The Voices of Living History: A review of accounts given by 12 former slaves and one white woman - of the antebellum plantations, the Civil War and the post-war period.

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The Voices of Living History: A review of accounts given by 12 former slaves and one white woman - of the antebellum plantations, the Civil War and the post-war period.
In this chapter we look at historical and cultural aspects of the material in the Ex-slave Recordings and supplementary sources available to the researcher that bear on the 19th century and the southern states of Alabama, Louisiana, Virginia and, above all, Texas. The Ex-slave recordings [ESR] are a corpus of gramophone recordings made of former slaves in the 1930s and 1940s, including also two tape recordings made in the 1970s.

It is important to note that well over half this Ex-Slave material has already been published in the seminal volume Emergence of Black English, [EBE] (Bailey, Maynor and Cukor-Avila, 1991). Although the EBE team took great care to provide careful transcripts, they also explained that these were to be seen as "analogs". That is, as transcripts they were a reflection or version of linguistic fact, and not the linguistic fact itself. What's more they were a Standard-leaning version as a result of overtly stated editorial policy. So, the transcripts given here of material already published in the EBE transcripts are my revised version. In nearly all cases they differ in detail from the EBE transcripts and in some instances they reveal deeper layers of vernacular bordering on creole.

A chapter of American history
The majority of the eye-witness accounts, testimonies and descriptions of everyday life relate to the period just prior to, during and just after the American Civil War. This is a chapter of American history that has now passed beyond living memory, but is compellingly recreated in these spoken testimonies.

Brother Against Brother
The recording by Mrs. Sampson (white) born in or near Cismont, Albemarle County, just a few miles east of Charlottesville Virginia, contains an impressive account of the day General Lee's army passed by. This was probably when Lee was moving his army eastward and northward in April 1864 to engage with Grant's troops on the upper Rapidan, culminating in battles in the Wilderness, at Spotsylvania and Cold Harbour.

MS: We've had to come down hyere [Cismont or Keswick, VA] an´ see General Lee's army pass by. And when we got yuh he had gone on another branch over the mount'n. And so we had just part of his army. That passed right through here by this store.

FW: [What was the army like?]  
MS: Pretty well worn out, all wounded and been in battle.

FW: [When was that?]  
MS: Must 've been the year of sixty...four, don't you reckon? Mm-mm (affirmative). And one go'n up the valley and one coming this way.

FW: [Was that General Lee?]
MS: No, he was...he went on the other side...of the mount'n.

FW: [there were no battles...?]

MS: No, none...no battles, but, good many killed in the neighbourhood. Of the flower of the country.

FW: [How was that?]

MS: I say, the different houses had sons in the army you know and were killed.

FW: [??]

MS: Ye-es. When General Lee's army was supposed to come through here, a- everybody went to work and we had a big dinner brought down to this big ole shop where it is now. To feed the hungry soldiers - and they were hungry. They'd jump over the fence and eat raw onions. Everything. And they were ragged and shot to pieces...

Lee's soldiers were "ragged and shot to pieces" because they had been fighting for years generally against superior numbers and with an endemic supply problem. They had come through years of sleeping on the ground, at the mercy of the weather, facing a continuing round of hardships punctuated by battles which eventually cost about a million lives.

There is a kind of indomitable optimism that can emerge under such hard conditions and which reflects the true spiritual dimension of mankind. This has to be said regardless of the rights and wrongs of the Confederate cause. The historians tell us that after defeating McClellan in 1862, "Lee had a firm hold on the confidence and later the affection of the Confederate troops which no defeat in the field or hardship could sever" (Higgins Burne, in Chambers Encyclopaedia - American Civil War -1970). Apparently the strength of this hold, even in defeat, was almost miraculous, and the devotion of his men after the surrender at Appottomax was touching to behold.

The warmth of the Cismont community's gesture of support for the hungry soldiers is easily appreciated. What is not at all easy is trying to visualize the logistics involved: they must have had to cater for thousands of people. Cismont received only a part of the army but the historic record tells us that at that time Lee marched some 45,000 men against Grant's forces on the Rapidan. Even if only a quarter of that number turned up, it's unlikely that the good people of Cismont had many dinners left over at the end of the day. Of course the Unionist soldiers faced all the privations of war too, except that they were sometimes - not always - better fed and as a rule they were much better equipped. Ex-slave Fountain Hughes in Charlottesville only a few miles from Cismont remembers when the "Yankees" arrived in the district. Neither he nor any of the other ex-slaves who give eye-witness accounts describe the unionist soldiers as "worn out", "ragged" or "shot to pieces". But he sees only too clearly that they suffer hardships:

FH: Sometimes they [Unionist soldiers] be passing by all night long, walking, muddy, raining. Oh, they had a terrible time. Colored people tha's free ought to be awful thankful.

EBE FH: 263-265
At the same time he recalls their scorched earth policy and the ordinary unionist soldiers' need to supplement their rations:

FH: I remember when the Yankees come along an took all the good horses an took all the, threwed all the meat an flour an sugar and stuff out in the river an let it go down the river. An they knowed the people wouldn't have nothing to live on, but they done that. And tha's the reason why I don't like to talk about it. Them people. An if you was cooking anything to eat in there for yourself, an if they was hungry they would go an eat it all up, [you] didn' get nothing. They'd just come in and drink up all your milk. Just do as they please.

EBE FH: 255-262

The second half of this quote, where the soldiers are described as coming by and taking the very food people are cooking, is reminiscent of Laura Smalley's description of hungry Comanches in Texas (unpublished AFS archive 5497A). The latter similarly pass by in droves and take the food out of people's cooking pots.

