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Excerpt

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Spoken Testimony, *Unwritten History*

MY FRIEND, I am going to tell you the story of my life, as you wish; and if it were only the story of my life I think I would not tell it; for what is one man that he should make much of his winters, even when they bend him like a heavy snow?"¹ So begins John G. Neihardt's 1932 account of a Sioux Indian's oral remembrances, *Black Elk Speaks*. It is one of many cross-cultural ventures from the 1930s that sought to transform the speech of the disinherited into a more lasting written form.

Although it has never been examined as such, *Black Elk Speaks* is fully representative of what Alfred Kazin called "the preponderance of descriptive nonfiction" that typified 1930s writing.² The (overlapping) genres of documentary, ethnography, oral history, folklore, journalism – as well as reality-based fiction – became the Depression era's characteristic avenues for representing a widespread societal preoccupation with the plight of the disempowered. The 1930s were a time when not only writers sponsored by the Works Progress Administration, but also scores of other ethnographers, documentarians, and journalists sought to preserve oral perspectives they perceived as rapidly vanishing. They thus traveled into the field and recorded black, American Indian, migrant worker, tenant farmer, and immigrant voices. Citing the real voices of living subjects as their authoritative sources, thirties writers often produced timely social commentary designed to shock a middle-class readership into greater awareness of widespread suffering.

During the thirties, insightful cultural critics recognized that, for countless American writers, documenting society had supplanted the project of creating fiction. For example, Kazin believed that the thirties saw "a literature of Fact – one of those

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periods in which, despite the emergence of so many brilliant individual sensibilities, the chief effort of many writers seemed bent only on reporting.”³ Kazin’s overstated phrasing suggests an ambivalence about the proliferation of this documentary-style expression. Similarly, William Phillips and Philip Rahv used an odd past tense in 1937, as if to distance themselves from the culture of the time: “The mood of the thirties required objectivity, realism, and an interest in the social manifestations of individual life.”⁴ Yet neither Kazin nor Phillips and Rahv stressed that the central value of these proliferating reality-based writings lay in their records of American speech.

In many field reports, there was a special emphasis on the ways Americans spoke. Representations of “the people’s voice” were enormously popular subjects during the thirties. For example, the Federal Writers’ Project’s *Lay My Burden Down*, an oral history of slavery, began this way: “From the memories and the lips of former slaves have come the answers which only they can give to questions which Americans still ask: What does it mean to be a slave? What does it mean to be free? And, even more, how does it *feel*?”⁵ In a related vein, the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union published letters from sharecroppers in a collection whose cover photograph strategically showed a torn scrap from a tenant’s letter lamenting that “we have no voice”; the collection was entitled *The Disinherited Speak*.⁶ Thirties documentarians and ethnographers believed that only by listening to and recording actual voices could they hope to realize the goal of authenticating history in its fullest sense.

The 1930s concern with recording the speaking voice is virtually unrivaled in American cultural history. In that decade, writers especially sought the speech of the dispossessed and the marginal. Concurrently, there was suddenly enormous interest in the folkways of ordinary Americans: in music, in theater, in film, in sociology, in fiction, and in journalism. “Folks” were perceived as the very backbone of the American heritage, and as the cultural consensus affirmed, their voices needed to be preserved in textual form. As in the case of the ex-slave oral histories already cited, writers believed that time was short and that before too long these spoken memories would be lost forever. There was a widespread sense of historical urgency to their projects. In his introduction to *These Are Our Lives*, a collection of oral histories of American

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southerners, for example, W. T. Couch insisted that “the people, all the people, must be known, they must be heard. Somehow they must be given representation, somehow they must be given voice and allowed to speak, in their essential character.”⁷ Couch’s rhetorical flourishes were more typical than not. Letting the people speak was one basic aim of thirties documentary-style literature.

Yet most scholars now consider the reality-based writings produced in the thirties as “failures.” In the “Instructions to Writers” provided to fieldworkers by the Federal Writers’ Project, for example, one of “the criteria to be observed” was “literary excellence.”⁸ But many of the documentary efforts from the thirties do not survive as literature. As William Stott noted, “The timely being timely for a little while only, it no longer is: thirties social documentary in general is now as dead as the sermons of the Social Gospel.”⁹ Stott asserted that the documentaries’ failure to last as literature was largely due to their didacticism and their lack of aesthetic sophistication, as well as their tendency to oversimplify and sentimentalize their subjects.

