working Cures: Health, Healing, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 2002).
[16] James M. McPherson, "Reviewed Work: The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South by John W. Blassingame," *Journal of Social History* 7, no. 2 (Winter, 1974): p. 208-211.
[17] Footnote count from Norman Yetman, "Ex-Slave Interviews and the Historiography of Slavery," *American Quarterly* 36 (summer 1984): 201. Eugene Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*: The World the Slaves Made (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974).

unpublished material from the FWP and other similar slave narrative projects. Notably, Rawick has combed through state archives to find earlier versions of the interviews as well as Narratives that were held back from the federal office. Norman Yetman advocated for greater study of the Narratives in the 1970s, and has published multiple books and articles on the subject. The short introductory article on the LOC database is written by Yetman — which is a point of concern given his belief that these extremely edited accounts are "verbatim testimonies concerning antebellum slave life and the respondents' personal reactions to bondage" [18] Paul Escott has also written numerous articles on the Narratives, and his early efforts to do quantitative analysis on them is an important precedent for this work.[19] I am greatly indebted to Catherine Stewart, whose 2016 book on the Narratives and their cultural context contains excellent intersectional analysis. [20]

This thesis (like many theses) is comprised of three chapters. In Chapter 1, I will discuss the ethics of neutrality and how it applies to online historical archives. The topic of neutrality remains controversial in library and archival sciences; however, I emphatically side with the new school of thought that rejects neutrality. I will contextualize my argument within the requirements of new digital environments and in relation to information codes of ethics that decenter whiteness, in order to discuss the specific issue of neutrality in the Narratives.

In Chapter 2, I will delve into the complex historical context of the Narratives. There are three main factors that demonstrate the difficulty of digitizing this material: cultural context,

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[18] Yetman, "Background," p. 534.
[19] Paul Escott, *Slavery Remembered : A Record of the Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979). Paul Escott, "The Art and Science of Reading WPA Slave Narratives," in *The Slave's Narrative*, ed. C. Davis and H. Gates (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985). Paul Escott, "Speaking of Slavery: the Historical Value of the Federal Writers Project Tapes," in *The Emergence of Black English*, ed. Guy Bailey (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1991), p. 123-32.
[20] Catherine Stewart, *Long Past Slavery*.

administrative inconsistencies, and individual interactions. An example of how all of these interact can be seen in the tropes of black misspeak and racialized spellings used in the Narratives. This chapter gives insight into the needs of the online archive and why the digitization of these Narratives is such a complicated endeavour.

In Chapter 3, I will identify eight topics that must be considered when designing an online archive for the Narratives. The analysis for this chapter incorporates examples from other digital historical databases on slavery. Chapter 3 is followed by my Digital History Manifesto, wherein I outline an ethical framework for values based design in digital historical archives.

My project lies at the heart of public history, technology, and social justice. As a public history project, I am interested in the design ethos and execution of accessibility. How can we make the Narratives understandable, approachable, and usable for the general public? How can we make the Narratives not just physically accessible but intellectually accessible? I am also interested in how digital technologies allow us to do things that would have been previously impossible. How do the affordances of technology allow us to interact with the Narratives in new ways? How can we use technology to decolonize the archive?

The primary theoretical lens for this thesis will be intersectionality, as discussed by Kimberly Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins.[21] Intersectionality, or the study of how different forms of discrimination overlap, is an ideal lens to examine this corpus wherein many of the elderly black interviewees were also female, disabled, and/or poor. We cannot effectively design

[21] Gloria T. Hull et al., ed. *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, Second edition (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2015). Janell Hobson, ed. *Are All the Women Still White? Rethinking Race, Expanding Feminisms* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2016).

an online archive for these Narratives if we do not understand the ways that interconnected forms of discrimination affected the Narratives' creation and preservation.

One of the joys of digital environments is that texts do not have to sit in single boxes or positions like they do in a brick and mortar archive. The possibility for infinite expansion and categorization allows us to embrace intersectionality over division and hierarchy, and to desettle and denature traditional structures. How can we embrace and express the complexity of the archive? How can we respectfully address the many overlapping forms of discrimnation that shaped how these Narratives were collected, preserved, and presented? These questions allow the conceptualization of this specific digital archive to stand as a case study to think through broader questions about public history, accessibility, technology, affordances, intersectionality, and social justice.

We Do Not Negotiate with Terrorists:
The Ethics of Neutrality

"Dr. Waters had a good heart. He didn't call us slaves. He call us servants."

"Marse Lewis, he was right good to all his slaves."

*"I ain't never forget when Mistess died—she had been so good to every n***** on our plantation."*

"I loved young Marster John, and he loved me."

"My white folks was so good to me." [1]

The above quotes are not the fabrications of a slavery apologist. They are the words of formerly enslaved people who were interviewed for the Federal Writers Project. Reading them may be confusing, troubling, or — much worse — galvanizing to a certain segment of the population that staunchly clings to notions of white superiority and consequently black inferiority.

There is danger in increasing the public accessibility of these Narratives, yet they remain an invaluable and powerfully humanizing record of black history in the United States. I have undertaken this case study with knowledge of the Narratives' historical value and historiographic impact, and with the belief that they can be a powerful educational tool. Many people are astonished to learn that they can listen to an audio recording of someone talking about their life

[1] The quotes come from, respectively: R. S. Taylor, "Uncle William Baltimore," *Federal Writers' Project: Arkansas*. p. 97; Sadie B. Hornsby, "Rachel Adams," *Federal Writers' Project: Georgia*, p. 1; Mary A. Poole, "Charlie Aarons, Ex-Slave, Says He Loved Young Marster [sic] John," *Federal Writers' Project: Alabama,* 1937. p. 1; and Rachel Bradley, "Mrs. Bernice Bowden," *Federal Writers' Project: Arkansas*, p. 233. I have chosen to cite authorial credit to the interviewers instead of the interviewees due to the edited nature of these interviews. I have also maintained the misspellings in the interviews while censoring out racial slurs.

as a slave. Slavery and modern technology seem to belong to different time periods, and realizing the overlap reminds people that the slavery is not so far distant — a useful tool for discussing its lingering legacies.

Yet, many of the interviewees discuss slavery favorably. There are many reasons for this: the racial politics of the 1930s warped the collection and editing of these interviews; interviewees — many of them impoverished, elderly people in a position of vulnerability — would have felt social pressure to understate the trauma of slavery for white interviewers; and notably, in a few cases, the ex-slaves in question were interviewed by the descendants of their enslavers. Part of what makes this project so exciting, however, are the ways that technology can be used to address and explore the issues that make the corpus so difficult to read.

As part of considering the design for an online archive for these Narratives, I have had to confront the ethics of neutrality in library and information sciences. Creating an online archive intentionally structured to contextualize this information and actively prevent its misuse and misinterpretation would not be a neutral act. Building upon an extant corpus of criticism, I will argue that a rejection of neutrality should be one of the guiding principles in designing this archive.

Some Non-Neutral Arguments About Neutrality

The International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) Code of Ethics for Librarians and Other Information Workers states in Section 5:

> Librarians and other information workers are strictly committed to neutrality and an unbiased stance regarding collection, access and service. Neutrality results in the most balanced collection and the most balanced access to information achievable.
>
> Librarians and other information workers define and publish their policies for selection, organisation, preservation, provision, and dissemination of information.
>
> Librarians and other information workers distinguish between their personal convictions and professional duties. They do not advance private interests or personal beliefs at the expense of neutrality.[2]

This section is frequently referenced along with Section 2, which states that access to information must be equitable regardless of political belief.

Neutrality is deontologically enshrined within the most widely accepted professional code of ethics for librarians, archivists, and other information workers. Yet, *IFLA* does not provide a definition for neutrality, only examples of what it might look like within a professional context: a balanced collection of materials, balanced access to information, and not advancing personal beliefs or convictions. Definitions of neutrality itself often shift to best suit the arguments of whomever is attacking or defending the principle.

James LaRue, director of the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom, has argued that "neutrality has a precise and essential meaning. Here it is: we do not

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[2] IFLA Code of Ethics for Librarians and Other Information Workers (Full Version)," *International Federation of Library Associations*, n.d. https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/11092.

deny access to library services and resources, we do not seek to silence people on the basis of their backgrounds or beliefs." [3] He argues that people should be able to investigate all options equally and then decide what to believe. "Can librarians punch Nazis because of what they believe?" he asked at a debate on library neutrality. "Then we deny them the common legacy of humanity—the right to be really wrong in public." He further contends that, "Neutrality is essential to our role in public life. It is enshrined in our values, our laws, and our policies. We abandon it at our peril."

Other advocates for neutrality like Em Claire Knowles, the assistant dean for student and alumni affairs at Simmons School of Library and Information Science, have argued that equal access and balanced collections can help mitigate the possible dangers of misinformation. Kathleen de la Peña McCook, professor at University of South Florida School of Information, has argued that, "People will self-select outside the library if we don't make them comfortable. We can't show them both sides if they don't come in." [4]

Chris Bourg, director of libraries at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has proposed a different definition of neutrality. Referring back to the original definitions provided by the Merriam-Webster and Oxford English Dictionaries, she has identified neutrality as "the state of not supporting or helping either side in a conflict, disagreement, or war"; in other words, "neutrality is about not taking sides." [5]

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[3] Information on James LaRue come from the following two sources: James LaRue, "Are Libraries Neutral?", *James LaRue,* February 11, 2018, http://www.jlarue.com/2018/02/are-libraries-neutral.html; and Amy Carlton, "Are Libraries Neutral? President's Program tackles heavy subject from multiple angles," *American libraries,* February 12, 2018, https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/blogs/the-scoop/are-libraries-neutral/.

[4] Quotes from Knowles and McCook are sourced from Amy Carlton, "Are Libraries Neutral?"

[5] Quotes from Chris Bourg are taken from Amy Carlton, "Are Libraries Neutral?" and Chris Bourg, "Debating y/our humanity, or Are Libraries Neutral?" *Feral Librarian,* February 11, 2018, https://chrisbourg.wordpress.com/2018/02/11/debating-y-our-humanity-or-are-libraries-neutral/.

Many critics of neutrality, including Bourg, have pointed to the impossibility of being neutral. As Alison M. Lewis sardonically noted in her edited anthology of essays questioning library neutrality, "It has already been 'discovered' by particle physicists, anthropologists, and a range of other researchers, that it is impossible to be neutral." [6] Moreover, the very existence of libraries, archives, and other repositories of knowledge is not neutral. As Bourg stated, "The very notion that shared, consolidated community resources ought to exist is not a neutral idea."

Emily Drabinski, coordinator of library instruction at Long Island University, has argued that libraries are unable to create balanced collections, as:

> Each of our nuanced and careful choices comes at the necessary, material, bounded cost of a whole range of other choices we do not make. We buy one book to the exclusion of probably thousands of others. And in the process we build our libraries as one kind of world, one that can never encompass all the possibilities of how we might organize ourselves in social, cultural, political, and, critically, material space. [7]

Bourg has further troubled this idea of balanced collections, arguing:

> The pro-neutrality folks are going to argue that a neutral collection is one that includes items reflecting all sides of contentious issues. But the idea that our collections should be inclusive of all or many points of view – even those points of view that some members of our community find repellent — is not a neutral stance.
>
> According to the *2016 General Social Survey*:
>
> - 51% of people would favor removing a book written by a Muslim clergyman who preaches hatred of the United States from their public library.
> - 35% favor removing a book that argues blacks are inferior
> - 25% favor removing books by communists
> - 17% favor removing books by homosexuals
>
> How does a library remain neutral on these questions?

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[6] Alison M. Lewis, ed. *Questioning Library Neutrality: Essays From Progressive Librarian* (Litwin Books: LLC, 2008), p. 2.

[7] Emily Drabinski, "Are Libraries Neutral?" *Emily Drabinski,* February 12, 2018, http://www.emilydrabinski.com/are-libraries-neutral/.

> One side says keep the book, another side says remove it.
>
> You can't have and not have the book simultaneously – you have to take a side. As far as I know, none of us work in Schrodinger's Library.

Drabinski's and Bourg's criticisms of "neutrally" curating collections point towards another important criticism of neutrality: not taking a side is still taking a side. To cite Drakinski once again:

> Those steeped in and rewarded by dominant ways of seeing the world don't have to know how intensely political the ostensibly neutral position is. If the white supremacists booking your meeting space are not after you, you don't have to know how dangerous they are. Books about reparative therapy for gay people can be simply another point of view if yours is not the body and mind those authors seek to destroy. To imagine that neutrality could be something we could choose is an intensely privileged position, one that I have to imagine my way into as I listen to the arguments of those absolutists whose worlds are rarely contested.
>
> In focusing such a conversation on an idealized notion of neutrality that none of us encounter in our real lives, we offer an alibi to those who have the power to define themselves and their worldviews as normal, as neutral, as apolitical.

In sum, critics of neutrality argue that information institutions are incapable of being neutral, no matter how staunchly *IFLA* calls for balanced collections of materials and access to information. Moreover, the mask of claiming to be apolitical reflects immense privilege, often re-entrenches dominant epistemologies, and can negatively impact minority groups.

Digital Dangers, or Pepe the Frog is Racist Now

Arguments about neutrality — which have raged through print, public debates, and especially librarians' personal blogs — are mostly grounded in the physical reality of libraries and archives. What of the digital realm?

By now it has been widely acknowledged that technology is not neutral. Scholars like Mark Marino, Tara McPherson, and Safiya Noble have made compelling arguments for the ways that code and algorithms themselves replicate and re-entrench societal inequities.[8] In his article "Edition, Project, Database, Archive, Thematic Research Collection: What's in a Name?" Kenneth Price argued that:

> A database is not an undifferentiated sea of information out of which structure emerges. Argument is always there from the beginning in how those constructing a database choose to categorize information — the initial understanding of the materials governs how more fine-grained views will appear because of the way the objects of attention are shaped by divisions and subdivisions within the database. The process of database creation is not neutral, nor should it be.[9]

While the impossibility of being neutral is common to both physical and digital spaces, digital environments are also unique in some important ways. Libraries have only so much space and funding, so distribution of resources has been a key part of the neutrality debate on both sides. In contrast, the internet greatly lowers cost of publication, distribution, and collection. The issue for digital environments is not scarcity but over-abundance.

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[8] For examples of their work, see: Mark Marino et al,, *10 PRINT CHR$(205.5+RND(1)); : GOTO 10* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2013). Tara McPherson, "Why Are the Digital Humanities So White? or Thinking the Histories of Race and Computation," *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2016*, http://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/debates/text/29. Safiya Nobles, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: NYU Press, 2018).

[9] Kenneth Price, "Edition, Project, Database, Archive, Thematic Research Collection: What's in a Name?" *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 3, no. 3 (2009), http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/3/3/000053/000053.html.

In the face of this information overload, experts must play a greater role. In an age that has devalued the expert, we need them more than ever to help navigate the increasingly vast galaxy of information. The curation of useful information for a website, or a series of reliable links for further reading, is an invaluable contribution to helping people understand information. Like all curation, it is not a neutral process because humans are not neutral. However, as R. David Lankes, director of the University of South Carolina's School of Library and Information Science, has pointed out, "To find meaning, people need professionals who are not neutral but advocates, not unbiased but trusted." [10] Unlike physical libraries, on the internet people can freely access all kinds of information. If providing access to all information is something that (some) information professionals prioritize, that job has largely already been done. The greater concern now is using our expertise to help mediate information.

While the work of experts may help those who could be confused by or misled by the FWP Slave Narratives, we must also discuss those who would intentionally and maliciously distort this information to further racist, white supremacist agendas. The lower barrier to publication on the Internet, which has helped social movements like #BlackLivesMatter and the Women's March, has also facilitated the rise of white supremacy, Neo-Nazis, and the alt-right. Algorithms which tailor search results based on previous search history and interests reinforce echo-chambers and the spread of misinformation.[11] Social media companies and other major technological groups have been reluctant and slow to take down hate speech, posts calling for mass murder, and other white supremacist materials.[12]

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[10] Amy Carlton, "Are Libraries Neutral?"

[11] For more on this subject, I highly recommend Safiya Nobles, *Algorithms of Oppression.*

[12] For more on this subject, see: Brett A. Barnet, *Untangling the web of hate: are online 'hate sites' deserving of First Amendment protection?* (Youngstown, N.Y.: Cambria Press, 2007); Abraham H. Foxman and Christopher Wolf, *Viral hate: containing its spread on the Internet* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); and Ignio

These racist online publications impact the real world. The white supremacist who killed nine members of a black church in Charleston stated that he was radicalized after Googling "black on white crime." Keegan Hankes, an analyst at the Southern Poverty Law Center's Intelligence Project, has stated that, "Propaganda can cause violent action just as much as an actual call to violence. [The Charleston shooter] acted on what he saw as a concerted attack against the white race, and he thought that because he spent hours online reading this propaganda."[13] Hate crimes by right-wing domestic terrorists have increased significantly alongside the growth of these online communities.[14]

It is true that these racist publications will continue to exist regardless of whether we structure our online archive to counter racist interpretations. The kind of people who would maliciously misappropriate this source base will do so regardless of what we do. However, we know that we are entering our work into a sphere wherein misinformation thrives, and that that misinformation has a real — and sometimes lethal — impact on human beings. We know that this information can be confusing and misleading, even to those with better intentions than white supremacists. We do not want people who have read the Narratives to Google "why would slaves say nice things about their masters?" or "was slavery actually bad?", potentially taking them to the websites of white supremacists and slave apologists. In the face of this real danger, we should use our expertise in this area to provide all the information necessary to understand this source

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Gargliardone et al., *Countering online hate speech* (Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, 2015).