Alice Gaston (ex-slave) was born in Alabama in 1853. In a remarkably youthful voice, she begins her short testimony by describing the dramatic happenings when the Unionists arrived in the district:

AG: I can remember when the Yankees come through and they carried my father away an carried away my two sisters an one brother. An they left me. An I remember when my Missus use to run in the garden from the Yankees an tell us, if they come, don't tell them where they at. Tole, dont tell nobody where they at when they come. (...)
An uh, when they (Yankees) come an ask for them I tole them I didn know where they was, and they was in the woods. An this was at the house. An when my father lef', he carried with the, he wen' away with the Yankees, an carried two, carried two, carried two girls an one son, the oldes' one. Carried them with him. An they wid the Yankees.

EBE AG: 1-14

That must have been very traumatic: in the moment of (so-called) Freedom - she loses her father and her brothers and sisters, and has to stay with Old Mistress, and Old Master when he returns from the war. Joyner (1987: 227) estimates that up to 70 percent of experiences with Yankees were reported as negative by the former slaves.

When Johnny Comes Marching Home again

What impresses eye-witnesses again and again are the massive troop movements, especially at the end of the War. Billy McRea (ex-slave) from Jasper Texas gives one of the best eye-witness accounts of this. First, he sees cannons being hauled through town on waggons, pulled by teams of six or eight grey mules. The cannons are then floated across the nearby river Sabina on "boats" - "all day long be crossing". There are unionist soldiers riding the tow mules. He takes a careful look at their uniforms: blue clothes with "junk" at the shoulder, and their badges are black diamonds and crosses (crossed sabers,
crossed rifles?). Next on the scene are riders on black horses and sorrel horses who pass through for two whole days. After that he sees a whole troop of infantry approaching, "...all walking, all walking. That crew of Yankees would go through". Next to enter the town are a troop of cavalry, with "big guns a-hanging on there". At this point McRea dramatizes the feelings of the onlookers: We see him as a small boy watching this scene. He turns to address an adult, Aunt Harriet:

McC: I ask um I say: "Mama, Mama, whah dey...whah dey goin?"
[She] Say "Dey all going home now." An old Colonel McRea that was our master, he was lookin at her, an he say: "Well, Harriet, all of yunu [=you] niggiz uhz all free now. Yankees all going home."
EBE McC: 50-53

Reading between the lines we gather that the old Colonel is anything but hide-bound in his attitudes. This is evident even in small details like the fact he names one of his best horses "Yankee Tom". Whereas many slave owners did not even tell their slaves they were free until the 19th of June of the following year ("Juneteenth"), he turns and addresses Harriet (and the issue) directly. Like Pharaoh, the Whites will have to let the people go. They have come to the end of an era.

Harriet Smith (a different Harriet, former slave from Hempstead, Texas) tells the story of an African American girl who at the age of 10 or 12 years gets her "arm ground off" while feeding a molasses mill with sugar cane. She is attended by doctors and survives. A few years later the one-armed young woman, now free since the War has ended, is sitting on a picket fence with Harriet Smith and others. Like Uncle Billy McRea, they see an endless stream of soldiers pass before them.

HS: Our yard had white picket fence aroun' it. The road went right by our house like this road goes along by my house (now). All day long we seen them soldiers going back to San Antone and different places.
E HS:155-158

These are blue-uniformed union soldiers, returning home now that hostilities are over. The young women watch as "poor colored soldiers in droves" pass the house. Then something utterly unexpected happens:

HS: Soldiers come along, we all setting on the fence, an a-standing at the fence. Setting, an a colored soldier come along and ask [the one-armed girl] did she want to go with him. An she said yes. An she mounted one of them horses an...

FW: Right up behind him, huh?
HS: Úh-ùh, no, rode a horse to herself
FW: Is that right?
She disappears with the stranger in the direction of "San Antone" and Harriet Smith never sees her or hears of her again. The interviewer asks whether the young woman at least went to tell her mother she was going, and is informed that "she didn't have any mother." This tale of two paths diverging suddenly and one being taken, contrasts with the fate of many slaves who simply did not know where to go or what to do when they were freed. They felt they were being turned out like cattle (EBE LS: 168; FH: 119). Perhaps that was particularly true of ex-slaves from a large plantation. Harriet Smith was from a household that included only a few slaves. Within two or three years of the end of the War she and several other members of her family bought houses from a local white landowner "over across the creek". Harriet Smith explains that her own father paid for her house.

After the War

After the war Laura Smalley is employed working on the halves (that is, as a sharecropper) on a large estate owned by Mr. and Mrs. "Pearce" [name changed]. She learns to live with Pearce's violent temper. She concludes that he is "fractious", as she puts it, but yet - in her eyes - a good man. Whenever he is drunk and or angry, his wife goes with him to see that no harm is done. If he walks, she walks, if he goes in the waggon, she goes in the waggon. On one occasion he brandishes a Winchester and threatens to shoot at Laura and her children (over a trivial incident in which the Smalley dog "attacked" the Pearce dog). Pearce's wife tries to restrain him. "En just time she got the gun away from him he went right back and laid down. Never said another word" (EBE LS: 552-564).

Typically after a bout of anger he would go back to the tenant in question to make amends. If the latter was a man he would say: "Less go to town, drink it off. Less go to town boy and drink it off" (EBE LS: 599-600).

Harriet Smith is not so lucky (or depending on your viewpoint, even less lucky) in that she suffers the effect of the most ugly sort of violence: that issuing from the poor whites who felt profoundly threatened by the ending of slavery, and who knew that violence committed on Blacks was most unlikely to be punished. These are the diametric opposite of the so-called "good rich, sensible White folks", the type of Whites that McDonald's slave owners hope he will have to do with in the future (see below). Harriet Smith's first husband, Jim Smith, works as a cowboy taking herds of "beeves" up north. They own their own home, and they also work for themselves. He is noted for his oratory in the church, law courts and political meetings, and is backed by white politicians who want to get the African American vote. Blacks and Whites alike flock to the meetings where he is a speaker:

HS: When he set the night for a speech, people come from Austin, from San Marcos, from every which way, white and colored, to hear him speak.

