RACE AND PLACE:
DIALECT AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF SOUTHERN IDENTITY IN THE EX-SLAVE NARRATIVES

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November 1, 1939  
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RIGHT LIVIN'

As I entered the classroom of the Housekeepers' Aid Project I found, seated at one of the desks, a Negro nurse, Etta Robbins. Apparently she had been writing, for pencil, some paper, and an open book were still lying before her.

"Good morning, Etta," I said, "I see you are still at work. Am I too early for our interview?"

"No, ma'am," said she, "I've jest gettin' through with a 'zamination in First Aid an' I sho hope I pass. I had so much to do today I jest couldn't git my mind on it. Fust thing, I had to git up early an' tend to mah baby. You know I has a new baby. He jest come last Saturday. I'se a midwife as well as a practical nurse and I always cares for my baby cases before I does anything else. As dis is de only baby case I has scheduled for some time, dey let me work on WPA. When I gits a job of my own den I soon gits laid off of WPA. Den I gits through wid dat case an', if I don't git another, dey puts me on agin, so you see I'se jest jist on, den off, den on agin."

"I ain't on nursing duty de rest of der day, so I can talk ter you jest as long as you wants to. You say youse goin' to write my life history? Well, I'se done plenty; I can't tell you half, but I'll try."

"I wuz born over here in Oglethorpe County. I'se fifty-
STORIES FROM EX-SLAVERS

The main purpose of these detailed and homely questions is to get the Negro interested in talking about the days of slavery. If he will talk freely, he should be encouraged to say what he pleases without reference to the questions. It should be remembered that the Federal Writers’ Project is not interested in taking sides on any question. The worker should not censor any material collected, regardless of its nature.

It will not be necessary, indeed it will probably be a mistake, to ask every person all of the questions. Any incidents or facts he can recall should be written down as nearly as possible just as he says them, but do not use dialect spelling so complicated that it may confuse the reader.

A second visit, a few days after the first one, is important, so that the worker may gather all the worthwhile recollections that the first talk has aroused.

Questions:

1. Where and when were you born?

2. Give the names of your father and mother. Where did they come from? Give names of your brothers and sisters. Tell about your life with them and describe your home and the “quarters.” Describe the beds and where you slept. Do you remember anything about your grandparents or any stories told you about them?

3. What work did you do in slavery days? Did you ever earn any money? How? What did you buy with this money?

4. What did you eat and how was it cooked? Any possums? Rabbits? Fish? What food did you like best? Did the slaves have their own gardens?


6. Tell about your master, mistress, their children, the house they lived in, the overseer or driver, poor white neighbors.

7. How many acres in the plantation? How many slaves on it? How and at what time did the overseer wake up the slaves? Did they work hard and late at night? How and for what causes were the slaves punished? Tell what you saw. Tell some of the stories you heard.

8. Was there a jail for slaves? Did you ever see any slaves sold or auctioned off? How did groups of slaves travel? Did you ever see slaves in chains?

9. Did the white folks help you to learn to read and write?

10. Did the slaves have a church on your plantation? Did they read the Bible? Who was your favorite preacher? Your favorite spiritual? Tell about the baptizing; baptizing songs. Funerals and funeral songs.

11. Did the slaves ever run away to the North? Why? What did you hear about runaways? What did the masters’ family do to prevent any slaves from running away to another plantation or to another? Did you ever hear about preventable crime? A murder or death among the slaves?

12. Did the slaves do when they went to their quarters after the day’s work was done on the plantation? Did they work on Saturday mornings? What did they do Saturday nights? Sundays? Christmas morning? New Year’s Day? Any other holidays? Cornshucking? Cotton Picking? Housewifery. What did some of the white master’s family do to prevent any slaves from running away to another plantation or to another? Did you ever hear about preventable crime? A murder or death among the slaves?

13. What games did you play as a child? Can you give the names or size of any of the play games or ring games of the children? Riddles? Charms? Stories about “Bay Head and Bloody Bones” or other “hunts” of ghosts? Stories about animals? What do you think of voodoo? Can you give the words or size of 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.

14. When slaves became sick who looked after them? What medicines did the doctors give them? What medicine (herbs, leaves, or roots) did the slaves use for sickness? What charms did they use and to keep off what disease?
Lay My Burden Down

B. A. Botkin

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Long Past Slavery
Catherine A. Stewart

Representing Race in
The Federal Writers' Project
“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.”

- George Cronyn, FWP Associate Director
Negro Dialect Suggestions
(Stories of Ex-Slaves)

Do not write:

Ah for I
Poe for po' (poor)
Hit for it
Tuh for to
Yus for was
Paid for bed
Paid for dead
Ouh for our
Nah for my
Ovah for over
Othuh for other
Wha for whar (where)
Undah for under
Fuh for for
Yondah for yonder
Koster for marster or massa
Gwaintor for gwinter (going to)
Gwon for woman
I'm for iffen (if)
Pluh or fish for fire
Us or ur or o' for of
Figure 1: The graph plots the top words indicative of dialect in the Ex-Slave Narratives.

Figure 2: Dialect frequency (occurrences per 1000 words) by race of interviewer, with 95% confidence intervals. White interviewers were significantly more likely to use dialect in the life histories that they created.
Figure 3: Topic model (LDA) of Ex-Slave Narratives. Posterior weights for top ten words in each topic are shown. The prevalence of dialect terms in the topics reveals the significance of dialect as a rhetorical strategy in the interviews.

Figure 4: Number of documents in each topic categorized by race of interviewer. Topics with a significant number of dialect words are much more likely to be found in white interviewers’ life histories as compared to black interviewers’ life histories.
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Figure 5: Dialect word frequency in the Southern Life Histories Project. Dialect words were also common in the Southern Life Histories Project, a Federal Writers’ Project life histories project that occurred at the same time as the Ex-Slave Narratives project.

Plot 6: Dialect frequency (occurrences per 1000 words) by race of interviewee, with 95% confidence intervals. Dialect words were used more frequently in interviews with black Americans.
“These life histories, taken down as far as possible in the narrator's' words, constitute an invaluable body of unconscious evidence or indirect source material, which scholars and writers dealing with the South, especially, social psychologists and cultural anthropologists, cannot afford to reckon without.”

- Benjamin Botkin, FWP Folklore Editor
THANK YOU.

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