[13] Russell Brandom, "Charlottesville is reshaping the fight against online hate," *The Verge,* August 15, 2017, https://www.theverge.com/2017/8/15/16151740/charlottesville-daily-stormer-ban-neo-nazi-facebook-censorship.

[14] Holmes Lybrand, "Fact-checking Trump's notion that white nationalism is not a rising threat," *CNN.com,* March 16, 2019, https://www.cnn.com/2019/03/16/politics/fact-checking-trump-on-threat-of-white-nationalism/index.html. "ADL Report: White Supremacist Murders More Than Doubled in 2017," *American Defamation League*, January 17, 2018, New York, https://www.adl.org/news/press-releases/adl-report-white-supremacist-murders-more-than-doubled-in-2017. See also the UN Report by Ignio Gargliardone.

base. If someone stumbles upon these interviews as quoted by a slavery apologist, they should be able to come onto this online archive to get more accurate context and information.

We also have to consider the broader cultural context for digital history projects on slavery. Slavery was a dehumanizing, multifaceted system of oppression. Anti-black racism is a pervasive, institutionalized, ongoing crisis that continues to affect the lives of millions of African Americans to this day. The growth of alt-right, white supremacist groups is a terrifying reality, and the legitimization of slavery is a central pillar to white supremacy.[15]

There is a difference between presenting both sides of a topical issue like funding public health care and presenting both sides of slavery. The dignity and humanity of human beings is not up for debate. We cannot be neutral about the evil of slavery. Choosing to not frame this information and not see it as potentially dangerous is *still a choice.* Moreover, it is ethically reckless and negligent. Being neutral and allowing sources speak for themselves without taking active steps to prevent their misuse and misinterpretation is ceding space to the powerful without protecting the vulnerable. Silence is complicity.

[15] Nina de Jesus, "Locating the Library in Institutional Oppression," *In the Library with a Lead Pipe,* September 24, 2014, http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2014/locating-the-library-in-institutional-oppression/.

The Act of Speaking with Others

Arguments grounded in whiteness — white librarians, white researchers, pervasively white institutions — are not sufficient to decide how to approach this online archive for black history.[16] There must be an effort to decolonize our work and consult others. As Tara McPherson has stated, "We should strive to create wherever possible the conditions for dialogue and the practise of speaking with and to rather than speaking for others." [17]

Unlike Western information ethics codes, the African Centre of Excellence for Information Ethics does not even mention neutrality. Instead their Tshwane Declaration on Information Ethics in Africa stipulates that: "Policies and practices regarding the generation, dissemination and utilisation of information in and about Africa should be grounded in an Ethics based on universal human values, human rights and social justice." [18] This approach prioritizes equality and justice when handling information. An African code of ethics designed for information related to Africa is a suitable choice for an archive of narratives from the transatlantic slave trade.

Moreover, Black History and Studies are intrinsically linked with activism, both theoretically and historically, and separating them is inherently problematic. As James B.

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[16] For more on whiteness in librarianship, archivism, and other information professions, I recommend: Nina de Jesus, "Locating the Library in Institutional Oppression"; Gina Schlesselman-Tarango, *Topographies of Whiteness: Mapping Whiteness in Library and Information Science* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2017); April Hathcock, "White Librarianship in Blackface: Diversity Initiatives in LIS," *In the Library with The Lead Pipe,* October 7, 2015, http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2015/lis-diversity/; Angela Galvan, "Soliciting Performance, Hiding Bias: Whiteness and Librarianship," *In the Library with The Lead Pipe,* June 3, 2015, http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2015/soliciting-performance-hiding-bias-whiteness-and-librarianship/.
[17] Tara McPherson, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," *Cultural Critique*, no. 20 (Winter, 1991-1992), https://www.jstor.org/stable/1354221, p. 23.
[18] African Centre of Excellence for Information Ethics, "Tshwane Declaration on Information Ethics in Africa," University of Pretoria, https://www.up.ac.za/african-centre-of-excellence-for-information-ethics/article/2616104/tshwane-declaration. African Information Ethics. http://www.africainfoethics.org/

Stewart stated in his historical survey of Black Studies, "One of the most important lessons that can be garnered from studying the past is that Black/Africana Studies cannot be an enterprise that is housed solely in academe if it is to be true to its historical legacy, nor can it be simply a national enterprise." [19] The foundation of Black Studies, from Frederick Douglass to Carter G. Woodson, was not neutral because the existence of black people in America has never been neutral. The fight for universal human values, human rights, and social justice — as specified by the Tshwane Code — has always been an ongoing struggle and pretending that we can be neutral about it is a gross exercise in privilege. As Stewart summarizes:

> Finally, the activist responses of scholar-activists to the myriad assaults waged on the masses of black people in the early 20th century should provide a model for contemporary counterparts. Bona fide Black/Africana Studies scholar-activists cannot remain silent and ensconced in pristine ivory towers in the wake of tragedies such as the executions of Trayvon Martin in Florida, Michael Brown in Missouri, Eric Garner in New York City, and others. [20]

If, as a scholar, I value having a dialogue with others, and speaking with them instead of for them whenever possible, I cannot ignore this information. I cannot study Black History while abandoning the activism that has shaped its formation from the beginning for the sake of "neutrality" — especially knowing how my source base could be dangerously misused. To cherry-pick what is convenient from this field of study, and then hide from the consequences of my work in an ivory tower, would be deeply harmful appropriation.

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[19] James B. Stewart, "Black/Africana Studies, Then And Now: Reconstructing A Century Of Intellectual Inquiry And Political Engagement, 1915–2015," *The Journal of African American History* 100, no. 1, "Centennial Perspectives, 1915–2015" (Winter 2015), p. 112-113.
[20] Stewart, "Black/Africana Studies, Then And Now," p. 118.

FWP Slave Narratives and Issues of 'Black Bias'

In the instructions distributed to FWP interviewers, the national office stated: "It should be remembered that the Federal Writers Project is not interested in taking sides on any question." [21] This stance was further clarified in a memorandum sent from the Federal Director Henrry Alsberg to State Directors which stated that interviewers must "take the greatest care not to influence the point of view of the informant, and not to let his own opinion of the subject of slavery become obvious. Should the ex-slave, however, give only one side of the picture, the interviewer should suggest that there were other circumstances, and ask questions about them." [22] These instructions, which were deeply rooted in slavery apologism, exemplify the FWP's flawed approach to neutrality.

During the early 20th century, prevailing stereotypes and academic research asserted the existence of 'black bias.' Influential sociologist Newbell Niles Puckett argued in the 1920s that African American's compulsion to lie had originated as a survival tactic in West Africa and continued throughout slavery and emancipation.[23] In her 1928 survey of African American art, Elizabeth Lay Green stated that "the Negro so far has found his most natural means of expression" in the mediums of music and poetry while struggling with literary pursuits because literature required "a more objective view of their subject matter." [24] Stith Thompson, the

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[21] Administrative Files 11478, p. xx, *Federal Writers Project Slave Narratives Administrative Files.*
[22] Memorandum from Henry Alsberg to State Directors of Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, Missouri, North Carolina, South Carolina, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia, Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana, July 30, 1937, Entry 21, Box 1, File "Ex-Slaves Correspondence." Found in Stewart, p. 69.
[23] Newbell Niles Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1926).
[24] Elizabeth Lay Green, *The Negro in Contemporary American Literature; an outline for individual and group study* (College Park, Maryland: McGrath Publishing Company, 1968), p. 7.

president of the American Folklore Society, wrote to Lomax that he would not hire African Americans to write about black folk culture, even if they were qualified, because "the material had to be treated with more objectivity than any black could have." [25] These prejudices within sociology and folklore studies (as well as many other fields of academia) labelled African Americans as culturally and biologically incapable of being objective.

The concern that ex-slaves might give "only one side of the picture" stems from these beliefs in 'black bias.' Catherine Stewart provides compelling analysis that:

> Black employees of the FWP, along with their ex-slave informants, operated in a social context where their objectivity regarding racial issues was continually being undermined as they were routinely accused of possessing a "Negro bias." The problem of establishing their authority, as either reporters or witnesses of an event as politically charged as slavery, was compounded by the fact that "Negro bias" was widely perceived by whites as having both genetic or racial and cultural bases.[26]

This suspicion of black workers and interviewees is well exemplified by Virginia state director Eudora Richardson, who wrote to Alsberg:

> The ex-slaves who are quoted have told interesting stories — yet stories that must be taken with the well known grain of salt that Mr. Lewis [the project's black supervisor] is not administering. I am entirely sympathetic with the Negro's desire for equality of opportunity. So I think I am writing now with the fingers of a liberal. I know the old Negro, moreover. He is a creature of fine imagination who likes to tell his stories after a manner that will be pleasing to his audience. [27]

Richardson claims to be "sympathetic with the Negro's desire for equality of opportunity," stating later on in the letter that "I am a liberal Southerner really!" [28] If a sympathetic, liberal

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[25] Thompson eventually got around this aversion of working with Afrrican Americans by paying Lomax for the works that he had collected from black informants. See Stewart p. 117, 281.
[26] Stewart, p. 134.
[27] Richardson to Henry Alsberg, November 27, 1937, Editorial Correspondence Pertaining to Ex-Slave Studies, Virginia. Found in Stewart, p. 140.
[28] Richardson to Henry Alsberg, December 8, 1937, Entry 1, Box 47, File "Virginia K-R." Found in Stewart, p. 141.

Southerner openly complained to the FWP Director that accounts written by African Americans were "written too soon after the Civil War, and had too much of a Negro bias to be accurate"; blamed the project's black supervisor for not taking stories "with the well known grain of salt"; and condescendingly commented on how well she knew the "old Negro" as "a creature of imagination" — well, we can only imagine how conservative Southerners reacted to the same material.[29]

Accusations of bias were weaponized against African Americans in particular to discredit their research and belittle their experiences of slavery. Somehow, the 'objectivity' of white interviewers was never questioned — even when they interviewed people that their grandparents had enslaved. This stance of not "taking sides" or letting one's "opinion on the subject of slavery become obvious" is a striking example of how claiming neutrality is siding with the oppressor. When designing an online archive for these Narratives, we must remember how neutrality was used to permit multiple 'opinions' about slavery and to delegitimize black voices. We cannot perpetuate the violence of this 'neutrality.' In the face of gross historical and contemporary injustice, we cannot afford to be silent; we cannot negotiate with terrorists.

[29] Richardson also claimed that she spent two weeks alone re-writing the material to remove the "bias" that could "harm interracial relationships." Richardson to Henry Alsberg, November 27, 1937. Found in Stewart, p. 142.

The Social Worlds We Inhabit:
History and Complexity of the Corpus

After reading hundreds of the Federal Writers' Project Slave Narratives, the interview with Mack Taylor remains one of my favorites. It reads as follows:

" Well, I's been here mighty nigh a hundred years, and just 'cause I pinched and saved and didn't throw my money away on liquor, or put it into de palms of every Jezabel hussy dat slant her eye at me, ain't no valuable reason why them dat did dat way and 'joyed deirselves can get de pension and me can't get de pension. 'Tain't fair! No, sir. If I had a knowed way back yonder, fifty years ago, what I knows now, I might of gallavanted 'round a little more wid de shemales than I did. What you think 'bout it?

" You say I's forgittin' dat religion must be thought about? Well,I can read de Bible a little bit. Don't it say: 'What you sow you sure to reap?' Yes, sir. Us niggers was fetched here 'ginst our taste. Us fell de forests for corn, wheat, oats, and cotton; drained de swamps for rice; built de dirt

2. 158

roads and de railroads; and us old ones is got a fair right to our part of de pension.

Figure 2.1: Excerpt from Interview with Mack Taylor

There are so many layers to Taylor's clever and strategic response.[1] After being admonished by his interviewer, he asserts his ability to read: a skill that would have been legally forbidden during his enslavement and marks his intelligence.[2] He quotes from the Bible and deflects criticism away from his own wistful musings to the massive injustice of slavery. He makes two statements that could be innocently unrelated, but by position to each other make a bold statement. "You reap what you sow" and "Africans were kidnapped and enslaved" are separately a quote from the Bible—which would have lent authority in the context of a predominantly Christian culture—and a statement of historical fact. He notably does not specify *who* was enslaving the Africans in his statement, further cloaking his criticisms by structuring the sentence without the subject (i.e. who is doing the action). In essence, he flips the discussion from the sinfulness of his thoughts to the actions of a white population that committed the far greater sin of enslavement. It is a bold move, and one cloaked in clever deflections and insinuations. By stating that enslavement happened "gainst their tastes," Taylor also disputes the idea that Africans willingly submitted to slavery, a popular revisionist belief endorsed by prominent contemporary historians like Ulrich B. Phillips and movies like *Gone With the Wind*.[3] In

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[1] I have included an image of Taylor's interview instead of retyping it because it presents the excerpt like an artifact. I also do not want to legitimize the racialized spellings by quoting them directly. However, for anyone who has difficulty reading the excerpt or who is using a screen reader, here is a complete transcription:
"Well, I's been here mighty nigh a hundred years, and just 'cause I pinched and saved and didn't throw my money away on liquor, or put it into de palms of every Jezabel hussy dat slant her eye at me, ain't no valuable reason why them dat did dat way and 'joyed deirselves can get de pension and me can't get de pension. T'ain't fair! No, sir. If I had knowed way back yonder, fifty years ago, what I knows now, I might of gallavanted 'round a little more wid de shemales than I did. What you think 'bout it?
"You say I's forgittin' dat religion must be thought about? Well, I can read de Bible a little bit. Don't it say: 'What you sow you sure to reap?' Yes, sir. Us niggers was fetched here 'ginst our taste. Us fell de forests for corn, wheat, oats, and cotton; drained de swamps for rice; built de dirt roads and de railroads; and us old ones is got a fair right to our part of de pension."
W. W. Dixon, "Mack Taylor: Ex-Slave 97 Years," *Federal Writers' Project South Carolina*, p. 157-8.
[2] For more on literacy and slavery, see: Janet Duitsman Cornelius, *"When I can read my title clear": Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991).
[3] Phillips's *American Negro Slavery* (1929) and *Life and Labor in the Old South* (1929) extolled the 'benevolent', Christianizing facets of slavery and were greatly influential on the [white] study of slavery. *Gone with the Wind*

addition, the work that he mentions—clearing roads, draining swamps, building roads and railroads—are projects that were considered crucial parts of American history and nation building; as such, he positions African Americans as central to the creation of America. Finally, he skillfully maneuvers the conversation back to his own greatest concern: getting the pension to which he is entitled.

We cannot be certain whether the interviewer, W. W. Dixon, understood the subtext in Taylor's response or if it was lost in the cultural gulf between them. I have included an image of the original file instead of retyping it in order to show how Taylor's speech was racialized through dialect spellings. Federal guidelines and local editors encouraged "phonetically spelling" the words of black informants. This racialization of sound was part of a larger tradition of mistrelry, exoticization, and dehumanization. While the narrative was supposed to seem more "authentic" because it "sounded black," this approach ultimately re-enforced a sonic colour line where Taylor's "otherness" was emphasized and his intelligence and capability were undermined. We should also note that many interviewers emphasized racist caricatures, such as drinking alcohol and lewd behaviour, due to their own biases and political agendas. It is possible that Taylor's comments about Jezebels and drinking were recorded for that reason.

This excerpt also highlights the lack of proper oral history technique. Dixon inserts their own opinion by asking a loaded question along the lines of 'aren't you forgetting about your religion?' [4] Poor interviewing methodology like this can warp the collection of information and

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(1939), which has recently been pulled from HBO Max for its problematic depictions of slavery, is another example of influential cultural products of this time period that endorsed the myth of the 'happy slave.' Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime* (New York and London: D. Appleton and Company, 1918). Ulrich B. Phillips, Life and Labor in the Old South (Little: Brown, 1929). Amol Rajan, "Gone with the Wind removed from HBO Max," BBC News, June 10, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-52990714.

[4] It is unclear what Dixon's gender was, so I have chosen to use the pronoun 'they.'

encourage placating, dishonest responses. It damages the integrity of the history by inserting the interviewer over the interviewee's own story in a very stark way. Moreover, Dixon's reaction reveals some of the power dynamics happening in this interview. Chiding a stranger who is much older than you would have been extremely rude during this time period — unless it was 'excused' through racial and class-based 'superiority.' This audacity is an example of Southern paternalism, a coy way to describe the utter disrespect with which many white people treated their black neighbours.

Yet, despite these issues with Dixon's interviewing technique, Taylor's wit, humour, and boldness shine through. This interview is a good example of the issues that will be discussed in this chapter. The FWP Slave Narratives are, in a word, complicated. Their history and complexity make this a difficult corpus to present to the public. In examining the origin and evolution of the Narratives, three main factors emerge that demonstrate the difficulty of digitizing this material: cultural context, administrative inconsistencies, and individual interactions. The broader cultural context, like the revisionist history movement that Taylor disputes, impacted the genesis and execution of the project through competing interests and conflicting agendas. The lack of proper interviewing technique demonstrated by Dixon is one of the many administrative inconsistencies that complicate the project. The interaction between Taylor and Dixon exemplifies the complex social and racial hierarchies that distort many of the Narratives. These factors combined to create problems like the tropes of black misspeak that are prevalent in the Narratives and represented by Dixon's misspelling of Taylor's words.