This is too much for W.B., one of the local poor Whites. One night he waylays Smith as the latter is returning home from "the Cedar Break", and shoots him. Several White people hear the shots and find Smith, but it is too late to save him. The year is 1901.
Thirteen months later, after plotting with a "passel" of his friends, the same W.B. waits for Smith's brother as he is coming back from the cotton gin, and guns him down in like manner. A little while after that, W.B. is himself shot and killed by his own brother-in-law since, Harriet Smith explains, the brother-in-law is afraid W.B. will take his life as he took the life of "Uncle Jim" Smith. They that live by the sword shall die by the sword, she implies. Ironically, Harriet Smith had nursed this same W.B. when he was a child: "before I was ever acquainted with my husband" (EBE HS: 440-442).

Harriet Smith then enters on two unsuccessful and short-lived marriages, and finally marries a man in his nineties who had fought in the Civil War and is comfortably off thanks to an army pension.

Meanwhile, Fountain Hughes moves from Charlottesville (Virginia) to Baltimore (Maryland). This is in 1881, the year president Garfield was assassinated. There he finds employment hauling manure and studiously keeps out of debt. He watches as cable cars and electrical cars are installed in the city, but by the time haulage becomes motorised (and manure less abundant) he has reached retirement age. In the last decades of his life he enjoys the religious shows on his radio, as his spiritual life becomes very rich (EBE FH: 363-382).

Charlie Smith (1844-1978?) lived a life of action. He had been born in Africa (in Galina, a coastal settlement by the Moa River on the border between Sierra Leone and Liberia). He gives an account of his enslavement and passage across the Atlantic (none other than the notorious Middle Passage) in a slave ship. Incredibly, the other Blacks want to throw him overboard, "like Jonah", and only the intervention of a white man, Mr. J., saves him. (EBE CS: 85-88)

Sometime after his arrival in America he is bought by a cowboy called Charlie Smith who changes the young man's name from Mitchell Watkins to Charlie Smith and frees him in all but legal terms. Charlie Smith (the younger) becomes a cattle hand himself, and then, according to his account, he works for the government and teams up with Billy the Kid (!). Together they go after Guiteau, the man who shot President Garfield. (EBE CS: 213-230)

This must be in 1881 or soon after. Almost a century later, in 1974, he is interviewed by Elmer Sparks, and explains that he is still working for the government. He also recounts how he was originally lured onto the slave ship in Sierra Leone after he had disobeyed his mother's instructions.

Life on the Plantations before the ending of slavery

Particularly interesting from the historical point of view are the recollections of slavery itself, and the description of the way the plantations were run. It is important to note that the Ex-slaves whose recorded interviews form the stuff of this chapter were in most cases more than averagely well disposed to whites - otherwise they would probably not have
talked about their experiences at such length. For that reason, and because in most cases they were being interviewed by white people, they probably underreport the harsh reality.

Organization
Mothers who had unweaned children had a set time to leave their work and go and breast feed them: Laura Smalley says that this was done at 10 o'clock in the morning and 3 o'clock in the afternoon, when the women would come running like cows to their calves. Strangely, the white babies of the slave owners' family were treated in much the same way. They were only given to their mother to be fed, afterwards they were taken away by their Black nurses until the next feeding time. Even when the babies were sick the parents expected the nurses to sit up with them.

After the young field-hand children were old enough to eat, on Laura Smalley's plantation at least, they were fed along with the other children in what Smalley calls the Old Woman's slopping room. Here, an elderly but agile woman known as Aunt Tishy fed the children slop or mush that they had to eat out of a communal trough with a spoon. Older children were expected to "tend" younger children and hold them in their arms. If they fell over with them they were spanked. And if Aunt Tishy did not do her job conscientiously, she too was beaten. (EBE LS: 5-8; LS: 30-36)

The division between house slaves and field hands is a well-known one, although the sharpness of the distinction is now thought to have been exaggerated. For example Joe Mcdonald, born before the Civil War in Livingstone Alabama, was "raised up" in the house and preferred to work around the house, but was sent out to plough when the young baby he was caring for was asleep. In his duties around the house he was multifarious:

McD: I washed and ironed. Some days I'd wash a hundred pieces. Some, every morning I'd have five beds to make up, five fires to makes [mix?] an the childrens to dress and churnin to do. An after that, well then I'd have some parts of the day. But I had all that to do every day. Raised right up in the house.
EBE McD: 13-16

A woman was interviewed with McDonald. No name for her is given, but since fieldworker John Lomax addresses someone there present as "Miss Carol", (or "Miss Carry"?) we will assume that this was her name. She, too, worked both as a field hand and as a house hand.

MC: I work in the fiel´ an the house too. Both places but I like the fiel' the best.
FW: Uh huh,. Why did you like the field the best?
MC: Well just 'cause I catch more good breeze? an' more good fresh air out in the fiel´ [than] I does in the kitchen, uh, in the house. Now you know that.
EBE McD: 33-35
Draught animals There are references to the use of draught animals and beasts of burden in the Corpus. Horses and mules are of course frequently mentioned. Laura Smalley ploughed with horses "right down" in the Brazos Bottom, in the years after Surrender. At Pearce's place however, where she worked for 17 years (also in the Bottom) the tenants plough with mules (EBE LS: 594). On large plantations some overseers were mounted (if I understand Moseley correctly, EBE IM: 94; 103). Certainly, Moseley's Old Boss rode around his plantation every morning and every evening. Mr. Pearce (Laura Smalley's fractious landlord) often rode a horse or used a waggon to get around his 700 acres - in both cases this was after Surrender, but probably continuing habits begun during slavery.

Harriet Smith was an expert horsewoman (EBE HS: 245-251) and regularly rode to church in Mountain City with her White folks. The one-armed girl she mentioned was also a rider. "We all was raised to ride horses", said Harriet Smith. Mules were used to turn molasses mills, and teams of mules and work-horses are mentioned. McRea3 has much to say about horses and mules in two contexts: as a highly visible feature of the massive troop movements at the end of the War, and in connection with Old Colonel McRea's business. He mentions that he often rode the Colonel's horses, including a "big sorrel horse" named Yankee Tom.

