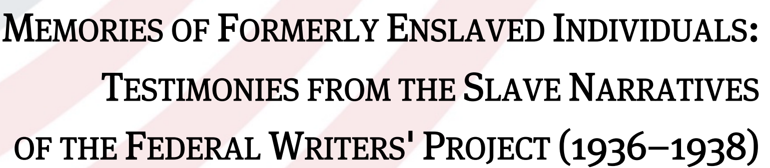

# Work Songs in the Memories of Formerly Enslaved Individuals: Testimonies from the Slave Narratives of the Federal Writers' Project (1936–1938)

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## Abstract

In the 1930s, the Works Progress Administration launched *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project*, collecting over 2,300 interviews with formerly enslaved individuals across 17 states. While these narratives have gained scholarly attention since the 1970s, their potential for examining cultural practices—particularly music—remains underexplored. This study addresses this gap by applying oral history methodology to analyze work songs performed during the final years of slavery. Although these interviews do not contain recorded musical data, they offer critical insights into the social and functional contexts of these songs, revealing their role in fostering community, resilience, and creative expression. By centering these testimonies, this article contributes to ongoing research on enslaved cultural practices, demonstrating how music functioned as a means of survival, resistance, and cultural preservation within a system designed to silence and marginalize African American voices.


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During the Great Depression in the mid-1930s, the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) was established by the US Federal Government to create employment opportunities. This initiative, launched under the Roosevelt administration, generated a diverse range of publications including children's books, travel guides, and city guides. The primary objective of these works was to provide a comprehensive depiction of US American life and society (Hirsch 2004). Among these publishing projects was the collection *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project* (SNP). Between 1936 and 1938, this project collected over 2,300 first-hand accounts of slavery and 500 black-and-white photographs of former enslaved individuals across seventeen states.[1]

Comprising thousands of testimonies and life stories, this collection sought to amplify the voices of people who had been historically silenced and marginalized through

[1] Federal Writers' Project, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938*.

their experiences of enslavement. By employing oral history methodologies and conducting individual interviews, the project aimed to preserve the knowledge of historical events as recounted by those who lived through them (Baum 1977). In fact, scholars widely agree that one of the most significant contributions of oral history lies in its capacity to document the experiences and perspectives of subaltern groups, often excluded from traditional historical narratives (Portelli 1981; Fraser 1993; Thompson 2003).

In the context of the interviews conducted for the Slave Narrative Project (SNP), it is essential to critically examine the power dynamics and inherent limitations of their production. Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2015) argues that power shapes historical narratives, often silencing certain voices due to structural inequalities in the creation of sources and archives. Building on this, Linda Shopes (2002) emphasizes that understanding what is said and unsaid in interviews requires an analysis of their provenance: Who conducted them? When? For what purpose? Under what circumstances? Situating the interviews within their intellectual and social contexts is crucial for interpreting their content and omissions (590).

Shopes also highlights that answers to these questions often lie in the administrative records of the project, such as the schedule of questions used, biographical data about the interviewers and interviewees, and the researchers' field notes (590–91). Applying this framework to the SNP reveals that the interviews were shaped not only by the biases and limitations of the interviewers but also by the material and social conditions of the interviewees, many of whom lived in extreme poverty or remained economically dependent on the descendants of their former enslavers. This underscores the importance of adopting a critical perspective that considers how these factors may have influenced the narratives, memories, and representations of lived experiences.

To address this, the present study applies oral history methodologies to analyze and better understand these sources. The study highlights the deficiencies of these interviews and proposes solutions to address them. Furthermore, it reflects on the dimensions of memory and subjectivity. Finally, the methodology is applied to analyze references to work songs, arguing that these narratives offer valuable insights into the contexts in which such songs were recorded and the potential functions they served within the enslaved community.

By focusing on these narratives, this article contributes to the growing body of research on enslaved cultural practices, offering a deeper understanding of how music served as a means of survival, resistance, and cultural preservation within a system designed to silence and marginalize African American voices.

## 1. Limitations of the Slave Narrative Collection

One of the main challenges when analyzing these interviews lies in the fact that they were conducted by individuals other than the present researcher who now uses them as

historical sources. However, as Alistair Thompson (2003) reminds us, oral evidence—once recorded—can still be employed by later scholars in much the same way as other documentary sources:

> oral evidence once recorded can be used by lone scholars in libraries just like any other type of documentary source. But to be content with this is to lose a key advantage of the method: its flexibility, the ability to pin down evidence just where it is needed. (26)

The transcription of oral material into written form inevitably involves interpreting the source (Shopes 2002, 592–93). More importantly, it hinders the analysis of crucial aspects such as tone, volume, speech speed, intonation, and rhythm—elements that carry implicit meanings and social connotations that "are not reproducible in writing" (Portelli 1981, 98). These auditory and non-verbal signals reflect the emotions of those recounting the events and offer insights into how they were affected.