During the past decade, further criticisms of 1930s documentaries and ethnographies (and other more recent efforts like them) have come from within anthropological circles. There is a growing insistence that the ethnographic narrative is inherently and necessarily fictional or, at best, a “partial truth.”¹⁰ Heated critical debates concerning the methods of anthropological fieldwork have spilled over into nonanthropological books and journals as well.¹¹ These debates make clear just how crucial investigations of the ethnographic narrative are for American studies, American history, and literary critical audiences. For scholars of both culture and history, studying the difficulties involved in producing ethnography sheds light on all dilemmas surrounding reality’s representation in narrative form. At the same time, the direction and intensity of these recent debates have put forth the false impression that nearly all previous documentary and ethnographic writing could not possibly have grappled in a theoretically sophisticated manner with questions of power, ethnic bias, and representation. According to this school, documentarians and ethnographers only infrequently examined their own presumed authority to narrate the speech of others and rarely questioned (what Renato Rosaldo called) the “mythic tale” that reality-based writ-

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ing “resembled a mirror that reflected other cultures as they ‘really’ were.”¹² Partially as a result of these debates, recent literary scholars have (with rare exception) leveled increasingly harsh criticism at documentaries and ethnographies from the thirties as inauthentic, inaccurate, and unreliable. For example, as evidenced by recent developments in scholarship on ethnographic narrative, it has become commonplace to criticize the “traditional” ethnographic model of fieldwork and writing.¹³ One scholar has even gone so far as to state, with respect to this ethnographic model, that “until the 1960s, its legitimacy went virtually unquestioned.”¹⁴

These various low estimations of 1930s documentary and ethnographic writing, however, leave unattended a crucial area of study, that is, how these writings sought to represent the voices of oppressed people. Representing the oral within writing, especially when the encounter being documented brings together someone from a primarily oral culture with someone from a primarily literate culture, raises significant questions about the social relations of power that inevitably shape a text derived from real encounters with living subjects. Written cultures have often inscribed the terms of what counts as rational expression into their self-understanding and then transcribed a spoken heritage’s words with forms that fit those terms. A people, to prove that it had a culture, had to document that culture in writing. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr., put it in another context:

Writing, especially after the printing press became so widespread, was taken to be the *visible* sign of reason . . . So, while the Enlightenment is characterized by its foundation on man’s ability to reason, it simultaneously used the absence and presence of reason to delimit and circumscribe the very humanity of the cultures and people of color which Europeans had been “discovering” since the Renaissance.¹⁵

To examine and analyze how the resulting power imbalance between oral and written cultures was handled in some thirties documentary and ethnographic narratives reveals that, in the Depression era, there were important (though partial) precursors to current efforts at self-conscious, sophisticated, politically engaged documentary and ethnography.

By way of entry into this study, let me begin with a brief

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discussion of *Unwritten History of Slavery: Autobiographical Account of Negro Ex-Slaves*; the dilemmas inherent in representing the perspectives of ex-slaves anticipated the problems all writers on the dispossessed were to encounter. *Unwritten History* was published in 1945 by the Social Science Institute at Fisk University, though it was based on interviews conducted in 1929–30. It remains an almost entirely neglected work that emerged out of the aforementioned thirties preoccupation with representing the “folk” and their speech, and in many respects, it is a path-breaking document – a great unacknowledged oral narrative of the decade. More than sixty years after the end of the Civil War, *Unwritten History* may be credited with being one of the first large-scale attempts to document the spoken memories of former slaves.¹⁶ These interviews with thirty-seven ex-slaves in and around Nashville, Tennessee, represent a crucial precursor to the twenty thousand pages of interviews with thirty-five hundred former slaves from twenty-six different states collected under the supervision of the Federal Writers’ Project of the Works Progress Administration principally during the years 1936–38.¹⁷ But unlike the Federal Writers’ Project’s collection of ex-slave narratives that they anticipated, the Fisk University interviews bear the personal imprint of one interviewer, Ophelia Settle Egypt, and her two coeditors, J. Masuoka and Charles S. Johnson. Egypt was trained in sociology and was also the granddaughter of ex-slaves who had communicated the African-American oral tradition to her.¹⁸ The Fisk narratives can therefore be analyzed collectively as the result of one internally coherent project’s evolving methodology toward representing its subjects’ oral remembrances.

This project faced some immediate dilemmas. In particular, the editors of *Unwritten History* confronted a scholarly community that was extremely hesitant about using ex-slave testimonies as historical evidence, a hesitancy that would go unchallenged (with rare exception) even for a generation after them.¹⁹ For example, as late as 1963, Charles H. Nichols would eloquently open his defense of the slave narratives’ validity with these sentiments: “Nearly everyone concerned with American slavery has had his say, but in our time we have forgotten the testimony of its victims.”²⁰ To this day, the ex-slaves’ testimonies in the Fisk narratives, as well as in the Federal Writers’ Project, while no longer “forgotten,” are still contested as authoritative sources for

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historical inquiry.²¹ Certainly these testimonies have not been used as inspirations for how to rethink and reshape the very way history gets told – although I propose they should be.