However it is oxen, above all, that are remembered with affection. These were used as draught animals and for ploughing, and were a prominent feature of life on and off the plantations in the 19th century South. And then - unlike mules and horses - they vanished from the scene for ever. It is significant that the three ex-slaves who talk about oxen (McRea, H. Smith, and Black) all recall the individual names of the animals. Celia Black remembers Corley and Let:

CB: Yes. Oh my grandfather had some big ole oxen. He had one with big wide horns. Oh, he looked like a house [laughs] Wide horns, an, an I use to set up there in tween them horns. An he, his name was Corley. His name was Corley. His name was Corley. An th'other one was named Let. Oh. An grandpa-them drive them to church, an he dont care where he went.
EBE CB: 63-68

Celia Black tells how as a little child she went out with her grandpa and these oxen on a hot summer's day. Her grandfather let her ride on Corley's massive head:

CB: It was in the summertime, in June, and th'ole oxens got hot. They got hot. An when we knowed anything, them ole oxens done run off in, runned off in the river with us, with us, with that waggon. An there I sat in Corley's horns. Sit up in ole Corley's horns. Oh, he's wadin through the water, an I was settin up in there. I stayed in there too. I held to his horns. I held to his horns. I held to his horns. I didin fall off in the river. I held I'm tellin you. I held it too, yes I did. Oh, oh, my grandpa was jus a-whippin on um with that whip, tryin to get um out of that river.
EBE CB: 74-84
Bedding
If the slave family were "wise" enough (as Laura Smalley puts it) they kept geese and made themselves a feather bed. When she was "coming up" they would often use hay to stuff mattresses. They would select their grass and "jus teck hoe an cut it". The grass was then laid out to dry. When it became hay this was used to stuff the mattresses (the young Smalley children had these hay mattresses on their beds and thought "we was something!"). If people wanted the hay ground up, they would let the frosts weather it. (LS: unpublished Archive AFS 5498A)

Cooking and diet
There is little about food in the ESR Corpus. On Laura Smalley's plantation the cooking was done centrally in a cookhouse and the cooked food was then carried elsewhere to be eaten. (EBE LS: 98-100)
Smalley mentions mush, slop or soup for the young (and mother's milk for the babies). And in telling of the hungry Plains Indians who took the food that her mother was cooking (Unpublished Archive 5498A) she specifies that it was "a big old chicken" that her mother had got in the pot. Just as Fountain Hughes mentions that soldiers in the Civil War commandeered his family's milk. (EBE FH: 260-263)
And when Smalley's mother met the Amerindians back in Mississippi on the morning of the star shower (when she was a child, Unpublished Archive 5498A) she was carrying bread that old Missus' cook had given her. Other than that, little information on food is given.

The big dinner given to the slaves on "Juneteenth" (June 19th) is mentioned, when the slaves on the plantation were finally told they were free. (EBE LS: 440-452)
But in describing the meal Mrs. Smalley simply says that there was a little of everything you would want to eat and drink. The fact that she says so little about food in her quite detailed stories of life on her plantation suggests that the food eaten by the slaves there was neither very good nor very bad, and was available in sufficient quantity. Even the slave who is whipped for half a day, is given her dinner afterwards. Smalley mentions corn in connection with her stepfather: when he was put on starvation rations (see below) he was limited to eating ears of corn, and corn was a staple on many plantations in fact. Harriet Smith, living in a household rather than a plantation, mentions parching (toasting) corn on Sundays for a snack while her elders and White folks went to church. (EBE HS: 145-149)
Alabamian McDonald mentions churning as one of his daily chores (EBE McD: 15 ) so we know that at least some people on his plantation ate butter regularly, and that there was plenty of milk. Finally, Uncle Bob Ledbetter speaks of barrels of flour, middlings [?] of meat and kegs of molasses, but these are items given freely by his employer after slavery ended.
If we turn to the very much larger corpus of Ex-slave Narratives taken down in dictation (my source for these dictated narratives is Howell 1995) there is more information on cooking and nutrition. There seems to have been an astonishingly wide range here in terms of the amount and quality of the food available to the slaves. On some plantations rations were meagre in the extreme and slaves had to supplement these by hunting or snaring animals, picking wild greens and begging from more fortunate slaves and their masters. In other places the rations were enough to keep body and soul together, but they consisted of a small number of staples: cornbread or flour, fat bacon, molasses and little else. As Mary Reynolds said:

MR: They brought the vittles (victuals) and the water to the fields on a slide pulled by an on old mule. Plenty times they was only a half barrel of water and it stale and hot for all the niggers on the hottest days. Mostly we ate pickled pork, cornbread, peas, beans and taters. They never was as much as we needed. (Howell, 1995: 13)

Rations were often doled out once a week, as Walter Matthews explained:

WM: Every Sat'day evenin', us go to de pitcher poke. Dat what dey call it when dey issue de rations. You go to de smokehouse and dey weigh out some big, thick rounds of white pork meat and give it to you. De syrup weighed out. De meal de fire and parch it till it most black, and put water on it. Mammy make salt water bread out of a li'l flour and salt and water. (Howell, 1995: 50)

On some plantations, however, there was an abundance of food, and slaves enjoyed good meat, bacon, milk, butter, cornbread, biscuits, mustard greens, collard greens, potatoes, yams and sweet potatoes, pulses, molasses, sugar and even honey, supplemented by fish caught in their free time. (Howell, 1995: 13)

A former slave from Texas, Jeff Calhoun, had the following to say:

JC: We allus had lots to eat, but for meat, we has to go to de woods and git deer and turkey and buffalo and some bear. I have eat hoss and skunk and crow and hawk. We has a big fire to cook on. To make de corn cakes, we put one leaf down and put batter on dat an put another leaf over it and cover with hot ashes and by noon it was done. Same thing for supper. We never have biscuits except on Sunday or Christmas. (Howell 1995:13)

The mention of buffalo and bear sounds apocryphal, but may not be if the plantation was on the western frontier.