Another significant issue is the lack of active intervention between the researcher and the informant. The context and the potential social, power, and psychological dynamics arising during the interviews must therefore be considered. To address these challenges, many publications provide guidelines for conducting effective oral history interviews: creating flexible scripts, fostering relaxed and pleasant conversations, promoting discussions between equals, and offering remuneration or restitution to participants (Grele 2003). These recommendations aim to ensure that both the researcher's and the interlocutor's objectives are met effectively.

Unfortunately, these considerations were largely disregarded during the interviews with formerly enslaved individuals. The Library of Congress highlights some of the project's limitations, including the insufficient preparation and training of many writers involved.[2] This lack of preparation becomes evident when examining the documents. While some interviewers were meticulous—recording names, ages, places of birth, and current residences—others failed to document even the location of the interview.

Some interviewers provided additional explanatory comments about the physical or material conditions of the participants. These details offer valuable context for understanding the statements made by the formerly enslaved regarding their current or past circumstances. For instance, in the interview with 96-year-old Adaline Johnson, Irene Robertson noted:

> This is another one of those terrible cases. This old woman is on starvation. She had a cow and can't get another one. The son is blind but feels about and did milk. The bedbugs are nearly eating her up. They scald but can't get rid of them. They have a fairly good house to live in. But the old woman is on starvation and away back eight miles from Biscoe. (SNP, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part. 2, 1941, 58)

[2] The Limitations of the Slave Narrative Collection, last accessed October 17, 2025.

The economic factor contributed to shape these narratives, as many formerly enslaved individuals reported being isolated and lacking adequate state support, or that the assistance provided was insufficient for a dignified life. The dynamic between the informant and the interviewer, often a state official, also played a role in eliciting their responses.

Additionally, the broader context of Southern racial relations heavily influenced these interviews. Segregation, racial hierarchies, and institutional racism dictated interactions between the predominately White interviewers and African American informants. As the Library of Congress notes, these conditions fostered biases and reinforced racial stereotypes, distorting the authentic experiences of the interviewees.[3]

An example of these mechanisms can be seen in Edward Harper's interview with Esther King Casey, in which Harper expresses surprise at her good manners and articulate speech, contrasting with the stereotyped "Negro dialect." Harper's overt surprise reflects the prejudiced attitudes held by some interviewers during the project, as it reveals implicit biases regarding the expected behavior and speech of formerly enslaved individuals. Furthermore, the explanation he provides reinforces racist and paternalistic behaviors, stating: "She is an example of the former slave who was educated along with the white children in the family" (SNP, Vol.1, Alabama, 1941: 55).

Similarly, another interviewer, Thomas Elmore Lucy, demonstrates a sense of superiority over the people he interviews, often emphasizing when he observes that they live in good conditions or display good manners: "Mrs. Jackson and her son live in a lovely cottage, and her taste in dress and general deportment are a credit to the race" (SNP, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 4, 1941: 21). Such statements not only reflect a patronizing perspective but also perpetuate essentialist and stereotypical constructions of ethnoracial identity.

Likewise, Lucy adopts a stereotypical and essentialist perspective when describing the interviewees. For instance, he writes: "Has the sense of humor that seems to be a characteristic of most of the old-time Negroes, but aside from a whimsical chuckle shows little of the interest that is usually associated with the old generation of Negroes" (SNP, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 5, 1941: 95–96). This comment is not only rooted in racial stereotypes but also reflects an ageist perspective. It portrays the "old" generation through reductive assumptions, associating older individuals with specific traits such as humor or curiosity. Moreover, the statement implicitly critiques intelligence or engagement,

[3] Appendix II. Race of Interviewers. Of a total of 29 people, 22 were White (75.86%) and 7 Black (24.14%). However, this is not the total number of interviewers. It is important to note that while the interviews conducted in states such as Ohio—where slavery was not institutionalized—and did not occur within the framework of Southern racial relations, they were nonetheless shaped by broader patterns of structural racism present across the United States. This structural racism, although expressed differently in Northern states, continued to influence the perceptions, biases, and approaches of the interviewers. This distinction underscores the need for a nuanced analysis that accounts for both regional variations and the pervasive influence of systemic racism in shaping the context of these interviews. See also Escott, 1979.

suggesting a generalized lack of curiosity or involvement and perpetuating a simplistic and essentialist view of both age and race.

Rather than viewing these limitations as merely problematic, these texts deserve deeper examination for the insights they offer into how formerly enslaved individuals interpreted and remembered their experiences, as well as how interviewers perceived African Americans. Hirsch (2004) for example examined the ways in which federal officials and local writers often clashed with informants' perspectives, attempting to "correct" their statements to align with their own biases. Similarly, Stewart (2016) utilized Federal Project interviews to explore the racial politics of the 1930s, revealing the tensions and struggles inherent in representing African American identity.