Cultural Context

"Here, for the first time in the history of literature, so far as I know, a group of poor and despised people are being given a chance to speak their piece, give their side of the picture." [5]

Alan and Elizabeth Lomax
Prominent folklorists involved in the FWP's Slave Narrative project

The FWP Slave Narratives were, of course, not the first time that African Americans participated in the writing of their own history. It was not even the first time that slave narratives were collected under the Federal Writers' Project. During the early twentieth century, there was a growing interest in the preservation and presentation of slavery histories. These initiatives existed partially because the last generation that had endured slavery was dying of old age and their stories were being lost with them. The seventy-fifth anniversary of the Civil War was fast approaching, which spurred interest in how to properly commemorate the struggle. Crucially, the oppressive racial politics of the time turned the writing of black history into a political and ideological battleground. The cultural backdrop of segregation and discrimination, as well as the various groups that struggled to define black history — Southern revisionists, black intellectuals, folklorists, and the formerly enslaved themselves — are key to understanding the cultural context of the Narratives.

As discussed in the introduction, slave narratives had a long history of publication in the United States and were frequently used to prove the evils of slavery. After the Civil War, however, these damning narratives were published much less frequently — while southern

[5] Found in Lynda M. Hill, "Ex-Slave Narratives: The WPA Federal Writers' Project Reappraised," *Oral History* 26, no. 1 (1998): 66.

apologists organized to create their own exculpatory versions of history. White supremacist groups like the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) wrote deeply racist children's books, built statues of 'Mammy', and mourned the loss of the "Old Negro." [6] As Kareen Cox argued in her history of the UDC, "the UDC left no stone unturned to insure that the next generation was motivated to honor and uphold the values of the Confederate generation." [7] Their prejudiced presentations of black history — and in particular, black slaves as content and well-cared for — were a crucial cornerstone of Lost Cause revisionism.

Within this context, there was also a tradition of black performances of slavery rememberance for white consumption. For example, at Ex-Slave Fairs the formerly enslaved (or any black people who looked old enough to have lived during slavery) were paid to sing old slave songs and tell old stories for white audiences. Performances like these encouraged a sanitized and nostalgic public memory of slavery through exploiting black economic vulnerability. This precedent of paid performance provides context for 'gifts' of food or money that interviewees requested and white interviewers provided during the FWP interviews. Moreover, the well-documented racist agendas of revisionist groups should make us hesitant when reading any Narratives collected by group members. As Sterling Brown pointed out, slaves who "yearn[ed] for the good old days 'befo' de War'" were often "ventriloquist's dummies." [8]

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[6] Stewart provides an excellent analysis of this in her chapter "The Passing Away of the Old-Time Negro: Folk Culture, Civil War Memory, and Black Authority in the 1930s." Stewart, p. 11-34.

[7] Karen Cox, *Dixie's Daughters: the United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Preservation of Confederate Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), p. 140.

[8] Sterling A. Brown, Arthur P. Davis, and Ulysses Lee, eds., *Negro Caravan* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), p. 3. More recently, Trevor Noah commented, "I know some people want to argue that, they want to be like 'oh but some slaves didn't have it that bad, and some slaves weren't having it tough.' Let me tell you something. If slaves were having a good time, then they wouldn't have needed to be slaves. The people could have just let them go home and see if they come back, that's how you know people are having a good time. Another reason you know they weren't having a good time is because no white person tried to become a slave." Comedy Central UK, "Gone With The Wind Is Pulled By HBO / The Daily Show With Trevor Noah," *YouTube* video 3:57, June 11, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Ca-O-uz9vQ.

Unfortunately, pro-slavery tracts were supported by a racist academic environment. As Norman Yetman observed, "Seldom before has racism been so pervasive and so academically respectable in America as during the early years of the twentieth century." [9] Black intellectuals fought to define black history and to separate it from racist ideologies. With the impetus to set the record straight and to contradict dominant narratives about the "benign institution," researchers at black universities were the first to collect oral histories of slavery. Anthropologists Paul Radin and A. P. Watson, historian John Cade, and sociologists Charles Johnson and Ophelia Settle Egypt, along with many graduate students, interviewed more than five hundred ex-slaves during the late 1920s.[10] Radin and Watson focused on personal experiences of religious conversion; Johnson and Egypt traced the lives of their interviewees from slavery to Reconstruction to present day; Cade primarily analyzed the material conditions of slavery. Their approaches and collections are an important point of reference and comparison for the FWP Slave Narratives. It is also important to note that black intellectualism in this time period was greatly influenced by the politics of racial uplift, and this ideology affected the way that black interviewers described the formerly enslaved interviewees, both in these earlier collections and in the FWP Slave Narratives.

Lawrence D. Reddick, who had worked with Egypt and Johnson on their slave narratives project, was the first to propose that the government collect stories from the formerly enslaved as

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[9] Yetman, "Background," p. 536.

[10] I want to draw particular attention to Egypt, an academic, researcher, and social worker who also helped expose the Tuskegee syphilis study and directed Washington's first Planned Parenthood clinic among many other notable accomplishments. Social Welfare History Project, "Ophelia Settle Egypt – (1903–1984) – Social Worker, Historian and Pioneer in Family Planning," *VCU Libraries Social Welfare History Project*, 2014, http://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/eras/great-depression/egypt-ophelia-settle-1903-1984/.

part of the relief program in 1934.[11] Before presenting his plan to FERA officials, Reddick conferred with Johnson and Carter G. Woodson (the later of whom is considered the father of black history). Reddick's project would have the benefit of countering slavery apologists, preserving oral histories that would otherwise be lost, and — crucially — employing black college graduates who, as Reddick observed, had "been left out generally in the program of recovery." [12] The pilot program, which employed 12 black writers in Kentucky, collected approximately 250 interviews between September 1934 and July 1935. The project did not continue due to administrative bumbling and the transition from FERA to the WPA.[13]

Under the WPA, the FWP's primary task was the American Guide, which was meant to document the regionalism and diversity of America while employing white collar workers and encouraging tourism. The American Guide is an important precedent for the FWP Slave Narratives. They shared a similar impetus, as both projects were founded amidst the fear that regional cultures would be smothered under the rise of mass media. Writing styles used in the American Guide, such as describing interviewees' circumstances, appearances, and demeanor, would be carried over to the Slave Narratives project. Both projects had conflicting primary goals around why they valued and recorded these stories. There was an impetus to record minority stories due to increasing perception of their cultural and historical value; there was also a desire to sell the stories and make money. The tension between these goals complicated the

[11] Scholars of this project have unanimously identified him as the first -- however, I would like to note the possibility that others informally proposed this idea before him. His proposal is certainly the first one that was recorded and greenlit.
[12] Lawrence D. Reddick to Norman Yetman, interview, July 20, 1965, Sept. 23, 1965. Found in Yetman, "Background," 541.
[13] Yetman, "Background," p. 542-543.

methodologies of the projects, as the accurate and thorough collection of information was often incongruent with the stories that 1930s Americans would want to purchase.

The first FWP interviews with the formerly enslaved were conducted by individual black writers who worked without explicit direction or recognition. These independent and spontaneous efforts were motivated for similar reasons as Cade's, Egypt's, and Radin's projects. The first slave narratives systematically collected under the FWP came from Georgia, where Rev. J. C. Wright, an official of the Atlanta Urban League, had suggested the project to help employ black writers. Henry G. Alsberg, the FWP National Director, wrote in response to the Georgia Writers Project's request to collect ex-slave narratives:

> I think your plan for write-ups of the stories of ex-slaves is fine. There was a project of this type under [the Civil Works Administration] and FERA. It was started in Kentucky, but for some reason was not well conducted and therefore discontinued. Indeed, I think in all the southern states and some of the border northern states a project of this type could be undertaken if it were wisely handled. [14]

While Alsberg thought the collection of slave narratives was "fine" if "wisely handled," he also clearly saw histories of slavery as an exclusively southern issue that, at most, bordered the northern states. His comments show the early signs of several issues within the FWP Slave Narratives: the erasure of formerly enslaved people living in northern states; the treatment of African Americans as a "Southern issue"; and the sense of division (if not animosity) between the administrative FWP offices in the north and the state offices in the south. The allegations of poor conduct in the Kentucky project also shows ignorance of the good work done by the black employees of the project and a lack of recognition that the project failed due to administrative

[14] Henry G. Alsberg to Carolyn Dillard, July 7, 1936, Correspondence Pertaining to Ex-Slave Studies, Records of the Federal Writers' Project, Works Progress Administration, National Archives, Record Group 69. Found in Yetman, "Background," p. 543.

bumbling as well as the shutting down of the WPA. "Wisely handled" also seems a coy way to imply a need for white oversight.

With Alsberg's mild interest and approval, Negro Writing Units in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia, collected interviews with ex-slaves on their own initiatives. These collections were strongly encouraged by the federal Office of Negro Affairs. The collection of slave narratives likely would have remained as independent initiatives instead of a formalized federally overseen project if not for the interference of the federal Folklore Editor, John A. Lomax.

Lomax is an important, influential, and deeply frustrating figure. He helped to preserve a significant amount of rural and African American culture, notably using new advances in portable wax cylinder recording technology to preserve songs. He also had a distinctly colonialist and exploitative approach to his work. His self-aggrandizing autobiography *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter* positions himself as the explorer of a 'dark continent' within the United States, venturing into 'savage' and 'uncivilized' pockets to collect material that only he could preserve, understand, and interpret.[15] Lomax is most famous for helping to promote famous guitarist Huddie William Ledbetter or 'Leadbelly' — it is less well known that he took half of Ledbetter's profits, made Ledbetter wash dishes and act as a chauffeur when not performing, and mislead Ledbetter to believe that he had arranged his release from prison.[16] As a folklorist Lomax was an evolutionist. In the words of Benjamin Filene,

> Evolutionists tended to study folk song to demonstrate the vitality of America's past. They offered little sense of any present-day possibilities for these cultural forms. ... Folk song, in the evolutionists' conception, was

[15] For an extended discussion of Lomax, his background, and his impact on the FWP Slave Narratives, see Stewart's chapter "Adventurers of a Ballad Hunter: John Lomax and the Pursuit of Black Folk Culture." Stewart, p. 91-119.
[16] Stewart, p. 114-115.

> a delicate remnant from a bygone era and the folklorists' job was to preserve it from being trampled by the pernicious forces of change. [17]

Lomax was interested in a constructed version of blackness that was perceived as static, disappearing, and in need of rescuing from a competent white folklorist — and if he happened to make money from selling these songs and stories, well, that just made sense.

Collecting slave narratives was a natural fit for Lomax's interest in 'disappearing' African American culture. After being hired as an editor and advisor for the FWP, Lomax read the slave narratives submitted by Florida state director Carita Doggett Corse. He enthusiastically wrote back to her: "I have enjoyed very much reading this batch of reminiscences from ex-slaves. It seems to me they are of very great value and I congratulate you on being the first to open up, as you have done, this field of investigation." [18] Lomax, like his children cited at the beginning of this section, was ignorant of the many previous efforts to record these oral histories and happy to attribute their first collection to a white woman. Due to Lomax's personal fascination, the project was expanded to other southern states and federal guidelines for the interviews — many designed by Lomax himself — were distributed to state offices. Lomax used his influence to put the direction and co-ordination of this project under his office, the Folklore Division, instead of the Office of Negro Affairs where black academics had been encouraging the project for years. As a result, folklorist values and techniques — especially in regards to 'authenticity' — permeated throughout the Slave Narratives Project.

Many black intellectuals fought to establish a project to collect oral histories of slavery, and by this merit alone the FWP Slave Narratives are worthy of our study and consideration.

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[17] Benjamin Filene, "Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Vernacular Music in the Twentieth Century," (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1995), p. 105.
[18] Found in Yetman, "Background," 549. Stewart, p. 175.

However, the project had clumsy implementation after being co-opted by Lomax. It inherited issues from its predecessor the American Guide: notably subjective descriptions of interviewees and conflicts between radical academic and commercial goals. African Americans in northern states were excluded from being interviewed. Aloof relationships between the northern national office and the southern state offices would cause Narrative collection and editing to vary greatly between the states. The radical impetus of the project — that black history is important and worth preserving — was undermined by Lomax whose directions and guidelines reinforced his (commercial) investment in the Old Negro.

Counter-acting Lomax's influence was Sterling Brown. Throughout the collection of the Narratives, Brown diligently fought to improve the interviewers' treatments of their subjects, reading drafts submitted to the federal office and sending out instructions on removing racist stereotypes and language. In one such missive, Brown gently (and with great restraint) stated: "I should like to recommend that the words darky and nigger and such expressions as 'a comical little old black woman' be omitted from the editorial writing." [19] Through records from Brown and the Office of Negro Affairs, we can trace conflicting ideas in how to collect and present these interviews.

Finally, the systemic and structural racism of the 1930s must be considered when reading the Narratives. In his article "Out of the Mouths of Ex-Slaves," Cade stated:

> May I add here that even though slavery has been abolished, it still exists in parts of our country. To go about and visit the large plantations where Negroes toil day after day in the fields till the end of the year when they

[19] Catherine Stewart cites this quote from Sterling Brown, "Notes by an editor on dialect usage in accounts by interviews with ex-slaves (To be used in conjunction with Supplementary Instructions 9E)"; however, I also found this exact wording in a missive sent by Henry Alsberg to the State Directors in 1937. While I cannot currently access the same primary sources as Stewart to confirm this, I expect that Brown's notes were used verbatim by Alsberg. This use of Brown's instructions indicates his influence on the project. See Stewart, p. 85, 274, and Administrative Files, *Federal Writers' Project.*

> are told by the owners that they are yet in debt — which means that they must toil yet another year, only to find themselves where they started — is indeed sad to behold. [20]

Sharecropping, incarceration, vagrancy laws, segregation, poverty, and terrorist groups like the Ku Klux Klan were all manifestations of the severe structural injustices that persecuted African Americans. Cade reported that Lucy Hamilton, a formerly enslaved woman, stated that she had "seen more slavery since surrender than before." [21] This statement is not a vindication of slavery; it is a reminder of the conditions that the formerly enslaved endured in the decades following the Civil War. As black, elderly people who were predominantly poor and living in rural communities, the interviewees faced multiple forms of oppression. Barriers to honest conversation existed with both white and black interviewers, and we must consider the impact that age, class, education, and gender had on the dynamics of interviews.

Southern revisionists (racists), black intellectuals like Rawick and Brown, folklorists like Lomax, and the interviewees themselves all contributed to the collection of the FWP Slave Narratives. The complexity of the archive lies in these competing ideas, interests, and cultural influences. How to handle these groups, and the impacts that they had, is an important part of designing the database. This complex foundation contributed to the complicated execution of the project, wherein the administrative inconsistencies and the actions of individual interviewers and interviewees shaped the content of the Narratives.

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[20] Cade concluded this observation with the statement, "However, we as a whole have done exceedingly well as we have only had sixty-five years to get where we now stand. Watch us grow." Note how Cade ends with a statement of racial uplift. John B. Cade, "Out of the Mouths of Ex-Slaves," *Journal of Negro History* 20, no. 3 (July 1935): p. 337.

[21] Cade, p. 336.

Administrative Inconsistencies

There are three important tiers to consider within the FWP Slave Narratives: the federal level, the state level, and the local level. The FWP federal administration distributed guidelines and interview questions, oversaw editing, and provided feedback on what kinds of Narratives were desired. Under Lomax, and later Botkin, the directions skewed towards 'folklore,' with a particular interest in songs, stories, and supernatural beliefs.[22] The loaded and leading questions distributed by the federal office are exemplified by the following:

- "Did the slaves ever run away to the North? Why? What did you hear about patrollers? How did slaves carry news from one plantation to another? Did you hear of trouble between the blacks and whites?"
- "What games did you play as a child? Can you give the words or sing any of the play songs or ring games of the children? Riddles? Charms? Stories about 'Raw Head and Bloody Bones' or other 'hants' of ghosts? Stories about animals? What do you think of voodoo? Can you give the words or sing any lullabies? Work songs? Plantation hollers? Can you tell a funny story you have heard or something funny that happened to you? Tell about the ghosts you have seen."
- "Now that slavery is ended what do you think of it? Tell why you joined a church and why you think all people should be religious." [23]

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[22] Sharon Ann Musher argues that, "Lomax's leadership in large measure explains the focus of the interviews with ex-slaves on daily life, folk songs, and superstitious practice." Sharon Ann Musher, "Contesting 'The Way the Almighty Wants It': Crafting Memories of Ex-Slaves in the Slave Narrative Collection." *American Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (Mar. 2001): p. 8.

[23] An earlier version by Lomax read: "Tell why you joined the Baptist Church and why you think all people should be religious." Administrative Files, *Federal Writers' Project.*

There is so much to unpack in this small selection of questions: the need to justify to a government employee *why* the enslaved would try to escape bondage; the assumption that one would only hear of (but not experience) "trouble between blacks and whites"; that voodoo, a complex religion with significant spiritual significance for many communities, was lumped in with children's games and superstitions; the expectation that interviewees would believe in ghosts and have stories of them; how an 'opinion' on slavery is looped in with religion, when Christianization was frequently used to defend slavery; and the loaded assumption that the interviewee has joined a church and believes that all people should be Christian.[24] Extensive papers can — and have — been written about the issues in these questions and how they shaped the collection of the Narratives. For our purposes, we should note that extant instructions and question lists can be used to analyze and contextualize the Narratives.