At the present time there is a strong tradition of ethnic African American cooking from the Southern states, including not only the items we have mentioned but also red beans and rice, pigs' feet, tripe and "chitterlings" (viscera). This soul food tradition must have developed primarily on the plantations where food was at least occasionally abundant, as
Status top

Some slaves achieved a special kind of status by being treated like one of the slave owner's family, or very nearly. McDonald was brought up in the big house by the white folks, although his status was between trusted retainer and adopted son. In McDonald's words:

McD: [The master and mistress] taught me mighty good, they teach me good. They said, I remember, says, "Joe?" I say, "Yes sir." "When we are dead and in heaven," they said, "we wants to raise you [= to have raised you] as an intelligent nigger. We wants you to have good friends like we have got." Say, "You'll never be scratched by good rich, sensible white folks because they can tell who you are by your raising and your compliments. That show that you been raised," he said, "not by the colored but by the white.

EBE McD: 6-13

Celia Black, born in Tyler Texas in 1854, constitutes another interesting instance. A rich white woman, Mrs. "Clegg", brings Celia's mother to East Texas along with the rest of her entourage, probably some time in the 1830s, and raises her like her own daughter, until she grows into a young "missy". She therefore has a position in society, and her lot is presumably much easier than that of most slaves. However, when she meets her future husband - Celia's future father - it becomes evident that her freedom is illusory. Mrs. "Clegg" does not want to let her go. After all, the young woman is not only like a daughter to her, she is her property. Celia Black observes:

CB: My mother always slept with Mrs. Clegg when she was young, `fore she was married. An Mrs. Clegg, after she [Celia's mother] was married, my papa, Mrs. Clegg, wouldn, wouldn agree for my papa to take her 'way from there. No she wouldn. She wouldn agree for um to try an take her way from there. Oh! oh! In them days, them days, the White people had control over the, when they had uh, had uh, colored help, they wouldn hardly, wouldn ' gree, ' gree for you to take um away from um. Then. Then, when my, Mrs. Clegg brought my mother to this country [Texas], she wouldn let nobody take her away from there.

EBE CB: 109-119

Fascinating how this speaker, interviewed in the 1970s, is recalling with easy everyday familiarity someone who had been born in the 18th century! At all events, the couple are able to marry, and Celia is born. As a little girl she enjoys going out with her father when he is driving oxen. It is a long time before Celia Black and her parents are finally able to escape Mrs. Clegg’s clutches, probably not until the abolition of slavery. Celia marries and goes west to pick cotton.

The plantation as microcosm top

Isom Moseley was born in 1856 near Selma, Alabama. His mother was a "house woman" and his father was a field hand. She died young and so the "white folks" decided to keep
him around the house "toting" cool water, working as a house boy. The carrying of water was a common occupation for slave children of a certain age, as is mentioned several times in the corpus (children are described as big enough to carry water, as a way of indicating their age). Moseley remembers all the trades that were carried out on the plantation. Two weavers worked at two looms which were running every day. Moseley carried water to the ash hopper for the soap makers who made soap for the plantation. This was the soap they used rather than "bar soap".

(EBE IM: 45)

There were tanners of leather who worked in the following way: they had a hole in the ground about three feet deep, and eight or ten feet long, lined with boards. Here they would lay a layer of bark down, then they would lay a layer of hide over the bark. This would then be covered with another layer of bark, and so on. They continued like that:

IM: ...till they got it like they want. An then they'd full that thing up with water. But now, 'fore they'd tan that leather they had a place to put it in to get, lay a while and get the har [hair] off. An when they done with that leather i's jus like any tan leather. An they had a man there to make shoes for all on us.

EBE IM: 49-56

The shoemaker was permanently employed making shoes for the good-sized children as well as for the older slaves. This contrasts with Fountain Hughes who wore no trousers or shoes until he was an adolescent, instead he wore a long shirt (which he terms a dress) and went barefoot even in winter. But to return to Isom Moseley's plantation. They had a molasses mill, whose working parts were all made of wood by the carpenters. After the cane was ground in these mills the extract ran into big iron kettles and then was stored in poplar troughs which were covered with a plank.

(EBE IM: 24-27)

Possibly this was grey poplar, a stronger wood produced by crossing white poplar with aspen. Molasses, of course, were a staple part of many slaves' diet. Apparently this plantation was model of good management and orderly activity. After Surrender, there were more that wanted to come on the estate than those who left. They were employed as "wage hands" or paid rent. The master was up before daylight and ready to make his rounds on horseback when the sun was half an hour high and the workers were going to the fields; he would make a second round in the evening before sunset.

(EBE IM: 97-100)

For that reason he never had a "rider over them" (mounted overseer?). In this immediate post-war period, there were "ten wage hands, and four plowers and, and six hoe hand" (ten in all?) and with those wage hands good crops were made. There were also the tenants - probably quite a number of them, since the plantation had obviously been large. The fact that a shoemaker and two weavers were employed full time strongly suggests this. Some or all of the rent-payers actually worked under the share-cropping system, rendering a third of their crops to the landlord.
Isom's Moseley's plantation was hardly typical of the plantations in the deep South - let us be clear about this. Most of the others worked on the basis of minimum spending on workers who in any case had no rights, with the lash as the only incentive to work. "I'd ruther be dead" said a White Mississippian to a Northern visitor, "than be a nigger on one of these big Mississippi plantations".

(Davis, quoted in Joiner (1987: 227))

Mississippi seems to have been the focus of some of the worst misery and resentment. Not surprisingly, Joel Chandler Harris' character Uncle Remus refers to the state as Massasip (Harris 1982: 295).