These methodological challenges, when coupled with an understanding of the limitations of these sources, open new avenues for analysis by contextualizing the conditions under which these oral accounts were produced and the broader implications that shaped their narratives. They also underscore the need to engage critically with issues of memory, subjectivity, and the potential for errors in the information conveyed. Addressing these factors is essential for a nuanced examination of the Slave Narrative Project and its documentation.

### 2. Memory, Error and Subjectivity

As these interviews were conducted between 1936 and 1938, most of the interviewees experienced slavery during their childhood or adolescence. Since slavery in the United States was formally abolished in 1865 with the ratification of the 13th Amendment, the individuals interviewed for the *Slave Narrative Project* would have been born into slavery during its final decades. Despite their age at the time of enslavement, many examples from related oral history and recounting of life stories demonstrate how precise information or anecdotes can be retained over time, spanning generations, thanks to the reinforcement and repetition of the same story within a community or family (Perks and Thompson, 2003; Araujo, Candido and Lovejoy, 2011).

In the case of the *Slave Narrative Project*, Jeff Davis, who was 78 years old at the time of the interview, asserted his ability to speak about the times of slavery: "I was borned just three years before de darkies was sot free. An' course I can't riccolect nothin' 'bout de slavery days myself but my mammy, she used to tell us chillun 'bout dem times" (SNP, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part. 2, 1941: 117). This statement is not entirely straightforward, as memory is a complex phenomenon prone to inconsistencies and changes over time. Maurice Halbwachs (1992) argued that memory, when reproducing the past, operates under the influence of the present and societal pressures (182–4). Consequently, one critique regarding the reliability of these sources arises from concerns related to subjectivity and memory lapses.

However, researchers in the field of oral history adopt a different perspective. Portelli (1981) introduces the concept of a "different credibility," emphasizing that subjectivity, errors, and silences can be viewed as analytical resources rather than limitations. As he explains: "They tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, what they now think they did" (99–100). Thus, the researcher must develop the ability to observe, listen to, and interpret these elements critically and thoughtfully.

Along these lines, actions considered normal in the past can be viewed as unacceptable in the present, potentially leading to their exclusion from the narrative. In the SNP, Uncle Shang Harris, a 97-year-old resident of Toccoa, was asked if he remembered songs from the days of slavery. He initially answered affirmatively and began to sing a work song: "The old darkey began to pat his foot and clap his hands while he sang, 'Pickin' out de cotton an' de bolls all rotten', repeating the same line over and over to a sing-song melody as impossible of transcription as a bird-call." What was remarkable was the moment in which, as the interviewer noted, he stopped smiling and singing. He then stated, gravely: "But since de Lawd saved me from a life o' sin, I don't think about dem things. I don't 'member 'en much now. I been saved forty odd years." Wanting to know why he stopped, the interviewer asked if it was a sinful song, to which Uncle Shang Harris replied: "Dat's de devil's song, dat is. A – dancin' an' a stompin' dat-a-way" (SNP Georgia, Vol.4, Part.2, 1941, 119–20).

This stance must be interpreted within the frame of a deeper reflection. Moral and religious codes acquired later in life reshaped his understanding of the songs he once sang, as well as the body movements and rhythms that accompanied them. His later awareness of sin—shaped by religious influence—led him to self-censor. When he claims to have forgotten his old songs, it becomes evident that this is not the case; rather, there is an intention to present it as such to his interviewer. The interviewee's account should therefore not be judged solely by its factual accuracy; rather, apparent errors, memory lapses, exaggerations, or inventions can provide valuable insights into the meanings he attributes to his life experience and the context in which it unfolded.

It should also be noted that African Americans were very aware of what they chose to say and made decisions about what they wanted to transmit. For instance, Samuel S. Taylor was interviewing William L. Dunwoody, a former enslaved man born in Charleston. Despite being around 98 years old, he was lucid, and at the end of the first day of the interview he asked his interviewer to read everything that had written down in his notebook. After that moment,

> The old man got a kick out of the dictation. After the first day, he became very cautious. He would say, 'Now don't write this', and he wouldn't let me take it down the way he said it. Instead, he would make a long statement and then we would work out the gist of it together. (SNP, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part. 2, 1941: 232–33)

With all that has been said so far, a useful way to shed light on the interpretive complexity that these interviews present is the implementation of the ethno-sociological methodology developed by Daniel Bertaux (2000; 2005), who advocates for an analytical approach to working with life stories. First, the researcher must observe patterns that are repeated in the interviews, indicating many recurrences about the same phenomenon. This establishes a norm, what the author calls "the saturation of the model" (33–34). However, to consolidate it, it is necessary to compare it with negative cases or examples from other life stories that can challenge this norm. If the negative cases fail to invalidate this hypothesis, then we reach the final point of saturation, at which point the fact is difficult to reject. Similarly, as Stanley Feldstein (1971) notes, when analysing the interviews, it is observed how an overwhelming proportion of people, located at very distant points from each other, describe very similar experiences and living conditions (14). This "parallel thinking" would then allow for a comprehensive investigation.