Before Narratives were sent to the federal office, they were edited at the state level. As Sharon Ann Musher observed in her study of editing within the Narratives,

> Lomax's interview script appears to have shaped not only the questions interviewers asked (and failed to ask) but also the way in which state editors restructured interviews before submitting them to Washington. When the state editors rewrote the eleven transcripts recording more than one interview with a single ex-slave, they did not merely join the two interviews into a single text but rather cut and pasted sentences, reordered, rewrote, and deleted sections in order to conform to the interview script that Lomax suggested in his questionnaire. [25]

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[24] Henry 'Box' Brown contended that religion was used to create humble and obedient slaves. "The great end to which religion is there made to minister, is to keep the slaves in a docile and submissive frame of mind, by instilling into them the idea that if they do not obey their masters, they will infallibly 'go to hell'...." Henry Brown, *Narrative of Henry Box Brown, Who Escaped from Slavery Enclosed in a Box 3 feet Long and 2 Wide* (Boston: Brown & Stearns, 1849), 47.

[25] Musher, "Contesting the Almighty," p. 10. I highly recommend this article for extended analysis of editing, paternalism, and interview dynamics.

In trying to conform to what Lomax wanted, some Narratives were edited to better fit his guidelines. Editing practises varied greatly between the states. While investigating six of the state archives, Rawick found that most of the editorial changes in states like Georgia and Missouri were relatively benign and included shortening the interviews and altering dialect spellings.[26] In other states like Texas and Mississippi, significant editing took place. Out of the 591 interviews Texas sent to the national office, 275 were edited by teams of interviewers. Rawick argues that these revisions "help[ed to] make the narratives conform more closely with the accepted version of proper race relations of the time [and also] flatten[ed] out the portrait of the individual narrator, making him or her much less 3-D." [27] Some of the more damning portraits of slavery were not sent to the national office at all, and were recovered by Rawick working with black activists during the 1970s. While some state editors were willing to rearrange narratives to better fit federal expectations, others were happy to omit them entirely if the stories too deeply criticized the racial history of their state.

This lack of consistency between state offices was compounded by local regionalism. Local white offices resisted hiring anyone who was not from the area. As Stewart argues,

> This objection stemmed in part from southern whites' firm belief that they 'knew' their 'Negroes' far better than northern Yankees ever could. Perpetuating Confederate mythology regarding race relations, southern whites frequently asserted an intimate knowledge steeped in the long past of slavery and the close relationships between slaveholders and their slaves that made them 'like family.' [28]

[26] The following data comes from Musher, "Contesting the Almighty."
[27] Musher, "Contesting the Almighty," p. 2.
[28] Stewart, p. 44.

This racism and defensiveness furthered the sense of division between the northern federal headquarters and the local white offices conducting the interviews. Some offices even refused to follow federal guidelines, creating their own questions and methodologies.

Many local FWP branches also preferred to employ white people — even if they had no experience or training in writing.[29] This prejudiced employment happened despite the fact that many black intellectuals had proposed the collection of slave narratives in order to ensure the employment of black college graduates. John Preston Davis, a leader of black lobbyists, wrote in a letter to the assistant administrator of the WPA that "It is strange, indeed, that of the thousands of employees secured to administer these various projects none is a Negro. I am sure you do not suffer from the illusion that no Negroes were qualified for these posts." [30] Thanks to the advocacy of activists like Davis and the persistent efforts of Brown and the Office of Negro Affairs, more black writers were gradually hired onto the project — however, they remained the last hired and the first fired.

Negro Writing Units (NWUs), while a despicable manifestation of segregation, also collected some of the most informative Narratives. Local offices frequently complained to federal administrators that they could not possibly hire a black writer because they lacked the funds to set up a separate office. Due to strict segregation laws, black writers were not allowed to work in the same offices as their white co-workers. The resulting segregated units, NWUs, often worked out of black community buildings like churches or homeless shelters. Despite their greatly unequal treatment, they gathered Narratives that greatly enriched the corpus and challenged many of the stories collected by white interviewers.

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[29] For more on the interviewers' varying levels of experience, see the introduction to Botkin, *Lay My Burden Down*.
[30] Davis to Williams, December 12, 1935. Found in Stewart, p. 50.

The dynamics between federal, state, and local offices are revealed through correspondence, administrative records, and the Narratives themselves.[31] This contextual information is vital to understanding differences within the Narratives: for example, the Narratives collected by the Florida NWU vary significantly in content and style from the highly edited Texas Narratives. The lack of administrative consistency across the FWP Slave Narratives Project provides important context for how the Narratives should be organized and analyzed.

Individual Interactions

In "Principles of Narrative History and Interviews," Norman K. Denzin discusses how narratives, particularly those obtained through interviews, are enabled and constrained by a wide range of social interactions and circumstances.[32] Practically every scholar of the FWP Slave Narratives has noted how the class and racial dynamics of the interviews restricted the ability of the formerly enslaved to speak truthfully about their experiences. Within these "rituals of racial etiquette", as Escott describes them, certain patterns and tropes emerge. These semiotics, or constructions of signs and meaning making within the Narratives, are a useful way to decode the interactions between interviewers and interviewees.

As one might suspect, the Southern apologists and revisionists introduced earlier in this chapter took racist approaches to the interviews. Historian Charles T. Davis describes how

> White interrogators customarily adopted a patronizing or at best paternalistic tone and at worst an offensive condescension… As a rule, the questions were leading and sometimes insulting, the answers routine or compliant, and the insensitivity of the

[31] For more analysis of the conflicts between federal, state, and local offices, I recommend Hill, "Reappraised."
[32] Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, ed. *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials*, 3rd ed (New York, Sage Publications, 2008), p. 64-5.

> interrogator and the evasiveness of the interrogated were flagrantly displayed.[33]

Many white interviewers also misled their informants as to why they were there, feigning friendly casual conversation. Others allowed their informants to believe that, as government agents, they had influence over pensions and welfare. This misinformation is sometimes explicitly discussed by the interviewer or observable in the remarks of interviewees like Mack Taylor who steered conversations back to welfare or pensions.

Many Southern racists were also able to weaponize the suggested format of the interviews. Due to folklorist traditions, the precedent of the American Guide, and Lomax's own stylistic preferences, interviewers were encouraged to add lengthy subjective descriptions to interviews. This style was supposed to help make the Narratives more readable, and thus more commercially viable. However, it allowed white supremacists to insert signifiers of black inferiority. While Brown fought against the inclusion of specific phrases like "comical old black woman" and the federal administration discouraged the use of phrases like "darky," extended descriptions of the interviewee's appearance, home, speech, and deameanor escaped editorial censorship because of the 'information' that they provided. A typical example of this comes from interviewer Sadie Hornby and interviewee Georgia Baker:

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[33] Charles T. Davis, Henry Louis Gates Jr., eds. *The Slave's Narrative*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 51.

"Now dere you is axin' 'bout dat sompin' t'eat
[illegible] dem days! Ida, ain't dere a piece of watermelon in de
ice box?" Georgia lifted the lid of a small ice box, got out
a piece of melon, and began to smack her thick lips as she de-
voured it with an air of ineffable satisfaction. When she had
tilted the rind to swallow the last drop of pink juice, she in-
dicated that she was fortified and ready to exercise her now
well lubricated throat, by resuming her story:

Figure 2.2: Excerpt from Interview with Georgia Baker

We must be careful with Narratives like Baker's that emphasize minstrel stereotypes (e.g. a love for watermelon) and fixate on exoticized physical descriptions (e.g. 'very black skin,' 'broad noses,' 'wooly hair,' etc.).[34] Other descriptions that may seem relatively innocuous to a modern reader often had deeper cultural meanings; for example, comments on mismatched clothing were meant to signify 'childlike' natures.[35] Common derogatory signifiers included 'uppityness', vanity, and dependence on charity, as exemplified by the description of Jane Smith Hill Harmon as "a comical little old black woman… Her wardrobe consists of out-of-style clothes and hats given her and it is her delight on Saturday afternoons to dress up in her finest and fanciest creations and come strutting along down town [sic] proud of the attention she is attracting." [36]

[34] Transcription of the text in the above image: "Now dere you is axin' 'bout dat sompin' t'eat [illegible] dem days! Ida, ain't dere a piece of watermelon in de ice box?" Georgia lifted the lid of a small ice box, got out a piece of melon, and began to smack her thick lips as she devoured it with an air of ineffable satisfaction. When she had tilted the rind to swallow the last drop of pink juice, she indicated that she was fortified and ready to exercise her now well lubricated throat, by resuming her story:"
Sadie B. Hornsby, "Mary Baker," *Federal Writers' Project: Georgia, Part 1*, p. 40.

[35] Of course, this wardrobe is due to 'uppityness' and not due to the poverty of the Great Depression making it difficult to have a cohesive outfit.

[36] Minnie Branham Stonestreet, " Jane Smith Hill Harmon," *Federal Writers' Project: Georgia*, part 2, p. 98.

These stereotypes and subtle constructions of meaning were designed to support the Lost Cause's ideology of black inferiority, moral deprivation, and childlike natures, positioning them as dependent on the generosity and paternalism of white Southerners.

As mentioned earlier, the long–established precedent of black performances of slavery history for white consumption also played a role in the dynamics of the interviews. Racist interviewers frequently mentioned gifts of food, money, or clothing to the interviewee. These descriptions furthered the stereotype of African Americans as dependent on benevolent white Southerners. It was also used to undermine the reliability of the interviewees and to reinforce stereotypes of African Americans as 'natural performers' who would say anything in exchange for money and goods.[37]

For many of the impoverished elderly African Americans interviewed, the appearance of a white government employee asking for their opinions on slavery must have been terrifying. As bell hooks recalls of her own childhood in the South,

> Returning to the memories of growing up in the social circumstances created by racial apartheid, to all the black spaces on the edges of town, I reinhabit a location where black folks associated whiteness with the terrible, the terrifying, the terrorizing. White people were regarded as terrorists, especially those who dared to enter that segregated space of blackness. As a child, I did not know any white people. They were strangers, rarely seen in our neighborhoods. The "official" white men who came across the tracks were there to sell products, Bibles, and insurance. They terrorized by economic exploitation.... Did they understand at all how strange their whiteness appeared in our living rooms, how threatening? Did they journey across the tracks with the same "adventurous" spirit that other white men carried to Africa…? Did they come to our houses to meet the Other face-to-face and enact the colonizer role, dominating us on our own turf? [38]

[37] Stewart, p. 209
[38] bell hooks, *Killing Rage: ending racism* (New York: H. Holt and Co, 1995), p. 39.

hooks' description gives us some sense of the physical and emotional intrusion that white interviewers would have forced upon their black interviewees. The FWP writers who "dared to enter that segregated space of blackness" did come with that "adventurous spirit," exemplified by the man who started the project and who had literally called his autobiography *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*. The interviewers also came with threats of economic exploitation — especially those who let their interviewees believe they had any control over pensions and relief.

In the face of this strange, threatening presence, interviewees reacted in a wide variety of ways, including tactics for survival, signifying, and outright honesty. Despite its use as a signifier against them, interviewees cleverly leveraged white interest in their stories in exchange for gifts of food, money, and clothing; they found ways to benefit despite the unequal power dynamics at play. These exchanges, while still exploitative, would have been a tactic for survival during the immense poverty of the Great Depression, wherein one interviewee describes how all he has had to eat that day was a handful of dirt.[39] Other interviewees used tactics of signifying, which Claudia Michelle-Kernan explains as: "The Black concept of signifying incorporates essentially a folk notion that dictionary entries for words are not always sufficient… The hearer is thus constrained to attend all potential meanings carrying symbolic systems in speech events—the total universe of discourse." [40] This way of speaking, in the words of Houston A. Baker Jr., through "artful evasion and expressive illusion" allowed interviewees to speak freely about their experiences without being understood by their white interviewer.[41] As discussed previously with

[39] For a greater discussion of hunger in the Narratives, see: Stephanie J. Shaw, "Using the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives to Study the Impact of the Great Depression," *Journal of Southern History* 69, no. 3 (August 2003): p. 631-4.
[40] Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, *Language Behaviour in a Black Urban Community* (Berkeley: Language-Behavior Research Laboratory, University of California, 1971), p. 314.
[41] Houston A. Baker Jr., "To Move without Moving," *PMLA* 98, no. 5 (October 1983): p. 842.

Mack Taylor, signifying strategies included the positioning of seemingly unrelated statements together and the avoidance of accusatory pronouns, as well as allegorical stories, evasiveness, equivocation, circumlocution, and euphemisms. Despite the danger to themselves, some interviewees made the brave choice to be direct and honest with their interviewers. As Nancy Boudry declared to her interviewer, "I'm not going to tell no story. I had a heap to undergo with." [42]

In contrast to interviews with white writers, the formerly enslaved were much more likely to discuss abuse, discrimination, and hardship with black writers. While this was not always the case, as divisions of class, education, and birthplace still affected power dynamics in the interviews, there is statistically significant variation in responses based on race. Black interviewers, who came from a more similar cultural background, were also able to translate and contextualize signifying for a broader audience. In a few cases, duplicate interviews exist where the same person was interviewed separately by a white interviewer and a black interviewer, and the differences between these duplicate interviews strongly indicate the impact of the interviewer's racial identity. Responses also vary significantly based on the gender of the interviewer.[43]

The interviews conducted by members of the NWUs also dramatically differ from their white colleagues in terms of signifiers and style.[44] While other writers used subjective descriptions as an opportunity to insert racist caricatures, NWU writers emphasized the intelligence, cleanliness, and steadfast nature of their interviewees.This focus on respectability

[42] I have corrected the racialized spellings in this quote. Maude Barragan, "Nancy Boudry," *Federal Writers' Project: Georgia, Part 1,* p. 113.
[43] For more quantitative analysis, see Escott, *Slavery Remembered.*
[44] For more on the writing tropes and styles of NWU interviewers, see Stewart's chapter "The Everybody Who's Nobody: Black Employees in the Federal Writers' Project." Stewart, p. 120-142.

aligned with racial uplift ideology. Interviewees were frequently depicted as reluctant to talk about slavery, which simultaneously undermined performative minstrel stereotypes and signified the truthfulness of the account. NWU writers also wrote more frequently in the third person, in accordance with academic standards and to increase the perceived legitimacy of the account by removing themselves as subjective observers.[45]

It is important to read descriptions in the Narratives within the context of who wrote them and how the interviewee chose to present themselves. Reading against the grain is often necessary. However, it is possible to observe patterns because the collection is so big: with over 10,000 pages of material, we can learn a lot about the use of tropes, grammatical person, and other signifiers. Preliminary statistical analysis and close readings of narratives have yielded rich results — which make the affordances of an online archive an exciting enterprise to consider.

[45] This strategy should be contextualized against the prevalent belief that African Americans were 'incapable of being objective,' as discussed in the previous chapter.

Tropes of Black Misspeak

One of the most significant ways that cultural context, administrative inconsistencies, and individual interactions interacted to complicate these Narratives is through the insertion of tropes of black misspeak. As seen in the selection from Mack Taylor's interview, racialized spellings of 'black dialect' were used extensively throughout the Narratives. Federal administrators and state editors encouraged interviewers to use "phonetic spellings," and Lomax praised writers who "preserved sufficient dialect and peculiar words so as to make the reader feel the Negro is talking." [46] While Alsberg instructed "that truth to idiom be paramount, and exact truth to pronunciation be secondary" — a possible move away from dialect spellings — he also distributed lists of standardized dialect spellings and ordered that "turns of phrase that have flavour and vividness" such as "durin' of de war," "kinder chillish," and "piddled in de fields" be retained.[47] Earlier versions of interviews found in state archives indicate that many were edited to include more racialized spellings before being sent to the national office.[48] However, despite the distribution of many federal guidelines there was little consistency in the insertion of racialized spellings, and the extent to which 'black dialect' was written into the Narratives varied widely — as did the misspellings.

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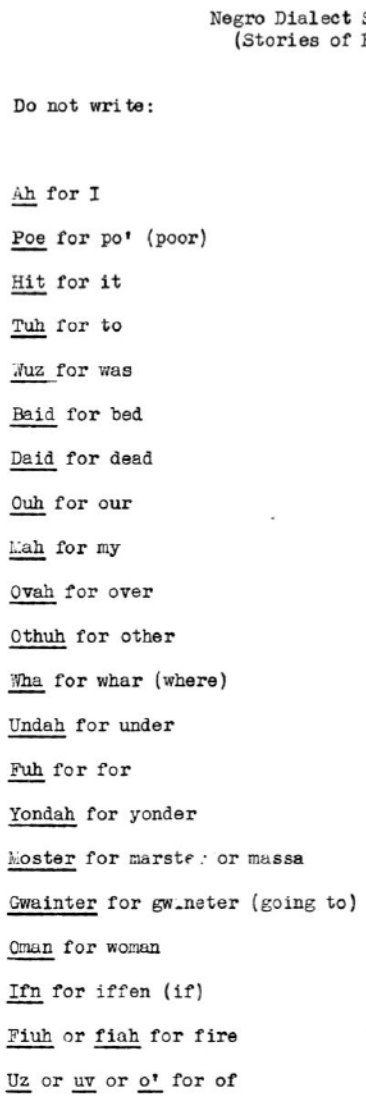
[46] John A. Lomax to Edwin Bjorkman, May 8, 1937, WPA Files, National Archive. Found in Lynda M. Hill, "Ex-Slave Narratives: The WPA Federal Writers' Project Reappraised," *Oral History* 26, no. 1 (1998): p. 64.
[47] Thomas F. Soapes, "The Federal Writers' Project Slave Interviews: Useful Data or Misleading Source," *The Oral History Review* 5 (1977), p. 34.
[48] Some of the best work done on this subject was by a linguist, Natalie Maynor. See: Alan R. Thomas, ed. *Methods in Dialectology: Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference Held at the University College of North Wales*, 3rd-7th August 1987 (Multilingual Matters Ltd, 1988).



