
EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION TO VOLUMES 2-19

It has taken a monumental struggle on the part of black Americans to transform their status in American society to gain a place for the voices of those who had been slaves in the writing of their own history. After a century of almost total neglect, the past five years have witnessed the republication of some of the slave narratives originally published in the nineteenth century.¹ And yet the main body of the material left by those who had been slaves has not yet been published except in very abbreviated, edited, and selected form. The unpublished interviews conducted in the twentieth century with ex-slaves have simply not been made generally available (except in very selected and edited form) and yet they are the most significant source of material on the lives of the slaves, their communities, and their struggles. This volume is both a substantive essay on slavery, which makes an effort to allow the slaves to enter into the creation of their written history, and an introduction to the main body of such largely unpublished interview materials.

The material will be published in two or three series. This volume is published along with six others, which contain material from the Works Projects Administration Writers' Project interviews. A second series, with the remainder of the WPA materials, will contain twelve volumes; the second will also contain reprints of two volumes of interviews collected at Fisk University at the end of the 1920s, first published in a mimeographed small edition in

1945.² It is hoped that there will be further volumes in a third series containing other similar materials.

We have chosen to reprint the interviews without editing them in any way or removing from the collection interviews which might appear of only slight interest. We leave to the judgment of scholars and the general public the value and usefulness of particular interviews.

We have also retained, whenever it has not interfered with the photographic reproduction of the material, all the editorial notes made by the original editors in preparing the materials for possible publication. These notes may be of use in probing the richness of the collection. Appended to this first volume are various letters and documents found bound with the first volume of the WPA materials, the Alabama interviews, which may prove of great help to the reader in utilizing the material.

As has been suggested at the beginning of this volume, the publication of these slave narratives and this volume should lead to a vast outpouring of fresh interpretations, which will give a full, rounded, and dynamic picture of the lives of the slaves. There are many subjects which the narratives can help illuminate far beyond the boundaries that have so far been reached. Four in particular, which have been only briefly noted in this book, seem to be worthy of mention at this point. They are, I think, illustrative of the problems the interviews will help clarify.

The first of these is the question of the social structure of the slave communities. This matter has created a great deal of controversy but very little substantial research. What were the relations between house slaves and field slaves? Were house slaves necessarily, or even usually, more docile than field slaves? How were house slaves used to control field slaves? How did the house slaves act to aid the field slaves? Were house slaves usually more privileged than field slaves? Were house slaves usually able to perpetuate their class position by passing it on to their children? Were house slaves often demoted to field slaves? And were there many house slaves who were required to work in the fields as well, particularly at harvest time? The slave narratives contain much that is relevant to these questions.

Second, the narratives contain a great deal of revealing information about and accounts of Reconstruction. Some of this has been used in this volume but much more study remains to be done with the materials. In many ways, these narratives are as rich in insight

into the history of black people in America for the years following the Civil War as they are in materials concerning slavery itself.

Third, an entire book could be written based primarily on the slave narratives about black American-Indian relations. The narratives from Oklahoma are particularly rich in such material. Some of the peoples of the Indian Territory, such as the Creeks and the Cherokees, were owners of black slaves who were, however, treated very differently from those black slaves owned by whites. Blacks became part of the Indian kinship structure, they were generally treated well, and they became Creek or Cherokee in culture. Runaway slaves often were sheltered in Indian communities and then sent on their way.

Finally, the narratives are a great source of black folklore and folk poetry. This volume has only scratched the surface of this material, not because it is unimportant but because it is of the greatest importance, and entire volumes ought to be based on it. There is nothing unclear or ambiguous about black folk stories or folk poetry for those willing to go beyond the literal pedantry of German historiography of the last part of the nineteenth century. As Sterling Stuckey has pointed out, the great twentieth-century American historian W. E. B. DuBois was able to relate "the music of the slaves to the total culture of America," thus emphasizing the strengths of the black slaves and the cultural weaknesses of much of white American life.³

This study of slavery based on the slave narratives and interviews with ex-slaves has not been able to give a precise picture of the historical development of the black community. It does not present an analysis which differentiates slave behavior of the eighteenth century from that of the nineteenth century, and it has stressed the continuity of black life before and after the Civil War. A reason for this is that the bulk of the slave narratives only present material on black life since approximately 1835. There is a need to assert the continuities in black community life that emerge from a careful reading of the narratives against a long tradition which has asserted that there was no black community or distinct behavior, that the slaves were victims tossed about by the white master class without any means of defense. Yet, even when this task is accomplished, it will still be necessary to establish methodologies to enable us to see the changes in black life since 1619. Utilizing these slave narratives and other available materials, there should be no difficulty in devising methods which can present the time sequences in black history.

Not only has this work slighted the historical development of the black community, it has not emphasized the regional differences in American slavery. That has been done in order to establish certain overall realities: there was a black community under slavery, there was the development of distinct Afro-American behavior patterns (for example, black religion), slaves were treated harshly but they were able to resist in specific ways, and so forth. But the slave narratives offer wonderfully clear material on regional differences. For example, the Texas narratives are filled with accounts of black cowboys and black slave cowboys. It is clear that the slave cowboy had much more individual autonomy than did slave field hands on cotton plantations. It is hoped that these narratives will be utilized to probe such differences, and their relationships to regional differences, as well as to develop a comprehensive picture of the changes in slave life.

This volume is an introduction to a body of material in which the slaves speak for themselves. If the volume is to have any merit beyond the presentation of the views of the author on certain matters concerning American slavery and racism, it will come from its linkage with the slave narratives—a body of material intrinsically of greater significance because it presents the reflections upon their experiences of those who were there, who suffered, and who built for themselves and those who were to come after them a way of life upon which people stand and challenge modern American society.

Notes

1. There is, despite a flurry of recent replications of some of the slave narratives, only the beginning of an awareness of the importance of these documents. Even when the complete WPA narratives will be published, there will remain scores of items either unpublished or published in the nineteenth century in obscure places (such as church bulletins and black newspapers) not generally available.

2. Fisk University, "God Struck Me Dead," mimeographed (Nashville: Social Science Institute, 1945); Fisk University, "Unwritten History of Slavery," mimeographed (Nashville: Social Science Institute, 1945). "God Struck Me Dead" was republished, with an introduction by Clifton H. Johnson, by Pilgrim Press of Philadelphia in 1969. The "Unwritten History of Slavery" was republished by Microcard Editions of Washington, D.C., in 1968.

3. Sterling Stuckey, "Twilight of Our Past: Reflections on the Origins of Black History," *Amistad* 2 (1971):261-295.