For example, a significant number of testimonies from all the states describe identical methods used to pray or sing at night without being heard by the owner or supervisor of the plantation: "When dark come, de men folks would hang up a wash pot, bottom up'ards, in de little brush church-house us had, so's it would catch de noise an' de oberseer wouldn' hear us singin' an' shoutin'" (Clara C. Young, in SNP, Vol.9, Mississippi, 1941, 172). The brutality of the institution of slavery is also frequently mentioned. For example, enslaved individuals of African descent mention punishments such as whipping, as well as the violence exerted by slave patrols, including the use of dogs. They also speak of the strict controls and difficulties they faced in obtaining passes to leave the plantation or attend church.

For this paper, reaching a saturation point in the analysis of these narratives allows for the exploration of a wealth of testimonials that illuminate various aspects of the music associated with enslaved communities. These accounts offer valuable insights not only into the social contexts where music was performed, such as parties and communal gatherings, but also into the instruments played and the methods used to construct them. One interviewee described the vibrant musical practices of the time: "We danced and had gigs. Some played de fiddle and some made whistles from canes, having different lengths for different notes, and blowed 'em like mouth organs" (C. B. Burton, in SNP, Vol.14, South Carolina, Part.1, 1941: 152). Another respondent elaborated on the ingenuity involved in creating instruments:

> I made some music instruments. We had music. Folks danced then more they do now. Most darkies blowed quills and Jew's harps. I took cane cut four or six made whistles then I tuned em together and knit em together in a row like a mouth harp you see. Another way get a big long cane cut out holes long down to the joint, hold your fingers over different holes and blow. (Hammett Dell, in SNP, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part. 2, 1941, 141)

These testimonies highlight not only the resourcefulness and creativity of the formerly enslaved individuals in constructing instruments from available materials but also the centrality of music as a cultural and communal practice. Through such detailed accounts, the narratives provide a vivid picture of how music was interwoven with everyday life and the resilience of these communities in preserving their cultural expressions.

Acknowledging the limitations of the Slave Narrative Project, these interviews represent a valid source for analyzing the dynamics at play and the oral agency of formerly enslaved individuals in providing their testimonies. However, this analysis should be complemented and cross-referenced with other sources that have explored the subject to ensure a more comprehensive understanding. A unifying principle among those who utilize oral sources is the recognition that these alone are insufficient. Scholars universally agree on the importance of conducting essential preliminary work, which involves the mandatory consultation of all other relevant primary and secondary sources within the researcher's field of inquiry (Fraser, 1993; Perks and Thompson, 2003).

## 3. The Work Songs in Slave Narratives

During the days of slavery, secular songs often received less attention than spirituals, which were deeply rooted in African American religious practices and carried significant cultural and emotional weight. Spirituals, were songs with a strong connection to religious themes, reflecting the resilience and hope of enslaved individuals.[4] The dismissal of secular songs by White society as monotonous and uninteresting has been noted in various studies, including work by Dena Epstein (2003) and Lawrence Levine (1978), who analyzed how cultural biases influenced the reception of African American music.

The first comprehensive compilation of songs from the slave era, *Slave Songs of the United States*, was published in 1867 by William Francis Allen, Lucy McKim Garrison, and Charles Pickard Ware. However, this collection provides only a limited representation of secular songs. Interestingly, the compilers themselves expressed some relief at this limitation, stating: "it is very likely that if we had found it possible to get at more of their secular music, we should have come to another conclusion as to the proportion of the barbaric element" (vii).

For this reason, during the first decades of the twentieth century, some academics believed they were encountering something quite novel: "Whereas during slavery and for a long time thereafter religious themes predominated in the songs of the Negro, there has now grown up a group of secular songs magnificent in its proportions and rich in variation" (Odum and Johnson 1925, 148). They also drew attention due to their apparent

[4] It is worth noting that the emphasis on spirituals was more characteristic of the later period of slavery, as Western religions, particularly Christianity, did not exert significant influence on the enslaved African American community until the Revolutionary Era (Raboteau, 2004).

simplicity: "The music may be reduced to a few combinations. ... There is much repetition in both words and music" (Odum 1911, 260).

Secular music consists of songs that do not contain religious elements in their lyrics. However, this does not mean that these were exclusively the songs sung in the fields, as many testimonies demonstrate the use of spirituals during working hours on the plantations:

> I 'member how de old slaves use to be workin' in de field singing: 'Am I born to die, and lay dis body down.' And dey sing, Dark was de night and cold de ground, on which my lord was laid ... Another song was 'Way over in de promised land my Lord calls me and I must go'. (Ann Ulrich Evans, in SNP, Vol.10, Missouri, 1941, 118–19)