Due mainly to this utterly contested authority of ex-slaves' testimony, Egypt and her coeditors had to deal with a peculiar paradox. Since historians of slavery discredited the credibility of both oral and written testimonies of ex-slaves during this period, if the editors of *Unwritten History* were to minimize editorial interventions, they risked perpetuating this devaluation.²² But if they intervened in obvious, visible ways, that would also call into question the authority of their subjects. The contradictory methods employed by the editors reflect the almost impossible situation they confronted.

On the surface, there is little that is unusual in *Unwritten History's* structure or presentation, and that is precisely the point. The thirty-seven interviews are headed by either straightforward titles (such as "I Was a Boy Slave") or quotations (such as "'Blacks Have No More Chance Than Slaves Had' "). The interviews are not subdivided or grouped in any way. They include no framing narratives, no attempts to introduce their informants with brief explanatory or biographical passages, and little or no commentary. There are no concluding statements or summaries. Only occasionally the interviewer's question will be reproduced parenthetically in the body of the narrative or a word will be clarified parenthetically if the reference is unclear. More often than not, however, obscure references are not explained, and informants respond to questions that are not included. Typeset on a typewriter and mimeographed on typewriter paper, even the physical appearance of the document is drab. In large part, then, *Unwritten History* makes no attempt to render "literary" what is "actual" through artful strategies, stylized techniques, or colorful packaging.

Aware that it was the subjectivity of ex-slaves' perspectives that caused them to be discredited, the editors (in a four-page introduction) countered by stating that subjectivity itself was a worthy object of scholarly inquiry. Documenting the very processes by which slaves accommodated themselves to slavery and made sense of their lot was a necessary supplement, the editors proposed, to the extant studies of "the slavery system as an aspect of the economic order."²³ (Though the editors do not say this,

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that “economic” focus had led to such statements as this one on slave children by Ulrich B. Phillips, perhaps the best-known and most influential scholar on American slavery of his generation: “The new-born pickaninny had a value purely because at some day his labor would presumably yield more than the cost of his keep. If he died early his owner was out of purse to an amount somewhat greater than his maintenance had cost. If he proved an idiot, or blind or crippled, the case would be worse, for he must prove a ‘dead’ expense until in fact he died.”)²⁴ Given the prevalence of such an interpretive approach, the editors of *Unwritten History* – all the while cautiously couching their remarks in sociological language – insisted that slavery needed to be understood as “a moral order” as well (i). Anticipating that their documents would be discounted as “personal stories,” as “not always accurate and not always true to the objective facts,” the editors suggested that “the merit” of their sources lay “not so much in the accurate recording of the historical events” but in “the individual’s subjective evaluation of them” (iii).

In establishing sets of oppositions – slave and master, “subjective evaluation” and “accurate recording,” spoken memory and written text – the editors at once engaged and evaded the dilemmas of representing speech in writing. If the editors’ goal had been to authorize and authenticate their speakers’ testimony, as it is clear they also wished to do, then they did so in a curious fashion. By casting doubt on the historical accuracy of their oral sources, they seemed to suggest the opposite of what they intended, even while pressing the idea of these sources’ historical uniqueness. Ironically, then, it was left to the speaking subjects themselves to suggest how and why the methods of history needed to be recast and reconceived. The ways in which the editors sought to validate their informants’ perspectives emerge from a close examination of the book’s structure, as well as from an analysis of the ex-slaves’ own reflections on the power imbalance between whites and blacks and between written and oral cultures.

As I have mentioned, the thirty-seven interviews are not subdivided or grouped, but their organization is clearly not entirely random either. The opening few interviews, for example, establish the enormous range of responses existing among ex-slaves when they remember their early years in bondage – from vague

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nostalgia to absolute fury. The very first interview, entitled “One of Dr. Gale’s ‘Free Niggers,’ ” begins with the informant saying: “Just the other day we were talking about white people when they had slaves” (1). The elderly ex-slave continues that she recalls how her owners “were saving me for a breeding woman” and observes that “all of the colored women didn’t have to have white men, some did it because they wanted to and some were forced” (1–2). Yet despite that this might have been her own fate if slavery had not been abolished, the woman adds: “Of course, . . . you couldn’t expect much from them” – referring to the children of white masters and slave women (2). In short, this first witness to slavery repeatedly indicates its horror but does not express malice; her testimony is remarkably evenhanded. For example, she notes that “the meanest thing they did was selling babies from the mother’s breast,” but quickly adds, “but all of them didn’t do that” (2). Or again, indicating the character of slaves, she comments that “it is just natural for Negroes to steal,” and remarks that “of course [the whites] whipped [the slaves] but some of them need it, and when I look around and see [African Americans] doing some of the things they do now, I think it would be a good thing if some of them could be whipped now” (9). Finally, with a small anecdote about how idioms changed before and after the Civil War, this former slave summarizes her feelings about the directions of history:

You notice most white people [today] in the South say “daddy” and “mother.” In slavery time colored couldn’t say papa; they had to say “daddy” and “mammy” and when they got free they started saying “papa” and then the white people started saying “daddy.” Now the colored are right back at “daddy” again; they will copy after them. (5)

Once more, in the aptly titled “‘White Folks’ Pet” (*sic*), the second interview, there is further evidence for the view that slaves were treated equitably by their masters and that race relations were not especially strained during the years before the Civil War. “I knows ’em, I knows white folks from their birth,” this ex-slave comments. “Only difference is I ain’t birthed one, that’s the only difference” (22). She remembers that “all the white folks was so nice to me” (26), and (somewhat ironically, given the special treatment she received) she summarily condemns the slave

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community: “You know, our folks just won’t hang together” (23). In her concluding remarks, she repeats herself for emphasis: “Yes, my white folks was good to me” (29). That *Unwritten History* opens with two accounts that register mainly positive memories of masters and negative impressions of slaves establishes a counterpoint for much of what follows.

The next two narratives, for example, break sharply with these initial characterizations of slavery, and in the third interview, “When It’s Right To Steal from Your Master,” there is explicit commentary (as there is from several others) on the extent of masters’ savage abuse of their slaves: “I heard the old people say that some of them would take the niggers and strip their clothes down and lash them till they put blisters on their backs, and then mix salt and pepper and put it on their backs to make them more miserable” (40). And the fourth interview opens with a suspicious question – “For what intent have you come here?” – and continues with an unforgiving bitterness and anger: “Now you talk about hard times, I have had hard times” (43). This informant brings up an especially painful memory by addressing himself directly at the Fisk University representatives listening to his words:

You as teachers used to whip the children with a paddle or something, but my whip was a raw cowhide. I didn’t see it but I used to hear my mother tell it at the time how they would whip them with a cowhide and then put salt and pepper in your skin until it burn. The most barbarous thing I saw with these eyes – I lay on my bed and study about it now – I had a sister, my oldest sister, she was fooling with the clock and broke it, and my old marster taken her and tied a rope around her neck – just enough to keep it from choking her – and tied her up in the back yard and whipped her I don’t know how long. There stood mother, there stood father, and there stood all the children and none could come to her rescue. (43–4)

Because the prior written records downplayed such abuses and agonies, all this man had was his memory, a memory so resilient that many years later “I lay on my bed and study about it now.” The inclusion of this subjective memory challenges all “objective” writings that exclude perspectives like this one.

The interactive process of the interview itself leads the infor-

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mant to further reflections about the imbalance of power between oral and written sources:

In slavery they used to teach the Negro that they had no soul. They said all they needed to do was to obey their mistress. One old sister was shouting in the back of the church and her mistress was up in the front and she looked back and said, "Shout on old 'nig' there is a kitchen in heaven for you to shout in too." The people used to say "dis," "dat," and "tother," now they say "this," "that" and "the other." In all the books that you have studied you never have studied . . . Negro history, have you? (45)

The seeming ramble of these words represents one man's open-ended reflections on how social relations of power have constructed African-American identity, speech, history, and writing. Far from being confused, this man is strikingly alert to the whole obfuscating process by which blacks' own relationship to God was denied and by which the hierarchical order of life on earth was presented as divinely ordained. Furthermore, he is intensely aware that white scholars did not acknowledge the significance of an ex-slave's testimony as a means of understanding the social experience of slavery and its consequences. This ex-slave is not insensible of these historical constructions; he speaks with a self-awareness that his firsthand experiences will not be considered persuasive testimony precisely because it is the firsthand experience of a former slave and is therefore classified as unreliable or prejudicial.

The narrative strategies of *Unwritten History* are all the more remarkable for representing the prescience of these ex-slaves, their awareness that their "truth," their "reality," and their experience are in competition with more empowered "white" versions of the past and would face enormous difficulties in achieving legitimacy. *Unwritten History* addresses this problem in part by representing the ex-slaves as active collaborators in the process of making known through writing what their lives have taught them.

Several of the ex-slaves interviewed by Egypt in 1929 and 1930 knew that theirs would be an unpopular version of history, one that might result in a backlash. "Yes, I was a slave and knows plenty about it but I don't care to talk about it," says one informant. "Nope, I don't care to give out nothing I know about it; just don't think it would do any good" (141). The same informant