Negro Dialect Suggestions
(Stories of Ex-Slaves)

Do not write:

Ah for I

Poe for po' (poor)

Hit for it

Tuh for to

Wuz for was

Baid for bed

Daid for dead

Ouh for our

Mah for my

Ovah for over

Othuh for other

Wha for whar (where)

Undah for under

Fuh for for

Yondah for yonder

Moster for marster or massa

Gwainter for gwenter (going to)

Oman for woman

Ifn for iffen (if)

Fiuh or fiah for fire

Uz or uv or o' for of

Figure 2.3: "Negro Dialect Suggestions" from the FWP Slave Narratives Administrative Files [49]

This racialization of sound was meant to make the Narratives seem more 'authentic' — and make them more profitable. Associate Director George Cronyn stated, "If a volume of such

[49] Transcription of the text in the above image: "Negro Dialect Suggestions (Stories of Ex-Slaves)
Do not write: Ah for I; Poe for po' (poor); Hit for it; Tuh for to; Wuz for was; Baid for bed; Daid for dead; Ouh for our; Mah for my; Ovah for over; Othuh for other; Wha for whar (where); Undah for under; Fuh for for; Yondah for yonder; Moster for marster or massa; Gwainter for gwenter (going to); Oman for woman; Ifn for iffen (if); Fiuh or fiah for fire; Uz or uv or o' for of." Administrative Files, *Federal Writers' Project.*

importance can be assembled we will endeavor to secure its publication… While it is desirable to give a running story of the life of each subject, the color and human interest will be greatly enhanced if it is told largely in the words of the person interviewed. The peculiar idiom is often more expressive than a literary account." [50] Color,' 'human interest,' and 'peculiar idiom' — in other words, stereotypical black dialect spellings — were considered crucial for the publishability of the material. This construction of the commerciable authentic was based on what white audiences expected to see and wanted to buy. "Of course," Lomax commented, "I understand that there is no norm for Negro dialect. Our efforts will be to preserve as nearly as possible the flavor of this speech and at the same time make it easy for those unaquainted with Negro speech to read the stories." [51] The repeated insistence by FWP administrators that the dialect be 'readable' to those 'unititiated in Negro speech' further indicates an intended voyeuristic white audience who demanded stereotypes of blackness while not actually knowing any black people themselves.

By the 1930s, racialized spellings of black dialect had a long and contested history. Decades before the FWP, Frederick Douglass declared in a speech,

> When a black man's language is quoted in order to belittle and degrade him, his ideas are put into the most grotesque and unreadable English, while the utterances of negro scholars and authors are ignored. A hundred white men will attend a conference of white negro minstrels with faces blackened with burnt cork, to one who will attend a lecture by an intelligent negro. [52]

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[50] Cronyn to Eudora Ramsey Richardson (also sent to North and South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas, Tennessee, Kentucky, Missouri, Mississippi, and Oklahoma), April 1, 1937. Found in Stewart, p. 78.

[51] Lomax to Eudora Ramsey Richardson, May 1, 1937. Found in Stewart, p. 79.

[52] John R. McKivigan, Julie Husband, Heather L. Kaufman, eds., *The Speeches of Frederick Douglass: A Critical Edition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), p. 467-477.

"Grotesque and unreadable English" are certainly an apt way to describe many of the Narratives. Douglas identifies white minstrel performers as the ones who performed 'black dialect.' In our modern day, blackface manifests primarily as one-off scandals committed by privileged young people, so it can be difficult to understand the former prominence and popularity of minstrel shows and how significantly they impacted American society. By the 1930s, minstrel shows had been a mainstay of American culture for a hundred years. These caricatures of blackness both created and reinforced stereotypes that were extremely harmful, degrading, and dehumanizing. The mockery of black dialect solidified the trope of 'how black people talk' and was replicated in radio shows, cartoons, and influential novels like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Jennifer Lynn Stoever describes this racialization of sound through her theory of the sonic colour line, which she defines as "the process of racializing sound—how and why certain bodies are expected to produce, desire, and live amongst particular sounds—and its product, the hierarchical division sounded between 'whiteness' and 'blackness.'" [53] Her theory provides an extremely useful lens to examine the construction of race and hierarchy within the Narratives. As Charles Chesnutt, an African American author whose work was concurrent with the Narratives, argued: "There is no such thing as a Negro dialect… What we call by that name is the attempt to express, with such a degree of phonetic correctness as to suggest the sound, English pronounced as an ignorant old southern Negro would be supposed to speak it." [54]

From his position in the Office of Negro Affairs, Brown tried to temper and moderate the tropes of black misspeak. Brown diplomatically wrote,

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[53] Jennifer Lynn Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line : Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), p. 7.

[54] Houston A. Baker Jr, Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 42.

> I appreciate the fact that many of the writers have recorded sensitively. The writer who wrote 'ret' for right is probably as accurate as the one who spelled it 'raught.' But in a single publication, not devoted to a study of local speech, the reader may conceivably be puzzled by different spellings of the same word. The words 'whahfolks, 'whufolks,' 'whi'folks,' etc. can all be heard in the South. But 'whitefolks' is easier for the reader, and the word itself is suggestive of the spelling and attitude.[55]

Brown ritualistically states his appreciation for the writers before gently criticizing the readability of the texts. He strategically uses the same argument as Cronyn — that the text must be readable — while advocating that the word be spelled *correctly*. The subtle deviation rejects the tropes of racialized spelling, which is reinforced by his observation that these are not meant to be linguistic studies. In another missive, he argued against the dropping of "g" in spellings (e.g. durin' instead of during) as characteristic of black dialect "since the g is seldom pronounced even by the educated." [56] However, Brown was limited in his ability to push back against the use of racialized spellings, and ultimately worked with Lomax to try standardize (mis)spellings.

Brown's objections were mirrored in the actions of other African Americans working in the FWP. NWUs rarely wrote with racialized spellings, and when they did (likely due to editor and federal office demands) it was much more restrained. Their work is comparable to the slave narrative collections collected by Cade, Egypt, Johnson, Radin, and Watson, which rarely used dialect spellings or did not use them at all. These writings were rejected by many white readers and editors. As Hurston observed: "Show some folks a bit of Negro-ness and they rear and pitch like a mule in a tin stable. 'But where is the misplaced preposition?' they wail. 'Where is the Am

[55] Sterling A. Brown, "Notes by an editor on dialect usage in accounts by interviews with ex-slaves. (To be used in conjunction with Supplementary Instructions 9E)," sent June 20, 1937. Find in Stewart, p. 84.
[56] Ibid.

it and I'se?'... The rules and regulations of this [stereotypical] Negro calls for two dumb Negroes who chew up dictionaries and spit out grammar." [57]

As Toni Morrison has argued about 'eye dialect,' the racialization of dialect spellings renders the speech of African Americans "as an alien, estranging dialect made deliberately unintelligible by spellings contrived to disfamiliarize it… it is used to establish a cognitive world split between speech and text, to reinforce class distinctions and otherness as well as to assert privilege and power." [58] To understand the racialized spellings in the Narratives, we have to confront their place in a broader history of discrimination and marginalization, how African American administrators and writers objected to their use, and the criticisms of more recent activists like Morrison.

Final Observations

In an interview on black power, feminism and the prison-industrial complex, Angela Davis stated that, "Black feminism emerged as a theoretical and practical effort demonstrating that race, gender and class are inseparable in the social worlds we inhabit." [59] These inseparable social worlds are critical to understanding the Narratives. The project's genesis, administration, and interpersonal interactions were all shaped by complex interconnected beliefs about race, class, gender, age, ability, education, and language. For Mack Taylor, being black *and* poor *and*

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[57] Zora Neale Hurston, "You Don't Know Us Negroes," unpublished article for *American Mercury*, 1934. Found in Stewart, p. 143

[58] Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 52.

[59] Frank Barat, "A Q&A With Angela Davis on Black Power, Feminism and the Prison-Industrial Complex," *The Nation,* August 27, 2014, https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/qa-angela-davis-black-power-feminism-and-prison-industrial-complex/.

male *and* old *and* disabled *and* literate *and* speaking in a black dialect were all interwoven. These factors influenced the way that the interviewer interacted with him, how his story was recorded and edited as it travelled to the Library of Congress, and how we read his Narrative almost one hundred years later. Any theoretical and practical efforts to present Narratives like Taylor's have to be cognizant of these social worlds.

Knowing more about the history and complexity of this corpus and how it was created helps us to design an appropriate archive. Making this corpus accessible is not just making it less onerous to click through or designing it so that it is easier to parse for screen reading software. In order to be intellectually accessible, we have to include everything that people need to know in order to understand this database. We have to use the affordances of digital archives to situate the Narratives, with all of their complexity, in a values-based design that prioritizes intersectionality.

We Have to Have More than Maps:
Designing the Online Archive

There is a scene in Barry Unsworth's novel *Sacred Hunger* wherein a merchant and his son discuss a slave ship that they own. Unsworth describes,

> In that quiet room, with its oak wainscoting and Turkey carpet, its shelves of ledgers and almanacks, it would have been difficult for those two to form any true picture of the ship's circumstances or the nature of trading on the Guinea coast, even if they had been inclined to try. Difficult, and in any case superfluous. To function efficiently – and to function at all – we must concentrate our efforts. Picturing things is bad for business, it is undynamic. It can choke the mind with horror if persisted in. We have graphs and tables and balance sheets and statements of corporate philosophy to help us remain busily and safely in the realm of the abstract and comfort us with a sense of lawful endeavor and lawful profit. And we have maps.[1]

The question of abstraction is uniquely pertinent to digital historians studying slavery. Historical records often obscure the humanity of those enslaved, representing individuals through rows of numbers on ship manifests and records of sales. This information is used to create digital databases with new lists and new maps.

[1] Barry Unsworth, *Sacred Hunger* (London: H. Hamilton, 1992), 353.

For example, using slave ship records from *slavevoyages.org,* Andrew Kahn created a data visualization of more than 20,000 slave ships that crossed the Atlantic.[2] "The Atlantic Slave Trade in Two Minutes" went viral, quite understandly — it is haunting to watch the swarm of black dots, each one representing a single slave ship, as they stream in thick lines across the Atlantic.[3] But at what point, when watching this visualization, does the representation of millions of lives just become meaningless, abstracted dots? When watching these visualizations, are we not engaged in the same abstraction as the slaveholders who first recorded it? How do we maintain, through digital tools, the humanity and dignity of those enslaved?

Slave narratives are one of the ways that we make the abstract personal. Preserving, sharing, and promoting the voices of those whose very humanity was denied is one of the most important ways that we can challenge this violence of abstraction. While designing an online database for the FWP Slave Narratives, we must consciously choose to center the humanity of these stories. Quantitative analysis and plotting interviews on maps present intriguing opportunities for analysis; however, this analysis must not perpetuate dehumanizing abstraction. An online database should not simply replicate, to paraphrase Unsworth, graphs and tables and statements. We have to have more than maps.

What follows in this chapter are eight recommendations for a digital archive of the FWP Slave Narratives. Given all of the difficulties with digitizing this corpus, as discussed in the

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[2] The records for individual slave ships are strewn across hundreds of archives throughout the world, from Angola to Puerto Rico to Sweden to Venezuela. It was not until the late 1980s that a substantial effort to compile these records was started by David Eltis through a digital network of historians. First published as a CD-ROM in 1999, *Slave Voyages* is a central database for slave ship records that has evolved into an extremely well-crafted online archive with an emphasis on scholarly collaboration and open public access. It has had a significant influence on subsequent digital tools and will be referred to several times throughout this chapter. It might also interest my readers to know that Eltis got his MA at the University of Alberta.

[3] Andrew Kahn and Jamelle Bouie, "The Atlantic Slave Trade in Two Minutes," *Slate,* June 25, 2015, http://www.slate.com/articles/life/the_history_of_american_slavery/2015/06/animated_interactive_of_the_history_of_the_atlantic_slave_trade.html.

previous chapters, I will outline some of the specific issues and questions that we should address in order to create a socially conscious design. I will refer to my observations of similar digital archives; by framing my project against a larger digital context, I hope to take what lessons I can from similar projects. I have created these recommendations with a specific aim towards unsettling traditional structures of information, and examining what digital technologies make possible that we could not do before.

A Quick Reminder of the Current Design's Limits and Deficiencies

Every time I discuss the FWP Slave Narratives, I inevitably backtrack slightly on my condemnation of the Library of Congress.[4] The design for the FWP Slave Narratives website *is* terrible, but the LOC was also one of the first institutions to digitize history for public consumption. The online archive is in dire need of an update, but that should be expected when a project is the first of its kind. The problems with the current online archive include the following: it is extremely difficult to navigate and click through, there is no useful associated meta-data, there is no search function, the associated multi-media files are disconnected from the narratives and are located in a different part of the web domain, the built-in OCR is largely inaccurate, the accompanying contextualizing articles are minimalist and insufficient, and the digital design takes little advantage of the affordances that technology provides.

It is also worth noting that the categorization of the Narratives by state where the interview occurred is misleading and problematic, especially if it is the only categorization used

[4] For example, in my first conference presentation on this subject I included a badly Photoshopped slide of the Library of Congress on fire. My personal vitriol has softened into exasperated sighs as I further researched this topic.

to sort the Narratives. This organization is a legacy of how the project was organized, as each state collected Narratives and sent them to the federal government for preservation. When the collection was published and later digitized, the Narratives were categorized by the state that had submitted them. However, this creates the false implication that the Narratives conducted in a particular state represent the history of slavery for that state. After the Civil War, there were massive migrations of African Americans looking for family members, new opportunities, and health care, as well as trying to escape exploitative former masters and situations. It was a wondrous and liberating time—but also a turbulent, dangerous, and deadly one, as the government failed to provide infrastructure to support the newly emancipated, resulting in mass starvation, disease, and death. Obscuring these migrations in historical collections is dangerous because it denies an important and formative part of African American history and creates the false illusion that emancipated people were able to happily stay in one place.[5] This erasure could be remedied with a different digital categorization and design.

The following recommendations regarding User Interface (UI) and User Experience (UX) have been developed based on the LOC website. A further extension of this project should incorporate more scholarship on UI and UX principles.

[5] I also want to point out that categorization invented in the 1930s is probably not the best way to categorize digital information almost a century later. For more information, see: Jim Downs, Sick From Freedom: African American Illness and Suffering During the Civil War and Reconstruction (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). Gretchen Long, Doctoring Freedom: The Politics of African American Medical Care in Slavery and Emancipation (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

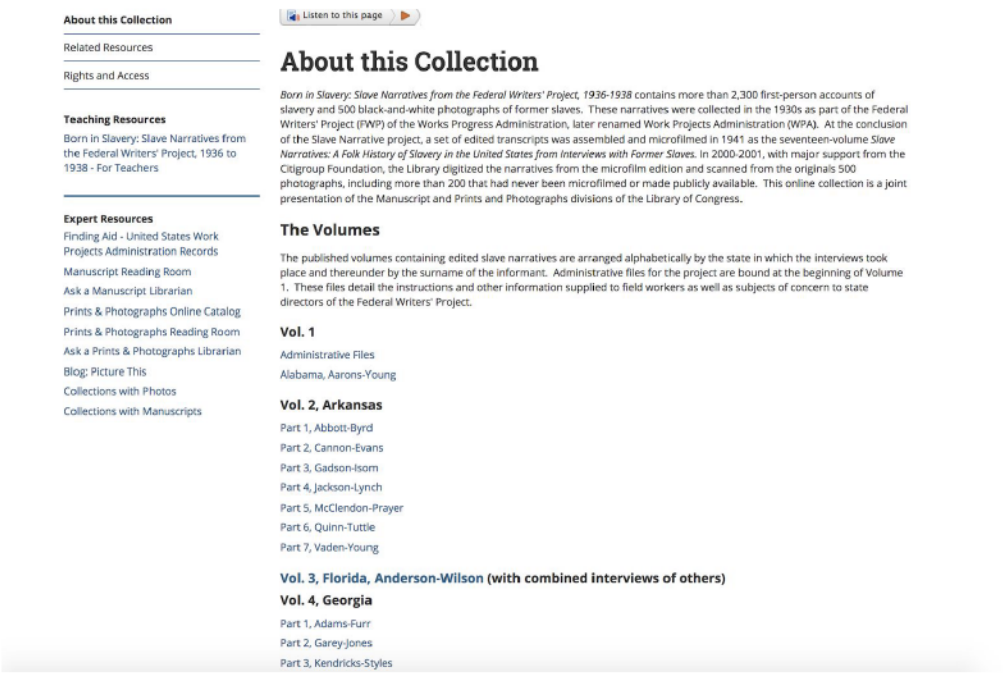

Figure 3.1: Screenshot of the LOC FWP Slave Narratives Home Page
Note the organization of the Narratives by state; this is the only available categorization for navigating through the Narratives.

Figure 3.2: Screenshot of the Georgia Narratives
If you click on one of the state collections (as seen in the previous screenshot), you are brought to a page that looks like this. These pages have a list of interviewers, interviewees, and locations where interviews took place. The metadata (bottom right) situates the collection within the LOC database but provides no details for individual Narratives.