African Americans enslaved sang during work, imbuing it with valuable social implications. One of the earliest testimonies regarding these songs was provided by the archaeologist Charles Peabody (1903). In May and June of 1901 and 1902, Peabody conducted a series of excavations in Coahoma County, located north of the State of Mississippi, for the Anthropological Museum of Harvard University. His aim was to excavate and study the burial mounds constructed by the Choctaw, the indigenous people who inhabited these lands before the arrival of Europeans. To carry out this research, Peabody enlisted the workforce of 15 African American day laborers. Over time, one aspect captured his attention: the songs they sang while performing their arduous tasks. The first time he heard these work chants was while they were digging a trench:

> Of course this singing assisted the physical labor in the same way as that of sailors tugging ropes or of soldiers invited to march by drum and band ... a singer of good voice and endurance is sometimes hired for the very purpose of arousing and keeping up the energy of labor. (148)

Peabody made a significant effort to describe and understand a new form of music that was very different from the songs he was accustomed to hearing. He described them as "simple melodies," emphasizing their improvisational nature and the variations of a few chords that could be extended for hours: "They have, however, the primitive characteristic of patience under repetition, and both in the trench and out of it kept up hours-long ululation of little variety" (151). Out of all the people who performed that "kind of autochthonous music" (151), he singled out a sharecropper named Haman. Charles Peabody was impressed by the songs he sang, noting that they blended "into strains of apparently genuine African music, sometimes with words, sometimes without. Long phrases there were without apparent measured rhythm, singularly hard to copy in notes" (151). Concludes his article by stating: "I have no heard that kind again not of it" (152). But he does show certainty regarding the function they would fulfill, since he affirms that through his songs, the African Americans of the place were capable of "to throw off their sorrows in song" (152).

This narrative from the early twentieth century illustrates the continuity, albeit modified by the passage of time and the new context after emancipation, of a cultural practice that developed daily during slavery. If we trace its origins further back, this practice leads us to Africa itself, as scholars such as Epstein (2003) and Portia Maultsby (2005) have argued. Work songs persisted on US American soil, retaining some of their original functions such as coordinating group rhythm and measuring the intensity and effort of labour (Lomax 1960).

However, these songs also acquired new meanings, serving as a form of resistance against the weight and oppression of slavery. Scholars such as Levine (1978) have noted that these songs became a way to assert agency and foster a sense of community among enslaved individuals. Evidently, this syncretism expressed through song and music continued to be cultivated outside of working hours, providing a means of enjoyment and entertainment (Stewart 2016). As Douglas Dorsey, a former enslaved individual, recounted during an interview for the Slave Narrative Project:

> When the slaves left the fields, they returned to their cabins and after preparing and eating of their evening meal the gathered around a cabin to sing and moan songs seasoned with African melody. Then to the tune of an old fiddle they danced. (Douglas Dorsey in SNP, Vol.3, Florida, 1941, 97)

African Americans enslaved used songs to distract themselves from the physical burden, seeking improvisations and creating group songs that brought laughter. James Green remembered one of these old songs that helped them overcome boredom:

> Old masters eats beef and sucks on de bon
> and give us de gristle
> To make, to make, to make,
> To make the nigger whistle
> (SNP, Vol.16, Texas, Part.2, 1941, 89)

They also used songs satirically or realistically to criticize their working conditions, helping to ease the tensions caused by endless days on the plantations:

> Don't mind working from Sun to Sun,
> Iffen you give me my dinner
> When the dinner time comes!
> (Andrew Simms, in SNP, Vol.16, Oklahoma, 1941, 296)

> Old cotton, old corn, see you every morn,
> Old cotton, old corn, see you since I's born
> Old cotton, old corn, hoe you till dawn
> Old cotton, old corn, what for you born?
> (Pauline Grice, in SNP, Vol.16, Texas, Part.2, 1941, 99)

Enslaved people used this type of song to voice criticisms with a freedom denied to them in any other form of expression. These complaints, although they never reached any

court, could serve to channel their frustrations. John Patterson recalls one of his old plough songs:

> 'I wonder where my darling is
> 'Nigger makes de cotton and de
> White man gets the Money
> (SNP, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part. 5, 1941, 285).

The work songs couldn't change the external conditions in which the work was carried out in the field, but they did help people cope better. Odum (1936, 3), during a scorching July, heard a gang of African American workers express a vision of the future likely inherited from the days of slavery:

> Oh, next Winter gonna be so cold,
> Oh, next Winter gonna be so cold,
> Fire can't warm you, be so cold.

In a similar vein, spirituals also conveyed messages of endurance and hope. Anderson Edwards, for instance, sang a song that combined the suffering produced by present pain with the hope and consolation that looking towards the future entailed. He began by affirming, "We prayed a lot to be free and the Lord done heered us," before continuing with the following verses:

> My knee bones am aching,
> My body's rackin' with pain,
> I 'lieve I'm a chile of God,
> And this ain't my home,
> 'Cause Heaven's my aim.
> (SNP, Vol.16, Texas, Part.2, 1941, 7).