But perhaps other states were scarcely any better if at all. Fountain Hughes complains bitterly about Virginia and his life as a slave there on the tobacco plantations. He says that he was almost full grown before he was allowed to wear trousers and given shoes to wear. He was not allowed to have money, and if he was sent on a message he was obliged to take a written pass with him, stating that he had permission to be out and would have to be back by a certain time. Slaves were worked without any consideration for their need for rest he says, because "you were nothing but a dog".

FW: Which would you rather be Uncle Fountain? [free man or slave]

FH: Me? Which I'd ruther be? You know whut I duh ruther do? If I thought, had any idea, that I'd ever be a slave again, I'd take a gun an jus end it all right away. Because you're nothing but a dog. You're nothing but a dog.

Night never come `dout you had nothing to do. Time to cut tobacco, if they want you to cut all night long in the field, you cut. An if they want you to hang all night long, you hang, hang tobacco. It didn't matter bout you tired, being tired. You're afraid to say you're tired.

EBE FH: 268-275

So he too would "ruther be dead" than be a slave. Many slaves went barefoot, particularly the children as we have said. In general, clothing was shabby and often meagre despite the fact that in much of the South winter below-freezing temperatures were not uncommon - even occurring in southern East Texas.

(LS: unpublished Archive AFS 5497A)

On some plantations the slaves, particularly the children, went barefoot. When they had finished growing they had to force their feet into stiff shoes known as red russets which were universally disliked. Many slaves, again particularly the children, slept on the ground with or without adequate bedding and even flooring. Evidently, Laura Smalley's plantation was about midway between Isom Moseley's model plantation and the worst plantations with the most inhuman conditions referred to by the White Mississippian - perhaps somewhat better than midway. There are many reasons for saying this: no slaves reportedly ran away

(EBE LS: 392);
the food was neither very good nor very bad (as we have noted); despite the vigilant
toughness of the overseer, Old Mistress protected the slaves who originally belonged to
her (EBE LS: 242, discussed below);
no member of Smalley's family was ever sold (EBE LS: 162);
and whippings were said to be rare despite the relatively large size of the plantation.
(EBE LS: 387-388)

But she then gives an account of the most brutal whipping she ever witnessed: And the
details are horrific. The victim, "old Aunt M.A". (at this time a young woman) was
working in the house when Old Mistress threatened to "whip" her for some
misdemeanour. At this point M.A. restrains Old Mistress (Mrs. "Bethel") by gripping her
wrists and sitting her down in the rocking chair. When Old Master finds about this he has
M.A. taken out into the peach orchard, stripped to the waist and tied to one of the trees.
She is then whipped for "half a day" by her own father - since her father is the overseer,
Uncle "Solomon". This must have removed half the flesh from her back. Lighted tobacco
pipes are also "snuffed out on her". Then late that evening they grease her back to "fill the
holes" (apparently a common practice on the plantations, mentioned by Harriet Smith and
others) and then give her dinner. But as Smalley says:

LS: If you Pa duh whip you half a day, you aint want eat.
("If your Pa whips you for half a day, you don't want to eat.")
(EBE LS: 226-227)

Uncle Billy McRea comes over as a genial character in his interview and communicates a
positive impression of his life with his master "Ole Colonel McRea", whom he describes
as a "speculator". So the Colonel was a business man not a plantation owner.
Nevertheless, McRea tells how runaway slaves were run down with dogs, brought back
and tied to logs before being flogged until they were "hollering" (screaming) and praying.
After that they were untied and put in prison ("old log jail house").
(EBE McC: 92-101)

Even after slavery had ended, African Americans were punished by the "Freedman's
Bureau" by being strung up by their thumbs. This according to McRea was a common
form of punishment. Both Smalley and McRea mention that slave children would try to
watch these floggings and tortures.

Laura Smalley says that her mother was called a "sassy nigger" (a defiant slave). This
came about in the following way: She had belonged to Old Mistress before the latter
married and came west from Mississippi to East Texas.
(EBE LS: 394-395)

This would have been at some time in the later 1830s or early 1840s when Texas was
being settled by Anglos (Whites from the United States). So like Laura Smalley's
stepfather Uncle Jessie, she was a "Pearce", the half of the slave force that originally
belonged to Old Mistress. On the other hand the overseer, Uncle S. was a member of the
other "portion" of slaves who had originally belonged to Old Master. Accordingly, when
Uncle S. is going to beat Laura Smalley's eldest brother, Laura's mother steps in to stop this, and Old Mistress protects her.

LS: That [the mother] was one of her niggers. She wouldn let Uncle S. whip her that-a-way. Well, they call her "sassy nigger" - sassy cau[se] she wouldn let Uncle S. whip her about the boy packing [carrying] water.

EBE LS: 244-247

In other words the overseer turns on the mother but is not actually able to whip her. Thereafter he lays in wait for the boy by the "water" and "just pitch it out, just pitch it out as fast as the chillun could get to um."

(EBE LS: 250)

Incredibly then, while Old Mistress protects her own from the overseer (a black overseer, normally called a "driver") that same overseer is (in the incident reported above) suffered to beat his own daughter half to death on the instructions of Old Master.

Laura Smalley tells a similar story about her stepfather, Uncle Jessie. He too never allows Uncle S. or anyone else to whip him. When they come for him, he backs up into a "corner fence" and keeps them off with a stick. He is a "great big old man" and even the Master has an interest in his not being "hurt" (injured). To punish him they therefore limit his food to an ear of corn for every meal, and fresh water. He continues his work of ploughing every day, and is apparently not in the least affected.

(EBE LS: 278-288)

As a result his food is stopped altogether, and he is just given water. His would-be punishers are amazed to see that even then he carries on as before:

LS: He live jus' the same. An' he live with mama, thirty-two years, thirty-two years, before he died, 'fore he died. An' he never did have a scar that the Old Boss put on him.