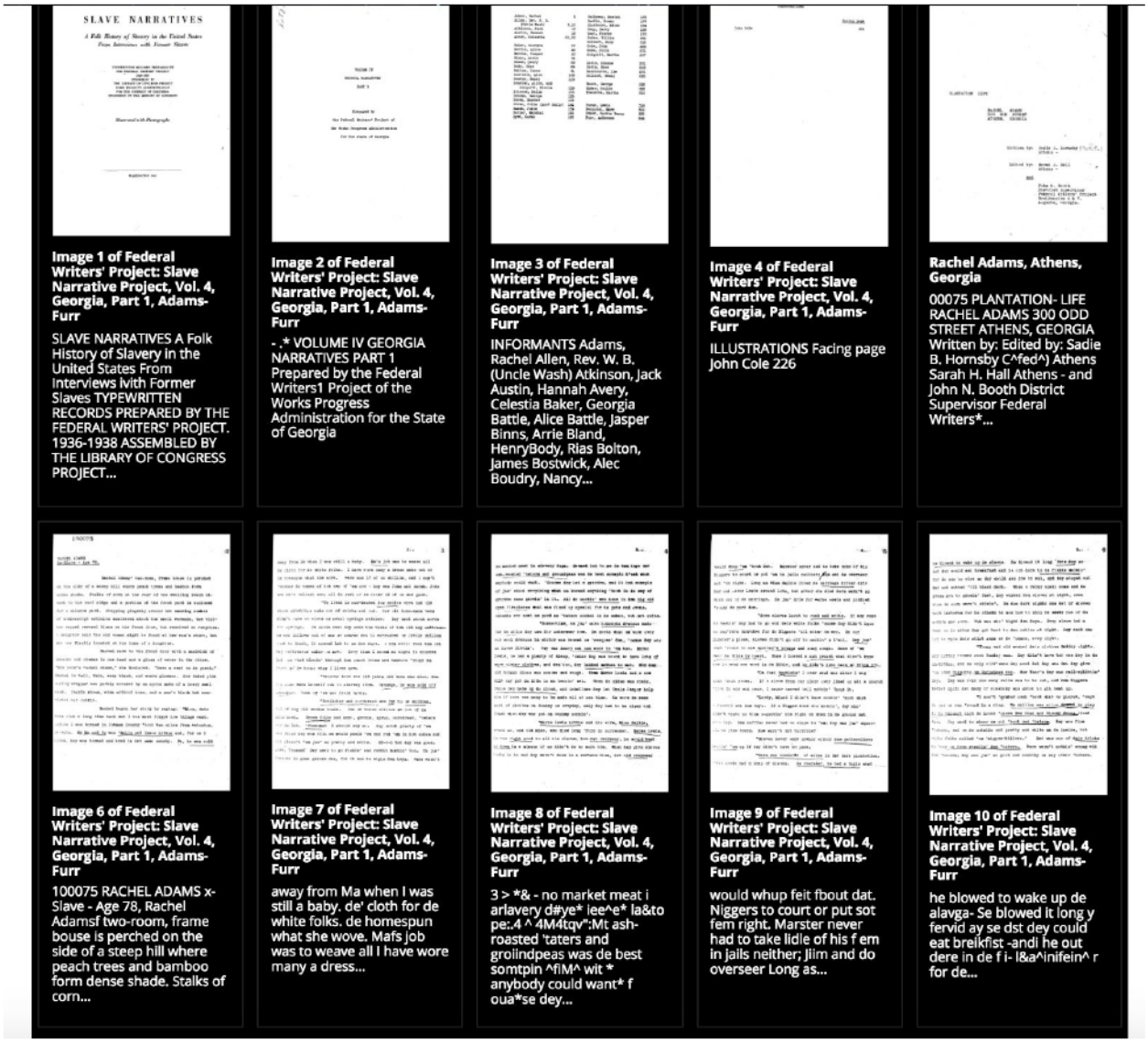

Figure 3.3: Screenshot of Narrative thumbnails

The Narratives themselves are presented as a long list of thumbnails that users can scroll through and click on for an enlarged view. This arrangement makes it very difficult to find particular Narratives or specific information. Note as well the poor OCR, which makes many of the text previews unparsable.

1. Intended Audience

As any marketing aficionado would tell you, the first step for a digital history project is to decide what audience you hope to attract. An online FWP Slave Narratives archive should serve first and foremost as a public history tool. International law enshrines the rights of victims of serious crimes to know the truth about what happened — the descendants of the formerly enslaved certainly fall under this category.[6] Moreover, as the legacies of slavery continue through systemic racism, gross incarceration rates, police brutality, and other injustices, the need to understand what happened during slavery — and what happened in the years following emancipation — remains of crucial importance.

The online archive should serve as a tool for anyone who would want to research this history: slave descendants, especially those descended from the people recorded in these Narratives; scholars and historians; high school or university students with assignments; people who want to learn about black history; and the general public. By making this archive easier to read and access for the general public and slave descendants, it will be easier to use for professional scholars and historians as well. Through tools like tagging systems and data visualizations, this archive becomes easier to explore and research for everyone.

The archive should have a mature content warning. There are Narratives with torture, decapitation, infanticide, and other horrific events. Trigger warnings could be used to help users navigate through this content.[7] I would suggest, at bare minimum, trigger warnings for rape,

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[6] Anne-Emmanuelle Tankam and Hans von Rütte Tankam, "A Different Approach to an Ethics Based Understanding of Professional Document Management: The Principles of Access to Archives of the International Council on Archives," in *Ethical Dilemmas in the Information Society: Codes of Ethics for Librarians and Archivists*, ed. A. V. Preisig, H. Rösch, and C. Stückelberger (Geneva: Globethics.net, 2014).

[7] For more on trigger warnings as a social justice issue, see: Angela M. Carter, "Teaching with Trauma: Trigger Warnings, Feminism, and Disability Pedagogy," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (2015): 10-31.

suicide, and body horror/mutilation. While it is important to make this history publically accessible, there are also legitimate reasons to mediate audience interaction.

2. *Renaming the Archive*

I mentioned in the Introduction how these Narratives, despite being labelled 'slave narratives,' discuss so much more than slavery. These interviews contain information about Reconstruction, the Gay Nineties, the turn of the century, the resurgence of the Ku Kux Klan, World War I, the Roaring 20s, Jim Crow, the Great Depression, and more. For example, Boston Blackwell's Narrative discusses life after the Civil War, soldiers' pensions (or lack thereof), attacks by the Ku Klux Klan, black men elected to public office, and the changes enforced by Jim Crow laws. Blackwell memorably stated,

> They was colored men in office, plenty. Colored legislature, and colored circuit clerks, and colored county clerks. They sure was some big officers colored in them times… They was all my friends. This here used to be a good country, but I tell you it sure is tough now. I think it's wrong - exactly wrong that we can't vote now. The Jim Crow law, it put us out. The Constitution of the United States, it give us the right to vote; it made us citizens, it did.[8]

Narratives like Blackwell's help to correct popular misconceptions about life after emancipation. The tendency to view history as a teleological progression towards better things, à la Western Enlightenment perspective, obscures the way that political rights improved for African Americans after the Civil War before being decimated by the resurgence of Southern autonomy

[8] Beulah Sherwood Hagg, "Story told by Boston Blackwell," *Federal Writers' Project: Arkansas*, p. 172.

and Jim Crow laws. The struggle for political and social rights did not end with emancipation, and racist, punitive laws have ebbed and flowed since 1865.

Yet, most of the scholars who have written about these Narratives have focused exclusively on slavery. Many interviews were edited during the collection process to remove any comments not directly related to slavery, and this expunging has continued in publications like Yetman's and Rawick's. For example, in Yetman's collection of the Narratives, Blackwell's account is edited to focus on slavery and to remove his comments on life after emancipation. This expunging strikes me as a great opportunity loss and mistake. The removed comments contain fascinating history in and of themselves.[9] Moreover, as Hill Collins would argue, the creation of knowledge cannot be separated from the context within which it was created. As historian David Thomas Baily argued, "the interviewees were, in fact, describing their lives in the 1930s as much as describing slavery." The context within which the interviewees lived and were interviewed are crucial to understanding the content of the Narratives.[10]

What should this corpus be called, if not 'The Federal Writers' Project Slave Narratives'? I am not certain. Perhaps, 'The Emancipation Generation Narratives' to direct focus to life after emancipation, or 'The Reconstruction Generation Narratives' for similar reasons. Or perhaps 'The Federal Writers' Project Black Narratives' to center the 1930s context and racial dimensions of the Narratives. A title should be selected, in consultation with appropriate communities, to properly represent these Narratives.

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[9] Another interesting example is Martin Jackson's Narrative. Jackson served in both the Civil War and World War I, and commented that "There was some difference in the food served to soldiers in 1861 and 1917!" Unknown author. "Martin Jackson," *Federal Writers' Project: Texas*, p. 188.

[10] Bailey, "Divided Prism," p. 402.

3. *Interactivity of the Archive*

Part of creating an online archive for public history is ensuring that the public would actually want to use the archive. In contrast to the current LOC offering which is difficult to navigate, a new online archive should feature intuitive interfaces that encourage interactions with the Narratives. These improvements to user experience (UX) and user interface (UI) should always be consciously designed to limit dehumanizing abstraction and to respectfully present the Narratives.

Other slavery history websites should be used for reference and inspiration. For example, many of these websites use introductory landing pages to help orientate a wide variety of users to the site; this is particularly important for helping users with varying levels of knowledge navigate through information about slavery.[11] Online exhibitions demonstrate how colour, formatting, and well-selected images can create a distinctly inviting user interface which is easy to navigate. For example, the *African Passages, Lowcountry Adaptations* online exhibition (Figure 3.5) about the history of slavery and plantations in Charleston and the South Carolina Lowcountry is beautifully written and designed.[12] Incorporating better UI, and perhaps creating a few pages of online exhibition to accompany the online archive, can be a useful way to keep users engaged who might otherwise be intimidated by blocks of dense text. Inserting portrait photos also helps to make history less abstract and to humanize the stories.

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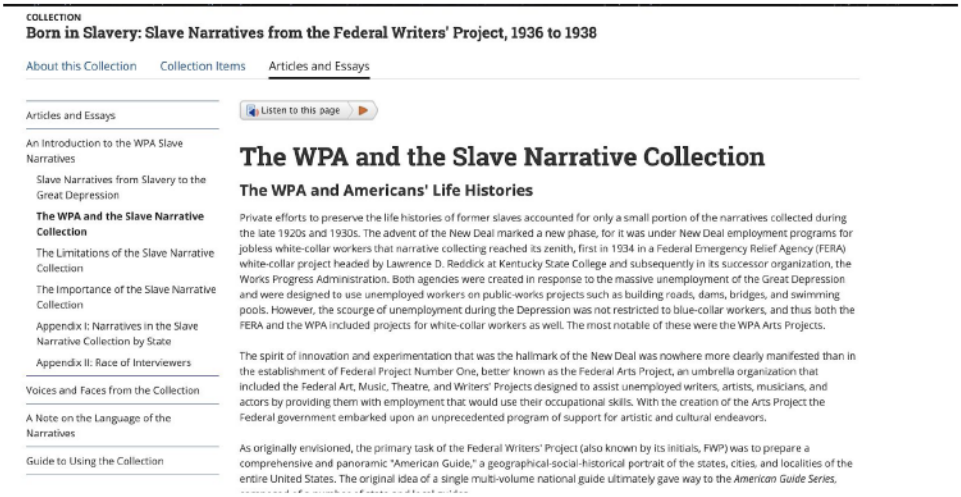
[11] Two of the introductory landing pages that I found especially effective were from *Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*, https://www.slavevoyages.org and *American Panorama - Forced Migration in the American South*, http://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/forcedmigration/#tab=2&narratives=true&cotton=true&sugar=&labels=false&decade=1810&county=&state=north-carolina&loc=5/-9.622/12.788.

[12] *African Passages, Lowcountry Adaptations*, http://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/africanpassageslowcountryadapt.



COLLECTION

Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1938

About this Collection | Collection Items | Articles and Essays

Articles and Essays

An Introduction to the WPA Slave Narratives

Slave Narratives from Slavery to the Great Depression

The WPA and the Slave Narrative Collection

The Limitations of the Slave Narrative Collection

The Importance of the Slave Narrative Collection

Appendix I: Narratives in the Slave Narrative Collection by State

Appendix II: Race of Interviewers

Voices and Faces from the Collection

A Note on the Language of the Narratives

Guide to Using the Collection

Listen to this page

The WPA and the Slave Narrative Collection

The WPA and Americans' Life Histories

Private efforts to preserve the life histories of former slaves accounted for only a small portion of the narratives collected during the late 1920s and 1930s. The advent of the New Deal marked a new phase, for it was under New Deal employment programs for jobless white-collar workers that narrative collecting reached its zenith, first in 1934 in a Federal Emergency Relief Agency (FERA) white-collar project headed by Lawrence D. Reddick at Kentucky State College and subsequently in its successor organization, the Works Progress Administration. Both agencies were created in response to the massive unemployment of the Great Depression and were designed to use unemployed workers on public-works projects such as building roads, dams, bridges, and swimming pools. However, the scourge of unemployment during the Depression was not restricted to blue-collar workers, and thus both the FERA and the WPA included projects for white-collar workers as well. The most notable of these were the WPA Arts Projects.

The spirit of innovation and experimentation that was the hallmark of the New Deal was nowhere more clearly manifested than in the establishment of Federal Project Number One, better known as the Federal Arts Project, an umbrella organization that included the Federal Art, Music, Theatre, and Writers' Projects designed to assist unemployed writers, artists, musicians, and actors by providing them with employment that would use their occupational skills. With the creation of the Arts Project the Federal government embarked upon an unprecedented program of support for artistic and cultural endeavors.

As originally envisioned, the primary task of the Federal Writers' Project (also known by its initials, FWP) was to prepare a comprehensive and panoramic "American Guide," a geographical-social-historical portrait of the states, cities, and localities of the entire United States. The original idea of a single multi-volume national guide ultimately gave way to the *American Guide Series*,

Figure 3.4 and 3.5: Screenshots from the LOC FWP Slave Narratives archive and the African Passages, Lowcountry Adaptations website.

These screenshots demonstrate the differences in UI between two black history archives. The African Passages website notably uses better kerning and line spacing while also interspersing interesting images to help augment the text.

Many online historical archives also feature the option to download a zip file of the entire collection. An example of this is *Documenting the American South* (DocSouth), a significant archive of texts, images, and audio recordings related to the history of the American South.[13] The zipfile for DocSouth is specifically structured to work well with common text mining and data analysis tools.[14] While this zipfile function should be included in an online archive of the Narratives, it would also be important to build in as many tools as possible to improve accessibility for users with less competency in NLTK.

The Forced Migration of Enslaved People in the United States is one of the most important black history archives for comparison.[15] The website traces the forced movements of enslaved people during the time period between the ban on the international slave trade and the Civil War. The website's use of timelines and bubble plots to display data is very effective and encourages users to play with the data. However, this focus on quantitative exploration does not come at the expense of qualitative information. The website is designed so that users can easily click between a tab with migration numbers and a tab with slave narratives from a certain geographic region. This feature humanizes the data, allowing users to see the big picture while still reminding users of the people that these numbers represent. It puts the voices of the enslaved at the forefront in a way that recognizes their experiences, agency, and humanity.

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[13] *Documenting the American South: North American Slave Narratives* is one of the oldest digital tools for centralizing primary sources about slavery. The collection claims to have all extant autobiographical narratives of fugitive and former slaves published as broadsides, pamphlets, or books in English up to 1920, as well as many biographies and fictionalized slave narratives. *Documenting the American South: North American Slave Narratives*, http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/.

[14] To quote the text file that accompanies the zip file download, "The plain text files have been optimized for use in Voyant and can also be used in text mining projects such as topic modeling, sentiment analysis and natural language processing… The TEI/XML files have been included for advanced users who would like to isolate particular parts of text for analysis."

[15] *American Panorama - Forced Migration in the American South*, http://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/forcedmigration/#tab=2&narratives=true&cotton=true&sugar=&labels=false&decade=1810&county=&state=north-carolina&loc=5/-9.622/12.788.

