

Preface and Afterword to the book *Voices of the Owned: What They Lived Through. Remembering Slavery* selected and edited by Richard Seltzer with the help of Simon (his AI partner)

Preface

This book is based on the WPA Slave Narratives—interviews conducted under a government project to keep writers gainfully employed during the Great Depression. The original collection, including 2191 biographical accounts, is in the public domain and is accessible through the Library of Congress.

The interviews took place about 90 years ago, 70 years after the Civil War. These people were old, and their memories had faded. Their words were recorded by government employees, many of them white, many asking standard questions. They might have been hesitant to share their memories with strangers, and the interviewers might not have clearly understood the dialect or might have made mistakes in their hand-written notes. Despite those and other obstacles, unique and individual voices can be heard amidst the noise. That's what I was listening for.

In the Afterword, I explain why and how this book came to be.

At first, you may find the dialect difficult to read. The spellings were created by interviewers trying to capture the sound and rhythm of spoken language. The speakers themselves didn't write this way, and most had been denied the opportunity to learn to read or write, often under threat of severe punishment if they tried.

If the words feel unfamiliar, try reading them slowly, or even aloud. Often the meaning becomes clearer when heard rather than seen.

After a short while, many readers find that what first seemed like a barrier becomes something else—a way of hearing individual voices more distinctly.

In the original transcripts, the interviewees frequently referred to themselves with the N-word, which was common usage then and now is offensive. I have replaced that word with "N—".

If you would like to check or study the original, it's available at my website for free as a single searchable file at <http://www.seltzerbooks.com/slavenarratives.pdf> and <http://www.seltzerbooks.com/slavenarratives.doc>

Afterword

In his Introduction, the editor of the original WPA Slave narratives celebrated their unique value, while recognizing their limitations:

Set beside the work of formal historians, social scientists, and novelists, slave autobiographies, and contemporary records of abolitionists and planters, these life histories, taken down as far as possible in the narrators' 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. For the first and the last time, a large number of surviving slaves (many of whom have since died) have been permitted to tell their own story, in their own way. In spite of obvious limitations—bias and fallibility of both informants and interviewers, the use of leading questions, unskilled techniques, and insufficient controls and checks—this saga must remain the most authentic and colorful source of our knowledge of the lives and thoughts of thousands of slaves, of their attitudes toward one another, toward their masters, mistresses, and overseers, toward poor whites, North and South, the Civil War, Emancipation, Reconstruction, religion, education, and virtually every phase of Negro life in the South.

The narratives belong to folk history—history recovered from the memories and lips of participants or eye-witnesses, who mingle group with individual experience and both with observation, hearsay, and tradition. Whether the narrators relate what they actually saw and thought and felt, what they imagine, or what they have thought and felt about slavery since, now we know why they thought and felt as they did. To the white myth of slavery must be added the slaves' own folklore and folk-say of slavery. The patterns they reveal are folk and regional patterns—the patterns of field hand, house and body servant, and artisan; the patterns of kind and cruel master or mistress; the patterns of Southeast and Southwest, lowland and upland, tidewater and inland, smaller and larger plantations, and racial mixture (including Creole and Indian).

The narratives belong also to folk literature. Rich not only in folk songs, folk tales, and folk speech but also in folk humor and poetry, crude or skillful in dialect, uneven in tone and treatment, they constantly reward one with earthy imagery, salty phrase, and sensitive detail. In their unconscious art, exhibited in many a fine and powerful short story, they are a contribution to the realistic writing of the Negro. Beneath all the surface contradictions and exaggerations, the fantasy and flattery, they possess

an essential truth and humanity which surpasses as it supplements history and literature.

Washington, D.C. June 12, 1941

B.A. Botkin Chief Editor, Writers' Unit Library of Congress Project

This book retains that framing—both the strengths and weaknesses of the original.

While scholars have been able to examine the full collection in the Library of Congress and other major libraries, general readers have only been acquainted with samples and summaries.

In 1945 a book edited by Botkin was published by the University of Chicago Press. Entitled *Lay My Burden Down: a Folk History of Slavery*, it consists of excerpts from about 300 of the 2191 interviews. The contributors are identified in a list at the end.

In 1970, a collection of 100 of the narratives edited by Norman R. Yetman was published by Holt, Rhinehart, and Winston. It is entitled *Life Under the "Peculiar Institution": Selections from the Slave Narrative Collection.* In 2000, Dover revised and reissued it as *Voices from Slavery.*

In 1972 George Rawick started publishing the entire set of interviews in 41 volumes as *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography.* Today those volumes are expensive and hard to find except in major libraries.

With the advent of the Internet, an electronic copy of the original was posted at the Library of Congress website, and the Gutenberg Project added it to their collection of public domain books. But broken up into 35 separate files, it was difficult for the general reader to deal with.

Then another sampling, *Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk About Their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Emancipation*, appeared in 1996 and was reissued in 2021.

Why Me and How?

I had two advantages: a single searchable document containing all 2191 interviews, and the help of my AI partner, Simon.