Religion top

Several of the former slaves mention religious practices. Harriet Smith explains that she and her family rode to church, the same church as the whites, but a different service. She mentions that the sermon might be given by a white man, who would ignore the fact they had a soul to save and preach instead that they should obey their master and mistress. This same observation is made several times in the handwritten Ex-slave Narratives. For example by Alabaman Jenny Proctor:

JP: Dey wuzn't no church for de slaves but we goes to the white folks' arbor [ "brush arbor" or open air church] on Sunday evenin' and a white man, he gits up dere to preach to the niggers. He say: "Now I takes as my text, which is, nigger obey your marster and your mistess, cause what you get from dem here in dis world am all you ev'r goin' to git, cause you just like hogs and de other animals. When you dies you ain't no more, after you been throwed in dat hole."

Howell (1995: 46)
And similarly in Louisiana, William Matthews explains (Howell 1995: 50) in his dictated narrative, that when an African American was allowed to preach, "all he could preach 'bout was obey the massa, obey the overseer, obey dis, obey dat." Returning to the Ex-Slave Recordings, Laura Smalley explains that "Old Master" (she seems to be talking of a proverbial Old Master handed down by tradition) would ruthlessly pursue the slaves who held religious services on the plantation. The services were therefore held in secret and the worshipers would sit round a tub which would have the power to "catch the voice" so that no one would hear. This in fact was a common Afro-American practice. She relates that on one occasion, Old Master found out and came and surprised the meeting. One of the old African Americans was talking with God and unable to stop. Old Master becomes incensed: "I'm good mind to kick you naked!" he yells. But the old man has no choice but to keep praying, and Old Master leaves him there.

(EBE LS: 345-368)

At a later date, in Mrs. Smalley's younger days, the slaves - or perhaps by now ex-slaves - were free to worship and prepared a place under the trees known as a "bresh arbor" (see above) where services were held by untutored pastors who would rely on the spirit to guide them.

While Alabamans Joe McDonald and "Miss Carol" mention no religious faith as such, they express an irrepressible optimism that shines all the more brightly because it shines through the obvious abuses of their lives. This is essentially the same indomitable optimism that was mentioned above in connection with the soldiers in the Civil War. A different kind of upward striving.

Fountain Hughes observes that in his early days just before or during the Civil War, the African Americans would congregate in one of their houses (actually log cabins, he says) and the service would be led by an elderly man. Again they would be guided by the spirit, someone would begin a hymn, it would be taken up, and the hymn would be sung, probably with continual subtle improvisation or embroidery of the melody, for perhaps an hour before they felt moved to change to something else.

Particularly notable is the religious faith of several of the Ex-slaves at the time they were recorded. Celia Black was interviewed by Elmer Sparks in 1974, when she was either 115 or 120 years old. (115-years old according to Sparks, and to local newspapers who reported her death only a few months after her interview, but 120-years old according to the editors of the EBE.) As we have said, she had been brought up in a white family (as indeed her mother had) during the last decades of slavery. It emerges at the end of the recording that she is quite prepared to meet her maker, and she gives her interviewer this serene farewell:

CB: God bless you all.

FW: Good bye.

CB: Good bye. We hope to meet again. If we don't meet in this world, then I hope we'll meet in yonder world. Meet in the new world.

FW: Well...[tape ends]
When Fountain Hughes is interviewed in Baltimore in 1944 at the age of 96, it becomes evident that he too lives his Christian faith. He scarcely goes to church but he listens to religious shows on the radio. And he is literally moved by the spirit, to the extent that he cannot keep still, he claps his hands and seems to be on the verge of ecstasy, we might say "in the spirit". To him the spirit - the presence of God - is a daily reality, an extra dimension added to the dimensions of time and space that structure our existence. What is more, the Spirit is something he hears. At the end of his interview he says:

FH: Well Ole People use to say, "One day Shall I Ever Reach Heaven or One Day Shall I Fly." I use to could sing it. I can sing, well sometimes I hear the Spirit you know and I may get to sing something again someday".

Fountain Hughes, has received "not the spirit of the world, but the spirit who is from God", given as Paul says, so that "we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God" (1 Corinthians 2:12). His spirituality is obviously something personal to him, but it also finds its place in Afro-American culture. The belief in a consciousness that moves between the spirit world and the visible world is a recurrent feature of African-American culture throughout the Americas (Garcia Márquez 1982; Sutcliffe 1992).

The African world view is that "spiritual energy permeates the invisible and the visible. By way of that energy, humans interact with the invisible in order to promote fortune or misfortune". (Mbiti 1970: 258).

Evidently Christians like Fountain Hughes will interact in order to promote "fortune" or good, in their prayer. Others in the African American world are equally interested in manipulating these forces and directing spiritual energy for more instrumental, and often destructive, reasons. These are the root doctors and the clients of root doctors (hoodoo workers) both in the United States and the Caribbean. Hurston (1978) describes the manipulation of such forces for vengeance in the her novel Jonah's Gourd Vine.

The most encyclopaedic work on root doctors and hoodoo in the United States is the work in five volumes by Harry Middleton Hyatt (1970, 1978). Just as we know that gravity causes bodies to fall toward the earth, Hyatt's informants know that a cat-bone confers invisibility, and they explain how to make yourself one: First catch your black cat. Boil it alive until the meat falls off the bone and then find the cat-bone. This is done by putting all the bones in running water and selecting the one that floats to the top or moves in opposite direction to the rest, (Hyatt, 1970, vol. I: 74-97)

Witches, too, may travel unseen: they leave their skin behind, and return home after doing their unspeakable deeds to pull their skins back on. The oral literature and stock of common lore is full of examples of this. (Hyatt 1970, vol. I: 138; Sutcliffe, 1982: 36-37).
In the Caribbean and United States the idea is taken literally, and yet it probably has its origins in the concept of "astral projection" (travelling in the spirit world, without one's physical body).