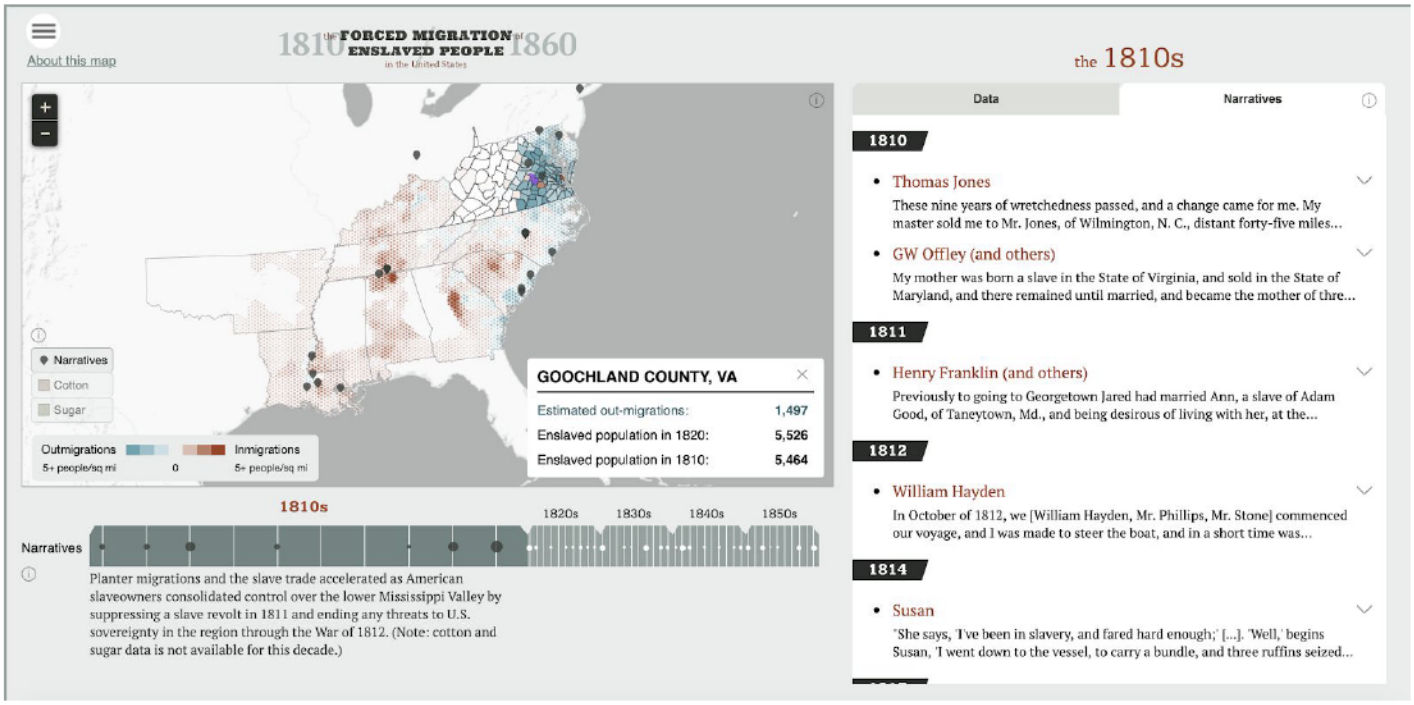

Figure 3.6: Screenshot from The Forced Migration of Enslaved People in the United States

Improved interactivity can look like all of these examples: well designed landing pages, improved UI, downloadable zip files, built in tools for data analysis, as well as maps and data visualizations. Conscious design choices that center individual humanity, like featuring portraits or narratives, are crucial to an ethical design. For the Narratives, it would be particularly important to put sound recordings, written narratives, and photos of the interviewees next to each other. Users should not have to try to navigate to a different part of the web domain to find a picture of Patsy Moses while reading her story. Interactivity could be further encouraged through hyperlink reading, supplementing the content of the Narratives with contextual articles and resources.

4. Contextual Information: Understanding the Narratives

In a blog post discussing his work with *Invisible Australians*, a radical digital archive designed to decenter whiteness in Australian history, Tim Sherratt stated,

> The glories of messiness challenge the extractive metaphors that often characterise our use of digital data. We're not merely digging or mining or drilling for oil, because each journey into the data offers new possibilities — our horizons are opened, because our categories refuse to be closed. These are journeys of enrichment, interpretation and creation, not extraction.
>
> We're putting stuff back, not taking it out.
>
> Cultural institutions have an exciting opportunity to help us work with this messiness. The challenge is not just to pump out data, anyone can do that. The challenge is to enrich the contexts within which we meet this data — to help us embrace nuance and uncertainty; to prevent us from taking the categories we use for granted.[16]

Sherratt highlights the importance of presenting data with rich context, with all of its nuance and uncertainty, while destabilizing and questioning traditional categorization of information. It is simply not enough to pump out information and make it available. Digital archivists also need to partake in "journeys of enrichment, interpretation, and creation," presenting information in all of its glorious messiness. This contextualizing work is especially important for the FWP Slave Narratives, which need to be read alongside an incredible amount of background information.

What follows is my preliminary list of what information would need to be included in a digital archive of the Narratives:

a) Cultural Context:

   Background on the Works Project Administration, Southern Revisionism and the Lost Cause, minstrelsy, Ex-Slave Fairs, segregation, the Harlem Renaissance, etc.

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[16] Tim Sherratt, "'A map and some pins': open data and unlimited horizons," *Invisible Australians Living under the White Australia Policy,* June 11, 2013, http://invisibleaustralians.org/blog/.

b) Federal Writers Project 101:

Information on how it started, how it was administered, and how the project varied between states.

c) Profiles of Major People Involved in the Narratives:

John A. Lomax, Sterling Brown, Zora Neale Hurston, Henry G. Alsberg, Benjamin A. Botkin, Carita Doggett Corse, Carter G. Woodson, Lawrence D. Reddick, John Preston Davis, Eudora Richardson, etc.

d) How the Interviews were Conducted:

A brief description of the variety of interactions that happened between interviewers and interviewees, with an explicit discussion of intersectionality and the factors that impacted these interactions.

e) Lists of Interview Questions:

A discussion of the interview question guidelines and what questions were frequently asked during the interviews; this information should be particularly emphasized in the design because of the insight it provides into the priorities and biases of the project.

f) Language Used in the Narratives

Provide a critical discussion of racialized spellings used in the Narratives, as well as background information about their history in American culture, the sonic colour line, and criticisms levied by black intellectuals.

g) Limitations of the Narratives:

Discuss what we can learn from these Narratives, and what their limitations are. Refer to other primary sources that provide information beyond these limitations.

h) Archive Background:

In the interest of full scholarly transparency, discuss the creation of the archive, what choices were made, and why.[17]

[17] Eltis makes a compelling argument for including this section in any online historical archive. Eltis, Implications, p. 263.

This information could be presented through articles, online exhibits, sidebars, hovertexts, and other tools. The interview questions in particular could be used to create a tool that demonstrates how some Narratives were edited and re-written to more closely align with the questions. The design should prioritize presenting the information in interactive, consumable formats. We want to avoid long dense articles with bad kerning and no images or visualizations to break up the text.

I would strongly advise that every page has a button for 'Tips on How to Read the Narratives.' When users click on this button, they would get a list of the most important things to know about the Narratives written in approachable language. This list could include:

- Who did the interviews?
- What questions were asked during the interviews?
- How could the Great Depression have impacted these interviews?
- Why would people say that slavery 'wasn't that bad'?

This button ensures that the most important information to prevent misconceptions is always available to users.

It would be important to include more general introductory information about slavery and black history as well. DocSouth could serve as a useful example; it features articles on Value of the Project (i.e. why slave narratives matter), the Historical Context of Slavery, the Literary Contexts for Slave and Ex-Slave Narratives, and the Importance of This Project to the Nation (see Figure 3.7). The general information should be orientated towards Black History instead of slavery specifically, given the content of the Narratives.

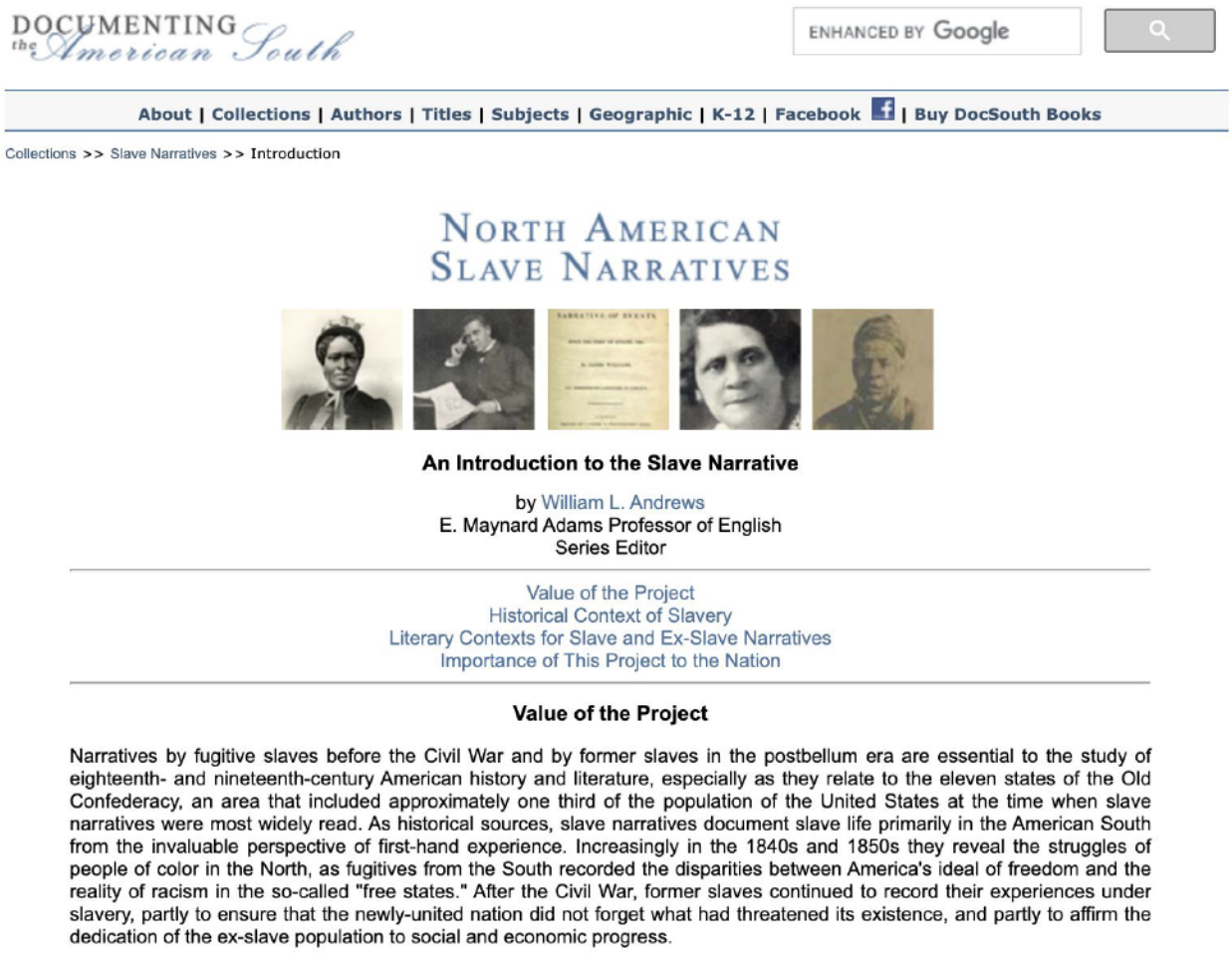

Figure 3.7: Screenshot of Documenting the American South

Note the introductory information featured by DocSouth, as seen in the blue hyperlinked text.

Our primary goal is to design this archive with the least potential for misunderstandings and abuse. We want there to be room for nuance, uncertainty, and exploration; however, we do not want any ambiguity over the evil of slavery and the oppression of African Americans. In providing more context, we ensure that the archive is *intellectually* accessible: that users have the information they need in order to understand the archive.Through adding additional contextual

information, we are engaging in the act of creation that Sherratt encourages. Giving context encourages users to use an intersectional mindset when interpreting the data for themselves.

5. Contextual Information: External Resources

Unlike the Federal Writers' Project and the Lomaxes, we do not want to think of our project as 'the first' and be ignorant of the incredible work that precedes us. It is of the utmost importance that we acknowledge our work as being part of something much larger and — most importantly — that we acknowledge the work of black historians, scholars, activists, archivists, and web designers.

Part of this acknowledgement is providing links to other black history resources. This situates our archive within a broader digital context while recognizing the foundation that we are building upon. For example, the Early Carribean Digital Archive has a tab entitled "Projects We Love" to showcase other black history websites; this tab title is endearing and approachable and I want to use it in our archive. Many of the websites that I refer to in this chapter should be included as external resources.

It is also important to include less formal resources that our users may find useful. For example, "Ask a Slave" is a comedy web series wherein a historical reenactor responds to questions about slavery.[18] The comedic style that the actress employs is very strong rhetorically, and is a very approachable way for people to engage with black history. The external resources

[18] *Ask A Slave: The Web Series*. http://www.askaslave.com/.

that we provide should not be exclusive to those produced for professional purposes within an ivory tower; we must look outwards.

6. Relational Ontologies, Metadata, and Tagging

In his 1985 study of the Narratives, Paul D. Escott found that interview responses had significant statistical variation based on the gender and race of the interviewer.[19] Despite his promising findings, I could only find one other quantitative analysis of the Narratives, which was conducted in 1992. In the three decades that have passed since those efforts, data analysis and distant reading tools have improved significantly, making it easier than ever to apply quantitative analysis to a large collection. With an archive that spans over ten thousand pages, these tools could be indispensable for helping users to navigate and explore the Narratives. By adding metadata and tags to individual Narratives, sound recordings, and photographs, as well as creating a relational ontology, we can greatly increase the functionality and accessibility of the archive for the general public.

Currently, the Narratives are presented in long, dirty PDF files. A more useful archive would separate each Narrative and allow sorting based on metadata instead of organizing Narratives solely by 'state where the interview was conducted.' This would allow the digital archive to become a site of remix and reassembly. Using detailed tags gives users the freedom to explore the archive and identify patterns.

While the potential to tag, organize, and data mine over 10 000 pages of material is exciting, quantitative analysis in a corpus this complicated can easily become misleading. For example, Escott noted that many ex-slaves who praised the memories of their masters described

[19] Escott, "The Art and Science." See also Escott, *Slavery Remembered.*

acts of cruelty later on in the interview, suggesting that greater weight should be given to the incidents described rather than the initial ritual praise.[20] A tag for 'positive comments about slave owners' — which could be useful for analytical purposes — may fail to communicate that context of ritual praise. The contextualizing information discussed in the previous sections will help add nuance; however, if we do not intentionally design for nuance at the most basic level of categorization, the archive will fail.

Creating a prosopography could help chart the complex personal networks that shaped the Narratives. As the current files are organized solely by the interviewee's last name and the state where they were interviewed, it is difficult to collect all of the Narratives that were conducted by the same interviewer or edited by the same person. Other names that are currently buried in text — e.g. the names of enslavers — could be tagged to make them easier to find and analyse across the archive. Being able to sort by names would provide rich opportunities for comparison and analysis. A prosopography would also be useful for labelling pre-existing relationships between interviewer and interviewee; for example, it would be extremely important to label the interviews where the interviewer's family had previously enslaved the interviewee. Moreover, external information could be incorporated to help contextualize the Narratives. A membership list for the United Daughters of the Confederacy could be used to identify which interviewers had ties to the organization. Information about individual interactions is crucial to being able to understand the Narratives and facilitating this should be one of the priorities of the archive.

[20] Escott, "The Art and Science," p. 187.

It would also be important to create a domain specific ontology for the Narratives. I have created the following preliminary list of categories based on my familiarity with the Narratives, the topics that are frequently discussed within the Narratives or in scholarship, and the categories that Cade created in his own publication.[21]

- The Confederate Army
- Corporal Punishment (e.g. torture, mutilations, whippings)
- Education (e.g. learning to read, college education, teachers)
- Emancipation (e.g. day of, announcements of emancipation, slaveholder reactions, 40 acres and a mule, enslavement after emancipation)
- Family Events (e.g. weddings, births)
- Family Reunions
- Family Separations
- Food (e.g. memories of food, gifts of food during the interviews)
- The Great Migration
- Incarceration (e.g. vagrancy laws)
- Interviewee Occupations
- Jim Crow Laws
- Locations (e.g. where the interviewee was born, where they were enslaved, where they went after the Civil War, where they were interviewed)
- Major Historical Events or Time Periods (e.g. the Civil War, the Roaring Twenties, the First World War, the Great Depression)

[21] Cade's categories were: Shelter - Clothing - Food; Family Life; The Slave and His Work; Punishments and Slave Trading; Religion and Recreational Activities; Did They Find Their Burdens Hard? Cade, "Out of the Mouths of Ex-Slaves."

- Medicine and Health
- Mixed Race (e.g. experiences of, family relationships)
- Music (e.g. songs, dancing)
- Pensions
- Political Rights (e.g. voting, political delegates)
- Prominent Historical Figures (e.g. Harriet Tubman, Abraham Lincoln, Booker Washington, Jefferson Davis, etc.)
- Recreational Activities (e.g. games like I-Spy)
- Residences (e.g. slave cabins, master' houses, residence at the time of the interview)
- Religion and Metaphysical Beliefs (e.g. Christianity, voodoo, ghost stories)
- Runaway slaves
- Share-cropping
- Slave auctions
- Textiles (e.g. clothing, cotton, dying cloth)
- The Union Army
- White Supremacy (e.g. the Ku Klux Klan, United Daughters of the Confederacy)

It could also be interesting to create tags for racist signifying language in the interviews (e.g. phrases like "comical old woman" or comments on mismatched clothing). Descriptors associated with authenticity or racial uplift (e.g. interviewees being reluctant to talk) could also be tagged. This tagging system would need to be designed by someone with expertise in signifying language, and the end result could be incredibly helpful for users who otherwise would have missed those signifiers.

A partial folksonomy would be the most suitable choice for this archive. Due to the complexity of the corpus and how much information is necessary in order to understand it, the archive must be carefully mediated for the public. However, there is a large movement within black history digitization to involve users in archive building as much as possible to encourage participation and to democratize the creation of knowledge. A partial folksonomy would be a compromise between these two needs. While the ability to suggest tags and metadata could increase interactivity and ensure that the archive is responsive to user needs, there should also be a system in place for reviewing those suggestions.[22] There is strong potential for white supremacists to infest a digital archive wherein the formerly enslaved compliment their enslavers. We do not want misleading metadata or tags created to promote racist, white supremacist agendas to skew the presentation of these Narratives. A partial folksonomy would prevent this danger.