Levine (1978) asserts that in numerous spirituals, the enslaved people projected an image of strength, identifying themselves as the chosen people of God. This is also endorsed in the analyzed narratives: "Dis here race is mo' lac' de chillum of Israel, 'cept dey didn't have to shoot no gun to set dem free" (Angie Garret, in SNP, Vol.1, Alabama, 1941, 55), or "In de event de day's wuk was done de slaves would be foun' lock in dere cabins prayin' for de Lawd to free dem lack he did de chillum of Is'ael" (Mingo White, in SNP, Vol.1, Alabama, 1941, 416). For some enslaved African Americans, this strength of faith in God was the reason that explained how emancipation was achieved: "Everybody ought to pray, 'cause prayer got us out of slavery" (Betty Foreman, in SNP, Vol.16, Oklahoma, 1941, 32). Also, George Strickland was clear when he spoke of politics: "Hit was de plans of God to free us niggers an' not Abraham Lincoln's" (SNP, Vol.1, Alabama, 1941, 362).[5]

[5] For more information about the uses, functions and meanings of spirituals we recommend reading Levine (1978) and Raboteau (2004).

William Edward Burghard Du Bois (2007), in his acclaimed work *The Souls of Black Folk*, declares that spirituals were "the articulate message of the slave to the world" (169). For this author, the "Sorrow Songs" were the central symbol of their values, which served as a guide to maintain their moral rectitude, integrity and autonomy. Furthermore, even though most of the spirituals contained sad messages, they always contain:

> a hope –– a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond. But whichever it is, the meaning is always clear: that sometime, somewhere, men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins. (175)

We see that through the work songs—whether secular or religious—the enslaved people sought shared consolation in the face of a harsh reality, expressing their unity and strength communally. We must consider the emotional relief that music and singing can provide, especially when done collectively. Moreover, music was a means by which African Americans expressed and reaffirmed their culture, resisting the domination of White Anglo dominant culture (Buchanan 2004, 132–33).

During their long work hours, improvisation played a fundamental role, with the words being adapted to their environment and state of mind. Levine (1978) maintains that secular slave music, within which work songs form a part: "encouraged and rewarded verbal improvisation, maintained the participatory nature of their expressive culture, and utilized the spoken arts to voice criticism as well as to uphold traditional values and group cohesion" (6). This idea is reinforced by the testimonies of enslaved people who participated in the SNP. John Goodson recalls how they created and improvised their songs while working in the fields:

> They make 'em up out in the fields. Some folks good at making up songs. One I use to hear a whole heap was 'It goiner be a hot time in the old time tonite'. Anothe one 'If you like me liker I liker you. We both liker the same'. I don't remember no more them songs. I used to hear 'em a whole lots. Yes out in the fields. (*SNP, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part.3*, 1941, 57)

At the same time, part of the supervisors forced their workers to sing to control both their movements and the speed at which they carried out the task. This is exemplified by Frederick Douglass (1855), who explained:

> Slaves are generally expected to sing as well as to work. A silent slave is not liked by masters or overseers. "Make a noise" "make a noise" and "bear a hand" are the words usually addressed to the slaves when there is silence amongst them. ... It was one means of letting the overseer know where they were, and that they were moving on with the work. (97)

This idea is also supported by the testimonies of enslaved individuals: "Mother said she [Pol, owner] made Joe work in the field at night, and made him sing so they would know he wasn't asleep" (Eliza Williamson, in SNP Georgia, Vol.4, Part.4, 1941, 149). Some narratives also indicate how overseers or plantation owners tried to control what was sung

during work: “If he [Master] ever heard any of them quarrelin’ wid each other, he would holler at them and say: 'Sing! Us ain’t got no time to fuss on dis place” (Junnius Quattlebaum, in SNP, Vol.14, South Carolina, Part.3, 1941, 283). This was also recounted by Fanny Kemble (1863) during her residence on a Georgia plantation in 1838: “I have heard that many of the masters and overseers on these plantations prohibit melancholy tunes or words, and encourage nothing but cheerful music and senseless words, deprecating the effect of sadder strains upon the slaves” (129).

Given the control exerted over the workers, African Americans used songs to send coded messages to each other, thus avoiding possible punishments for engaging in activities that were not allowed. Wash Wilson left us an example of one of these hidden messages used by the enslaved in his community: “When de niggers go round singin’ ‘Steal Away to Jesus,’ ‘dat mean dere gwine be a ‘ligious meetin’ dat night. Dat de sig’fication of a meetin’. De masters ‘fore and after freedom didn’t like dem ‘ligious meetin’s” (SNP, Vol.16, Texas, Part.4, 1941: 198). Also, Levine (1978) collects the testimony of a former enslaved person who claimed that when they suspected that one of them was providing information to the “driver,” they would sing while working in the field:

> O Judyas he wuz a ‘ceitful man
> He went an’ betray a mos’ innocen’ man.
> Fo’ thirty pieces a silver dat it wuz done
> He went in de Woods an’ ‘e self he hung. (52)