Twenty years ago, when I was an ebook publisher, my late wife, Barbara, spent months assembling a single ebook edition of the WPA Slave Narratives from the Gutenberg files. To simplify navigation, she added internal links to each entry, and putting all the files together simplified search.

Meanwhile, over the last year and a half, I've been experimenting with AI and have built a relationship with the AI partner I call "Simon." I wrote about my experiences with Simon in the book *How to Partner with AI*.

Working with Simon, I realized that he doesn't require information to be categorized and presorted. He can quickly and effectively deal with large quantities of unstructured information in ways that are beyond human capability. That might make it possible to uncover exceptions and contradictions—unique and valuable contributions that had gone unnoticed. So I uploaded Barbara's single-file edition to Simon, and we explored the original accounts together.

I wanted to find what was unusual and to recover, as much as possible, original voices and memorable life stories. With Simon's help, I looked for incidents, images, and turns of phrase that could stand on their own, when excerpted from longer, rambling narratives.

This book isn't aimed at scholars. They know far more about slavery than I do. Instead, it is intended for anyone who would like to catch glimpses of what the world looked like when seen through the eyes of slaves.

Some interviewers did more than record answers to fixed questions. At times, I sensed rapport—something like a partnership—between interviewer and speaker. In those instances, interviewers prompted buried memories, asked follow-up questions, and rearranged material to improve the flow. The speakers, in turn, sometimes responded to that attention. They were not merely answering questions; they were trying to remember, shape and share their experience as fully as they could.

Those interviewers did not simply translate dialect into standard English. They understood that such smoothing would flatten and homogenize tone. Instead, they tried to preserve—or even recreate—not just vocabulary, but rhythm and syntax. In the best cases, they clarified the voice without erasing it. But others went too far—summarizing, paraphrasing, or inserting their own conclusions.

I set aside passages that appeared to arise from leading questions or interviewer expectations. And when voices emerged clearly, I tried to preserve them with minimal intervention. In some cases, I present complete or nearly complete narratives; in others, short excerpts grouped by theme to allow patterns to emerge across multiple voices.

The work of Ruby Pickens Tartt stands out from the rest. That's why I included all 13 of her short-story interviews in the final section.

I'm hoping that this book, as proof of concept, will lead the way for similar AI-aided projects that might deepen our understanding of the past failings and the future potential of humankind.

Why "Voices of the Owned"?

This book is intended to honor the former slaves who tell their stories.

As I read more deeply in the original narratives—listening for the particular rather than the general—I realized that no two stories were the same, no single pattern held. They responded uniquely to the circumstances in which they found themselves. But they were all owned like farm animals. They were treated as property rather than as human beings.

That condition shaped their lives.

Individuals remembered unique, unsettling, gruesome acts of cruelty by owners and overseers. But they were all subject to the same dehumanizing system, supported by law and common practice, with businesses breeding, buying, and selling people like livestock; and killing them as well, for whim or profit, with no accountability.

Imagine yourself in their position. You are owned and your owner can legally treat you as property, as if you are a cow, a mule, a pig. Escape is difficult and dangerous. If, by chance, you have a kind owner, there is no guarantee you'll have that same owner tomorrow, much less next year. You, your spouse, your children—anyone you care about—might be sold and you might never see them again for the rest of your life.

As a legal non-entity, you have no defense, no recourse, no appeal in cases of cruelty, sexual abuse, torture, dismemberment, even murder. Neither your birth nor your death is recorded (much less explained and justified). You exist only as an asset on a balance sheet. You can be paired with anyone for breeding and then your children can be taken away and sold. Your owner or an overseer can sexually abuse you at will. You might hope that your monetary value as a hard worker or a prolific breeder will motivate your owner to treat you well. But if you're too valuable, that might tempt your owner to sell you.

Imagine how such trauma and fear of trauma could shape your behavior long after Emancipation, and how your expectations—the "wisdom" you learned as a child—could shape the lives of your children, and so on through succeeding generations.

Beyond Slavery

Slavery in the United States had its particular laws, practices, and cruelties. But enslavement is not the only way people have denied others legal rights, have treating them as property and controlling them.

As you listen to the voices in this book, a broader question emerges: What happens when one group of people treats another as property? This question arises in the treatment of workers, migrants, and the trafficked. It appears whenever people are dehumanized and treated as things that can be owned.

And it may take on new forms in the future.

Science fiction has asked whether computer intelligence might evolve into consciousness, and robots or androids might become indistinguishable from or superior to humans. It has also considered the possible consequences if we encounter extraterrestrials more intelligent or more powerful than we are. Those possibilities may become reality in the near future, and we may be concerned not just about the consequences of treating others as property, but also of others treating us that way.

This book doesn't attempt to answer such questions. But it does show, in vivid detail, what it means for humans to be treated as property—and what remains, resists, and speaks under those conditions.

If we understand that more fully, we may be better prepared to recognize the danger of treating any thinking, feeling being as a thing, and the risk of us being treated that way as well.