A nonhierarchical ontology could be useful in decolonizing the archive. The Early Caribbean Digital Archive states on their website that,

> Archives are repositories of knowledge. But all repositories are created and maintained by individuals located in time, place, and history, who make choices about what counts as knowledge, what belongs in a particular archive, and why it belongs there. In short, every archive is embedded in systems of power that shape what counts knowledge and non-knowledge… But the digital archive, we believe, offers new possibilities for re-archiving (remixing and reassembling) materials from existing archives as well as archiving new materials. This is not just the promise of recovery—not simply a question of finding materials that have

[22] For more on "Pushing Description out to the Contributors or User Communities," see Trevor Owens, "Arranging and Describing Digital Objects," *The Theory of Digital Preservation* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2018), p. 128-158.

> been hidden in the past. Rather, this is a formal possibility—one linked to the new affordances of the digital archive which invite (if not require!) us to disrupt, review, question, and revise the colonial knowledge regime that informs the archives from which we draw most of our materials.[23]

The ability to remix and reassemble archive materials is one of the ways that digital archives can be used as a tool for decolonization and integrating intersectionality. Traditional [Western] hierarchical knowledge categories are bound within the legacies of colonialism, racism, sexism, classism, and other matrices of discrimination and oppression. This hierarchical model could be replaced by one that organizes information by relationships between categories. The Humanities Networked Infrastructure of Australia (HuNI) is an excellent example of a relationship-centric digital archive.[24] Creating a new domain ontology that prioritizes relationships between categories instead of hierarchy is a rejection of those colonial structures.

7. Dealing with Dialect

There is a compelling argument to be made for removing the racialized spellings from the Narratives considering: the history of minstrelsy and how the mockery of black dialect has been used to reinforce a sonic colour line that exoticizes and dehumanizes African Americans; the objections of black intellectuals from Frederick Douglas to Zora Neale Hurston to Toni Morrison; how NWUs and other black-led oral history projects eschewed racialized spellings; and how many of the racialized spellings in the FWP Slave Narratives were added in afterwards by state editors. In an analog world, replacing each racialized spelling would be a Herculean

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[23] "Decolonizing the Archive: Remix and Reassembly," *Early Carribean Digital Archive,* https://ecda.northeastern.edu/home/about/decolonizing-the-archive/.
[24] *Humanities Networked Infrastructure of Australia*, Huni.net.au.

task. In the digital landscape, this can easily be accomplished through some minor computer programming.[25]

Table 3.1: Examples of racialized spellings from the FWP Slave Narratives

Correctly Spelled Word: **Racialized Spelling(s)**
About: bout
After: atter
Always: allus
And: an'
Applied: 'pplied
Asks: axes
Asking: axin'
Attention: 'tention
Back: bac
Bed: baid
Before: befo'
Believe: beliebe
Belong: b'long
Breakfast: breakfas'
Borrowed: borried
Both: bofs
Can: kin
Can't: cyant
Car: car
Care: keer
Catch: cotch
Caught: cot
Cause: coase, cose
Child: chile
Children: chillen, chillens, chillum
Climb: clim
Clothes: clo'es
Colored: cullud
Dead: daid
Dog: dawg
Even: eben
Every: evvy
Everybody: eberybody

[25] For my final Intro to Python assignment I adapted an OCR program to more accurately transcribe the Narratives. With a more functional OCR than the LOC website currently uses, it would be easy enough to build a dialect dictionary that could swap out racialized spellings for correct ones.

Excepting: septin'
Family: fambly
Figure: figger
Fire: fiuh, fiah
Folks: fo'ks
For: fuh
Forget: forgit
From: frum
Get: git
Give: gie, gi'
Going: gwine
Going to: gwainter, gwineter
Government: govmint, gov'mint, gove'nment
Head: haid
Heard: heered
Himself: hisself
Horse: hoss
Horses: hosses
Hundred: hun'erd
Hungry: hongry
I: Ah
If: ef, ifn, iffen
Into: inter
Just: jes, jest, jus'
Kept: kep
Killed: kilt
Kind: kin'
Learn: larn
Learned: larned
Leave: leabe
Leaving: leabin'
Left: lef'
Like: lak
Lives: libes, libs
Lord: law, lawd
Make: mek
Master: massa, mausa, marster, moster, marser
Meant: ment
Mistress: mistiss
More: mo'
My: mah, muh
Natural: nachal
Near: nigh
Nearest: nighest
Never: niver, neber, nebber, nevah
Nothing: nothin, nuttin
Nurse: ness

Nurses: nusses
Of: uz, uv, o'
Often: offen
Old: ole
Other: utha, othuh
Our: ouh
Over: ovah, ober
Person: pusson
Poor: pore, poe, po', poar
Pretty: purty
Rather: redder
Recollect: ricollec'
Remember: 'member
Right: ret, raught
Saviour: sabior,
Scared: skeert
Scaring: skeerin'
Seen: seed
Set: sot
Since: sence
Something: somepin', somet'ing, supin
Starting: stahtin'
Stealing: steelin'
Such: sich
Sure: shore, sho,
Surely: sho'ly
Take: tek
Thanks: t'anks
That: dat, 'at
The: de, th',
Their: dere, deir
Them: dem, 'um
Then: den
There: dar
They: dey
Things: t'ings, tings,
Think: t'ink
Thinking: t'inkin'
This: dis
Thought: tho't, t'ought
Three: t'ree
To: tuh, ter, teh
Took: tuk
Truth: troof
Under: undah
Was: wus, wuz
Were: wer

What: wha, whar
When: w'en
Where: whar, wha
Whip: whup
Whipping: whupping
White folks: whahfolks, whufolks, whi'folks
With: wid, wif, wood
Without any: withouten
Woman: 'oman, oman
Women: wimmin
Work: wuk
Yellow: yaller
Yesterday: yistidy
Yet: yit
Yonder: yondah
You: yo
Your: yo

The strongest argument against removing the racialized spellings is that it could obscure the racist transcription and editing of these Narratives. There is some merit to this argument, which we can use to improve our design. After all, we do not want to erase the history of racialized spellings from this archive. Ideally, the archive should be programmed so that users can look at as many versions of the interviews as possible, ranging across extant audio recordings, unpublished versions held in state archives, the Library of Congress copies, and the truncated versions published by scholars like Yetman. Allowing users to look at the changes across versions would facilitate a greater understanding of the transformations and adaptations that the Narratives went through — especially in regards to editing choices and the insertion of racialized spellings. This feature could also facilitate research questions and exploration; for example, comparing racialized spellings across states or between different interviewer demographics. As mentioned in the Contextual Information section, there should also be information provided about the use of racialized spellings and their history in American culture.

Fundamentally, however, the most basic, automatic presentation of the Narratives — i.e. the first version that a user would see — should have the racialized spellings removed. 'That's just history; that's just the way they were recorded' is an insufficient argument when a) many were not recorded that way, but changed afterwards by state editors, and b) we should not be perpetuating these misspellings when they are so deeply rooted in dehumanizing, exoticizing portrayals of African Americans meant to undermine their credibility. Moreover, the tactics used to undermine the reliability of black interviewees can be as effective today as they were in the 1930s; how many readers will doubt whether the account can be trusted when "truth" is spelt as "troof"?

There are also significant accessibility issues with keeping the racialized spellings. The plethora of misspellings and multiple spellings of the same word would make the Narratives difficult to read for non-native — and even native — English speakers. It would also be extremely difficult to parse for screen readers and automatic translators, making this archive significantly less accessible for people with print disabilities.[26]

The most important consideration is how to present these Narratives in a way that shows the greatest respect for the interviewees. I do not think that using the version where black interviewees "chew up dictionaries", as Zorra Neale Hurston would put it, shows that respect — especially when contemporary black writers and the NWUs were not using those racialized spellings. How you represent the dialect — whether you choose to leave the spellings as they are in the LOC version, or to replace misspelled words with the correct spellings — is a political

[26] "What is a print disability?," *Centre for Equitable Library Access: Public library service for Canadians with print disabilities*, https://celalibrary.ca/about-us/what-is-a-print-disability.

decision without a neutral position. On a digital archive, seeing racialized spellings should be an opt-in feature or tool, not a default that normalizes their existence.

8. Community Engagement

As mentioned in the discussion of partial folksonomies, one of the characteristic political choices of black history databases is to invite input and participation from the public. David Eltis wrote that his databases Slave Voyages and Origins "both rely heavily on contributions from members of the public — especially the diasporic public. The Voyages database invites the public to add new data on transatlantic slaving ventures as well as correct existing data via a 'contribute" page.'" [27] In these websites, the public is invited to engage in the act of creation — especially if they are members of the diasporic community. Eltis further contends,

> Voyages and Origins not only provide organic (or re-newable) databases but also encourage, indeed depend on, the interaction of scholars and the larger public. Together they have the effect of blurring the distinction between the scholarly and non-academic worlds and constitute a new way of generating and distributing knowledge that is increasingly referred to as "crowdsourcing." [28]

[27] Eltis, Implications, p. 259.
[28] Eltis, Implications, p. 260.

While the age of the article is reflected in Eltis's excitement over the 'new' trend of 'crowdsourcing,' this approach of blurring the distinction between the scholars and the larger public is still key to black history digitization efforts. Freedom on the Move, a new database for fugitive slave ads, describes itself as a "collective public history project" and plans to use crowdsourcing as a way to "provide an opportunity for people in all areas of life to engage with the history of slavery in the US in a concrete and meaningful way, by excavating small details of enslaved peoples' lives, bit by bit." [29] It further identifies crowdsourcing as a way to "undermine the barriers between professional historians and the historically-inquisitive public." [30]

Finding ways to engage the public creates organic databases that break down barriers and encourage more meaningful interaction with history. This engagement with black history is especially important as many people are blind to the history of racism, oppression, and colonialism in the Americas.[31] Engagement can also be used to empower members of diasporic communities to write their own history.

In our archive, we should consider how the public can participate. For example, Freedom on the Move requires users to create an account in order to correct OCR readings of text and create metadata; this allows the archive to track who is contributing and easily remove their contributions if they are inaccurate, racist, or problematic in any way. Within this system, over 9000 contributors have contributed to the archive (and it is a very recently created archive). Our archive could use a very similar system, with the same functionality and safeguards.

A very exciting prospect with this source material is the ability to contact the descendants of the interviewees. Many of these descendants have started to chart their family trees and claim

[29] "About the Project," *Freedom on the Move,* https://freedomonthemove.org/#about.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.

that lineage on websites like Ancestry.com. Social media and genealogy websites afford us the unique opportunity to contact these individuals, within appropriate ethical guidelines, and ask them what they would like the archive to look like. Do they perhaps own something of their great-grandmother's that they would like photographed and included in the archive? Is there a function that they would like to be included? We can ensure that the voices of the descendants — the closest people to these Narratives — have significant input into the archive's design and content.

Conclusion

The FWP Slave Narratives can be very intellectually challenging and emotionally difficult to read. The design of the database should not be an additional difficulty in reading these stories. The original goal of the LOC digitization was to make the Narratives available; now, our goal is to make them accessible by enabling people to understand and interact with these stories. The use of complex data infrastructures to facilitate text mining and data visualization has allowed researchers and the general public alike to interact with digitized information in completely new ways. Digital history archives are a site where disruption can take place, where we can decenter whiteness and integrate more intersectional principles in how we understand and organize information.

In order for this disruption to take place, the issues and questions raised in this chapter should be addressed. This ethical approach is time-consuming and difficult; however, we have a responsibility to the memory of individuals like Mack Taylor and to their descendants to do this work properly.

The Digital History Manifesto

A defining feature of Digital Humanists is their fondness for manifestos. These documents, full of fierce declarations and casual language, are useful for establishing intellectual and ethical frameworks that guide new explorations into digital realms. Manifestos help researchers engage with the thorny ethical issues that frequently emerge when applying new tools to old topics. The ethical digitization of the FWP Slave Narratives is a niche case study; however, the principles that have guided my analysis may be extrapolated for other digital historical archives. Thus, as an aspiring Digital Humanist, I have developed my own manifesto for values-based design in digital historical archives.

Be Curious

Dig deep into the materials. Follow tangents and the trails of things that pique your interest. Avoid teleology and other prescriptive ideas about what your corpus *should* contain. Embrace random occurrence and let yourself be surprised. By becoming deeply familiar with the history and context of your corpus, you will become a domain expert; this empowers you to create a better online domain.

Forget Neutrality; Get Multiplicity

Forget 'not taking sides' and the imaginary position of innocent neutrality. Look for who is missing from the table. Do not amplify the voices of the oppressors; seek out those whose voices

have been excluded due to historically-entrenched matrices of oppression, and find ways to remove the structures that have put them in that position. Invite participation from those who have been excluded, silenced, or ignored.

Learn Self-Reflexivity and Know Your Privilege

Examine your own position in what you are creating and how that impacts what you do. Self-reflexive is not something you can 'be' but something that you infinitely learn; you will never be done with this step. Be conscious of your limitations and your position to the material with which you are working. Factors including, but not limited to, race, gender, class, education, ability, nationality, and native language impact how historical documents are gathered, transcribed, and distributed — your relation to these factors also impacts how you read these texts.

Plan for the Terrible People

Design to limit the possibilities for terrible people with terrible ideas. The Santa Clara Toolkit for Ethics in Tech Practise argues, "If you are building or granting access to powerful things... it is your responsibility to mitigate their abuse to a reasonable extent." [1] When designing an online resource — especially one containing minority histories — you have to think about how it could be misunderstood, misappropriated, and misused.

[1] Shannon Vallor, Brian Green, and Irina Raicu, "Ethics in Technology Practice," The Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University, 2018, https://www.scu.edu/ethics/.

Ask where the Money is

This one is a bit longer, but bear with me. Think about the world 400 years from now (assuming that it does not end before then), and wonder what they will see: what things our society is so deeply entrenched in that we can no longer see it ourselves, what things so profoundly colour every aspect of our lives. In Medieval Europe, Christianity was that thing: so completely enveloping life and common habits, but accepted as natural and normal. While I cannot claim the hindsight of a time traveller, I would warrant a guess that capitalism is that ubiquitous thing unseen in our current world. From technology access to funding for projects, capitalism is inherent in anything that we create because it is inherent in our society. I think we would do well to ask ourselves: where is the money? What funds us? How does money, or lack thereof, block accessibility? Who would financially profit off of our work? The great irony of the Federal Writers' Project was that it struggled with two goals: to create and preserve culturally significant material, and to sell that material to make money. In the desire to make money, things were edited out or re-written to have broader appeal. Capitalism hollows radical intentions, and we should be conscious of its forces in our designs.

Practise Ethics of Care

Embrace your feminist ideology and practise an ethics of care. Care for others, care for your impact, care for the voices that you are presenting and care for the people who will be reading them. When digitizing difficult histories of oppression, violence, discrimination, and hate, know that this is important work, but it is hard to do. Be gentle with yourself.

Ask yourself, so what?

So, why are you making this? Consider your motivations in creation. What is the end goal here? What is the point and the purpose? What will this be used for afterwards? Think about the impact that you want your creation to have, and consciously design towards that goal. Whenever you feel stuck, ask yourself: so what? How can I expand this? Why does this matter? What comes next?

Blow up the ivory tower

History does not belong inside an ivory tower. Scholars cannot stay ensconced in a protective monastic enclave of theory and rhetoric while marginalized people continue to bear the consequences of the history that we study. You have to find ways to bring history to the public and encourage them to participate. Find ways to speak more clearly and directly. (Maybe even swear a little for emphasis.) Enter conversations with humility and learn from expertise outside of the academy. Recognize how certain communities have been historically excluded from academic research, and how many still face barriers for recognition and advancement. In the face of ongoing discrimination, oppression, and persecution within our society, we cannot use our priviledge to hide inside the academy. Head out of the ivory tower and leave dynamite behind you. We aren't going back.

Final Thoughts

Jamaican-born historian Afua Cooper wrote, "Since much of the Black past has been deliberately buried, covered over, and demolished, it is our task to unearth, uncover, and piece it together again. This we are called to do because the dead speak to us." [1]

Creating a digital archive for the FWP Narratives is a unique opportunity to unearth black history and make it accessible to the public. While I hypothesize ways that an online archive of the Narratives can be more responsible and have better intersectional politics, it is important to remember how recent this history is and how the legacies of slavery continue to this day. I have written this thesis during the largest civil rights movement in history, as thousands have taken to the streets in cities around the world to protest discrimination and police brutality.[2] In her Narrative, Mary Reynolds talked about how slave drivers would "beat the breath out your body." [3] African Americans still cannot breathe.

In allyship with this struggle, I hope that my analysis can lay the groundwork for these Narratives to be better presented to the public. While doing research, I came across a story from 1940 wherein John Lomax and his daughter Ruby recorded an elderly black lady named Harriet McClintock. Ruby wrote in a letter to her family that when they played back the recording of her singing, McClintock "shouted with laughter and cried, 'Sing on, ole lady — Yeah that's me,

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[1] Afua Cooper, *The Hanging of Angelique, The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Old Montreal* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), p. 10.
[2] Larry Buchanan, Quoctrung Bui and Jugal K. Patel, "Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History," *New York Times,* July 3, 2020, www.nytimes.com › george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.
[3] Unknown interviewer, "Mary Reynolds," *Federal Writers' Project: Texas*, p. 238.

don't you hear me?" [4] This story stuck in my brain: McClintock laughing and being proud that her voice was being heard. Against all odds, the voices and stories of McClintock, Taylor, and thousands of others have survived to us.

The dead are calling us — don't you hear them?

[4] I have corrected the racialized misspellings in this quote to proper spellings. Ruby Lomax to her family, October 29, 1940, regarding an interview with informant, "Aunt Harriet McClintock near Sumterville, Alabama." Found in Stewart, p. 104.

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