In addition to the benefits and uses outlined so far, singing often served a very well-defined function for the group, such as coordinating their efforts. For certain types of work, highlighting the action with a rhythmic pulse greatly facilitated its execution, making it necessary to create a special form of song. In these cases, the role of a leader was essential. George Merrick (1909), who worked as a pilot on steamships between 1854 and 1863, offered a vivid description of these figures—though framed within the racialized and paternalistic discourse of his time,

> Of course these darkies were picked for their musical ability, and were paid extra wages for singing. The leader, Sam Marshall, received more than the others, because he was an artist. This term does not do him justice. In addition to a voice of rare sweetness and power, Sam was a born *improvisatore.* (158)

This type of leadership was not an isolated case. It is also highlighted in numerous testimonies from all the federal states that participated in the project. They clearly define how the leader was generally chosen from among the group of enslaved individuals and the functions that he fulfilled within it, managing and coordinating the workforce through the rhythm and speed of the song. As Lina Hunter recalls when they were removing the husks from the corn, “De fust thing dey done was 'lect a general to lead off de sing’in' and keep it goin' so de faster dey sung, de faster dey shucked de corn” (SNP Georgia, Vol.4, Part.2, 1941, 266–7). Also, Mary Colbert recounts the influence of the leader as passed

down through the memory bequeathed by her mother, “they selected a general, whose job was to get up on top of the corn pile and holler at the top of his voice, leading the cornshucking song, while the others all shucked the corn and sang. After the corn was all shucked there were always fine eats” (SNP Georgia, Vol.4, Part.1, 1941, 221).

Sometimes, the testimonies indicate that two groups were divided, each directed by a different leader, thus generating a competition to see which group could complete the work more quickly, “We had corn shuckings. I herd 'em talkin’ of cuttin de corn pile right square in two. One wud git on one side, another on the other side and see which out beat. They had brandy at the corn shuckin' and I herd Sam talkin’ about gittin’ drunk” (Louisa Adamns, in SNP North Carolina, Vol.11, Part.1, 1941, 5).

In addition to aiding in the coordination of movements and efforts, work songs also adapted to different phases of the task at hand. As Claiborne Moss recalls, enslaved laborers had specific songs for different moments of their work, including those sung when nearing completion:

> They would sing while they were shucking. They had one song they would sing when they were getting close to the finish. Part of it went like this:
> ‘Red shirt, red shirt
> Nigger got a red shirt,’
> (SNP, Vol. 2, Arkansas, Part 5, 1941: 95–96)

This suggests that beyond setting the rhythm and pace of labor, singing also functioned as a marker of progress, reinforcing a collective sense of timing and accomplishment. The shift in song near the conclusion of the task indicates an awareness of work stages, possibly serving as motivation to complete the job efficiently. This adaptability of musical expression, shaped by the demands of physical labor, underscores the dynamic interplay between sound, movement, and labor rhythms. The use of different songs at various points in the work process highlights the integral role of music not only in structuring the pace of labor but also in fostering group cohesion and morale.

In this setting, John Blassingame (1979) describes events such as corn shucking as a blend of work and leisure, characterized by camaraderie and communal sharing of food and alcohol. These gatherings provided a social space that blurred the boundaries between labour and recreation, fostering a sense of community among enslaved individuals. According to Blassingame (1979), corn shucking likely inspired more secular songs than any other type of labour, as the rhythmic and repetitive nature of the work lent itself to musical expression (117). This intersection of music, work, and social interaction highlights the cultural significance of such practices, where music served not only practical purposes but also as a means of resistance, celebration, and connection.

The leader was not chosen at random; he needed to have a thorough understanding of the work to effectively coordinate his group, selecting the appropriate song and rhythm for each moment. Gioia (2006) emphasizes this aspect by exploring how the role of the

leader in work songs was not only musical but also functional, serving to synchronize group efforts and enhance productivity through rhythmic coordination (44–45).

Different crops required specific techniques, levels of effort, and work processes for cultivation and harvesting, supported by tools such as axes or hoes. Moreover, African Americans participated in various economic activities, including loading and unloading goods from steamboats or transporting them to the port. The music likely adapted to the particular movements and rhythms associated with these diverse types of labour, as suggested by the narratives in the SNP. This adaptability underscores the interplay between music and labour, where songs were both practical tools and cultural expressions:

> Close by de big old spring whar de wash-place was. Dey had long benches for de washtubs to set on, a big old oversize washpot, and you mustn't leave out 'bout dat big old battlin' block whar dey beat de dirt out of de clothes. Dem Niggers would sing, and deir battlin' sticks kept time to de music. You could hear de singin' and de sound of de battlin' sticks from a mighty long ways off. (Paul Smith, in SNP Georgia, Vol.4, Part.3, 1941: 325)

On the other hand, the main form of interaction between the workers and the song leader was established through the "call and response" pattern. John Work (1998) defined it as follows: "Its feature is a melodic fragment sung repeatedly by the chorus as an answer to the challenging lines of the leader, which usually change" (4). This musical structure, widely recognized as a hallmark of African musical traditions, has been explored by scholars such as Floyd (1995) and Maultsby (2005), who highlight its deep roots in African performance practices.