(Akin Omoyajowo 1983: 226-227)
The victims of destructive hoodoo or witchcraft may have to consult a root doctor to protect themselves - indeed this may be the only way of saving their lives, of unlocking their bowels or saving themselves from a wasting disease. But however skilled witches are in manipulating these forces for evil or destructive purposes, they will not ultimately prosper. Because, as the African American proverb has it, "God don't love ugly."
The expression "Ole People" which Fountain Hughes uses above is in itself interesting. In Caribbean culture this expression can be used to refer to the community's "foreparents" or ancestors. Jamaicans, for example, may quote a proverb and prefix it with the formula: Old people say or Oldtime people say. Of course, this could also refer to one's elders, or to elderly people, and in African cultures at least, the distinction may not be seen as important.

(Parrinder, 1968)
Now there is not much in the Corpus about ancestors, except for some vivid narratives about the parents and grandparents of the ex-slaves (these people were born at the end of the 18th century or the beginning of the 19th). But what does emerge - very clearly in some cases - is a respect for elders which seems to be an integral part of the culture and detectable even in the urban African American environment of the turn of the 21st century. A related and overlapping theme is the African and Afro-American cultural trait of indirection (see Herskovitz, 1941). When considering any testimony from the Corpus it is worthwhile remembering that feelings, views, and observations may be expressed more indirectly than one would expect, particularly if one takes the majority North American culture as a yardstick. Obviously, this trait is reinforced by southern Blacks' long experience of the need to monitor what they say to all but the most trusted white people. As Alan Lomax advised interviewer John Henry Faulk when he began working on the WPA project: "The Black don't show you what he means" (quoted by Faulk in Brewer's chapter, Bailey et al 1991).

Endnote top
In this chapter we have looked at a wealth of historical and cultural detail of the lives of ex-slaves before, during and after the Civil War. The historic and social information these people present for our inspection ranges from the kind of details that would otherwise have been lost forever, to personal views or sidelights on specific incidents or general practices that are still in the collective consciousness or recorded in the history books. One feels that with more corpora of this sort an almost holographically real picture could be built up of this past age and the institution of southern slavery during the last decade or so of its existence. Hopefully some of the much larger corpus of interviews that make up the hand-written Ex-Slave Narrative collection may approach the communicative expansiveness of Smalley or Hughes.

Several of the ex-slaves in this Corpus are unexpectedly communicative, within certain bounds, even though they are being interviewed by whites. We might consider several reasons for this. Laura Smalley, for instance, comes from a plantation where Ole Mistress
was the protectress of the "Pearce" slaves, Laura Smalley included. Later, as a tenant, Laura learns to see the good side of her white landlord's character despite his dangerous fits of drunken anger. This man's wife, too, is another guardian angel. These experiences undoubtedly enabled Smalley as an old lady to open up to John Henry Faulk who himself had evolved from being a White Liberal to being someone ready to see things from the Black point of view. (Brewer, 1991: 167)

Thus Smalley can range across the spectrum of experiences, good, bad and horrific, during slavery and after, contributing substantially to the overall cultural and historical picture presented here.

Most of the other interviewees also reveal that they managed to sustain a generally positive relationship with one or more Whites. This fact would seem to explain the degree of frankness and expressiveness seen in all the informants except for Alice Gaston whose interview is too short and formulaic for much expressiveness to emerge anyway, and perhaps Ledbetter who seems to be accommodating the Whiteman (see Bailey et al, 1991:13). But this naturally raises the question of lack of representativeness, since embittered anti-white speakers (and those who would have difficulty in expressing themselves to whites) are clearly under-represented. This is inevitable for obvious reasons: the kind of interview one would probably get from such people would be no interview at all.

Of course, the Ex-Slave Recording interviewees as a sample are very far from being representative. Improbably, they include a 115-year old woman who was brought up to be a young "missy" in the bosom of a white family (Celia Black); a 134-year old man enslaved in Africa, almost thrown overboard - like Jonah - by the other Blacks, employed as a cowboy and government agent in Texas, and claiming to have been a mason for "a hundred years" (Charlie Smith); a former slave whose husband was an up-and-coming politician and cowboy (Harriet Smith); and an ex-slave on an apple-pie order plantation where none wanted to leave after Surrender and more wanted to come on (Isom Moseley). There is also genial former slave in Jasper, Texas, whose enthusiasm for his subject (the Civil War and "slavery time") so causes him to lower his guard that at least ten percent of his interview is in a very deep variety of Black English similar to Gullah (Billy McRea). But then at least one of the interviewees - Fountain Hughes - expresses bitter resentment about his slave origins, though he combines this profound hurt with the ability to talk his way through a long interview filled with detailed observation and advice. He is an intelligent, self-educated man who moves easily from abstraction to specific detail, despite his advanced age. Significantly he seems to have a long-standing relationship with the white interviewer and his wife. (EBE FH: 11-12; 328-329)

Nevertheless he reaches a point where he becomes reticent and refuses to say what he knows. (EBE FH: 249-250; 258)

As a result of these testimonies, we have also been able to build up an overview of important aspects of the culture which are only semi-visible at best to many Whites. This has involved identifying the many half-spelt-out clues to the culture in these interviews.
and relating these out to other sources, particularly Caribbean and African sources, as well as African American writers who provide overt articulation of what is often covert. It would seem that this culture is able to draw apart, and define itself according to its own principles. There is an obvious parallel between the cultural situation and the linguistic situation - the surface similarities and deeper system differences between African American Vernacular English and other varieties of English.

We have now reviewed at least some of the cultural aspects of the Ex-Slave Recordings [ESR] corpus with their attendant implications for our analysis of the language used in this source. Deep knowledge of the culture and of course the language at every level, is a necessary part of the "profiling" or immersion approach which can reveal hidden linguistic detail - including fragments of creole-like language - simply by maximising our understanding of the people and the language of the recordings in an interactive way. To paraphrase Labov's accumulative principle: the more we know about a language (and its culture), the more we are able to find out about that language (and culture).


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