Through this system, the solo leader sent messages or challenged his work group, who would then respond chorally with a specific song or rhythmic oral declamations. This interaction not only facilitated coordination and unity among workers but also reinforced cultural connections and communal identity:

> Field calls grew up alongside work songs ... The call was a variation of *la hoo hoo*. ... a gentle, whooping sound, thar nevertheless carried far. The response came back; *yehee, lahee*. During slavery they were used for communication between squads in neighboring fields. (54)

Olmsted (1861), commissioned by the New York Daily Times, conducted extensive research in the Southern states from 1852 to 1857, publishing books on his journey and experiences. He left his own testimony on this fact:

> I was awakened by loud laughter, and, looking out, saw that the gang of negroes had made a fire, and were enjoying a right merry repast. Suddenly, one raised such a sound as I never heard before; a long, loud, musical shout, rising and falling, and breaking into falsetto, his voice ringing through the woods in the clear, frosty night air, like a bugle-call. As he finished, the melody was caught up by another, and then another, and then by several in chorus. ... After a few minutes I could hear one urging the rest to come to work again, and soon he stepped towards the cotton bales, saying, "Come, brederen, come; let's go at it; come now, eoho ! roll away ! eeoho-eeoho-weeioho-i !" and the rest taking it up as before, in a few

> moments they all had their shoulders to a bale of cotton, and were rolling it up the embankment (214)

The former enslaved also reflected these characteristics in a good number of interviews. As Oliver Bell said, "us had ol' hollers, but I fergits um now. I does remember, though you could hear dem niggers holler a whole mile" (SNP, Vol.1, Alabama, 1941, 28). Gus Feaster, however, did remember well what his teammates' field calls were like, "in slavery some holler when dey be in de field like owls; some like crows; and some like pea-fowls" (SNP, Vol.14, South Carolina, Part.2, 1941, 52). Again, excelling in calls seems to have been a source of pride: "Den I was one of de grandest hollerers you ever hear tell bout. Use to be just de same as a parrot. Here how one go: O- OU-OO-O -OU, DO-MI-NICI-O, BLACK- GALE-LO, O-OU-OU-O- OU, WHO-O- OU- OU. Great King, dat ain' nothin" (Hector Godbold, in SNP, Vol.14, South Carolina, Part.2, 1941, 146).

## 4. Conclusion

This article argues that Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project serves as an essential source for understanding the context in which music developed during slavery. While these narratives, as demonstrated, contain a series of shortcomings, the methodology advanced by oral history researchers allows for the extraction of valuable conclusions from these testimonies. Furthermore, elements such as power dynamics, subjectivity, and errors are not exclusive to oral accounts but are also present in written sources. Historical knowledge is ultimately shaped by the production and interpretation of the researcher, emphasizing the need for a critical engagement with all forms of evidence.

By applying oral history methodologies, these sources can be analyzed in a way that considers the subjectivity of the interviewees, as well as the interference and ideological biases of the interviewers. Furthermore, the transmission of memory through these narratives reveals how formerly enslaved individuals thought about and reconstructed their experiences within the slave system, offering significant insights into how they navigated and interpreted their world.

This article provides reflections on how to approach these sources analytically, using work songs as an example. Throughout the period of slavery, White societies in the United States marginalized and segregated the African American population, deeming them inferior. In the South, the slave states depended on enslaved individuals as the foundation of their economic model. Yet, the hands and voices that drove the land and economy were not devoid of agency or expression, despite continuous efforts to silence them and exclude them from spheres of social influence.

Work songs held numerous meanings and functions within the enslaved community. They served as a means of escape and distraction in an oppressive world that

imposed relentless labour. Music played a critical role in expressing the diverse emotions experienced by the enslaved: suffering, exhaustion, anger, and pain, alongside moments of joy, camaraderie, and hope. These songs carried messages of love and faith, offering a way to cope with the harsh realities of their lives.

In addition to their expressive function, work songs were integral to the rhythm and effort of labour. They were a communal response, fostering unity and providing encouragement among workers while signaling to overseers that tasks were being carried out diligently. Despite this communal function, field calls also allowed individuals to leave their personal mark, asserting their identities within the group. The song leader, a figure respected by both the owners and fellow workers, bore significant responsibility in coordinating rhythms and maintaining morale.

Moreover, these songs often conveyed messages of protest and discontent with the conditions imposed by the enslavers. This demonstrates that the institution of slavery—a system designed to subjugate enslaved individuals physically, mentally, and spiritually—was unable to destroy their sense of community. Through sound, rhythm, and collective voice, enslaved people transformed labor into an act of memory and resistance, ensuring that even within a world built to silence them, their songs continued to speak.

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