
“I TALK MORE OF THE FRENCH” Creole Folklore and the Federal Writers’ Project

by Nicholas T Rinehart

So the legend of the wild men came gradually back to town, brought by the men who would ride out to watch what was going on, who began to tell how Sutpen would take stand beside a game trail with the pistols and send the negroes in to drive the swamp like a pack of hounds. . . . The negroes could speak no English yet and doubtless there were more than Akers who did not know that the language in which they and Sutpen communicated was a sort of French and not some dark and fatal tongue of their own.

—William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!*

It is a recurring lament. “We have at our disposal not a single written testimony on the reality of slavery coming from a slave,” writes Louis Sala-Molins in *Le code noir* (1987), a history of the 1685 decree that officially established racial slavery in the French colonies of the Caribbean (qtd. in Miller 35). Reflecting two decades later, Christopher Miller arrives at the same dire conclusion. “In the English-speaking world, and especially in the United States, the problem of silence [in the historical record of slavery] is significantly offset by testimonies and narratives, beginning with Equiano’s,” he explains. “But in French the problem is far more serious, for *there are no real slave narratives in French*—not as we know them in the Anglophone Atlantic, not that have yet been discovered. That absence, for now at least, haunts any inquiry into the history of slavery” (34). Doris Kadish, considering the cultural history of slavery in the Francophone Caribbean, echoes this refrain: “The paucity and fragmentation of Francophone material stands in sharp contrast to the rich supply of American slave narratives, for which there is no French-language equivalent” (*Slavery* xiii). And in the words of Deborah Jenson, in her survey of Haitian letters of the Revolutionary period, this “silence of the slave in the French / Francophone print traditions contrasts with the existence of a considerable body . . . of slave and ex-slave narratives in the Anglophone arena . . . dating from the mid-eighteenth century through the 1930s” (2).

But these exclusively Anglophone texts—more than 6,000 extant sources written, dictated, or otherwise produced by slaves and ex-slaves throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early-twentieth centuries—shed light primarily on the history of slavery in the United States, England, the British Caribbean, and Canada.¹ Without French-language equivalents, however, the history of slavery in the Francophone arena (the French Caribbean, New France, and Canada) poses considerable interpretative challenges. “What would African American history and historiography be without the testimonies of Olaudah Equiano,

Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, or the dozens of narratives of former slaves?" Miller asks. "That is the condition of the African diaspora in the French Atlantic" (36–37).

These supposed deficits, gaps, lacks, and silences are deeply troubling perhaps most importantly for the unproductive ways in which they have framed and dictated scholarly inquiry into the history and culture of French slavery in the Americas. Miller's framework, for example, is self-limiting. He considers hypothetically, "Why is there no Francophone Equiano?" and later bemoans that "there is no French *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, no singularly influential literary work from which abolitionism gathered strength in its own times and which can serve as a compelling *aide-mémoire* now" (33, 37). Miller may be correct that there is no Francophone Equiano and no French *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, at least according to the terms of his analysis.² And there are specific and observable historical explanations for why that is the case. But when literary history concerns itself with questions of strict equivalence rather than deeper considerations of resonance—of affinity, kinship, and resemblance—it creates puzzles without viable solutions. The "epistemological challenge" posed by the history of French colonial slavery is both real and imagined (Miller 53). Sala-Molins, Miller, Kadish, Jenson, and the numerous other critics and scholars who have been on the lookout for the Francophone Equiano or the French *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—and from various critical perspectives and orientations—may have doomed themselves from the start.

Herein lies a thorny paradox: The supposed absence of Francophone slave narratives veils or obscures the history of the French Atlantic, yet, as I will show, the collective quest for French-language equivalents to the antebellum slave narrative has prevented the consideration of legitimate testimonial sources in the Francophone tradition. In searching for the Francophone Equiano—or Frederick Douglass or Harriet Jacobs or even Harriet Beecher Stowe—we have overlooked forms of testimony produced by slaves and ex-slaves in the New World that do not conform to the generic conventions of the American slave narrative.

Scholarly inquiry into the history of slavery in the French Atlantic has emphasized either the overseas colonial experience of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries or the imaginative evocation of this experience in works by later twentieth-century writers and filmmakers like Maryse Condé, Édouard Glissant, Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphaël Confiant, and Ousmane Sembène. More pointedly, the critical framework constructed around Olaudah Equiano and Harriet Beecher Stowe—the two pillars of Miller's historicist critique—privileges the long-eighteenth century and American antebellum period as sources for Francophone testimony. This chronological tunnel vision betrays an undeniable fact that the American slave narrative tradition is deeply fissured. Indeed, simple generic division of the "slave narrative" into two larger bodies of work—nineteenth-century autobiographies and twentieth-century interviews—tends to skew historical analysis in favor of one or the other (Bailey 383).³ Literary studies, too, must contend with this schism. The two waves of slave narrative production arose from vastly different historical contexts: the abolition of slavery and the Great Depression.⁴ Few considerations of the "slave narrative" and its significance in American literary history have attempted to reconcile this necessarily bifurcated tradition (Hill 68).

Yet those in search of authentic French slave narratives would have done well to turn their attention to this second group, the "other slave narratives"—the approximately 4,000 ex-slave interviews collected and compiled by the Federal Writers' Project (FWP), under the aegis of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), between roughly 1936 and 1938.

The FWP narratives of Louisiana and its neighboring regions comprise Francophone texts of various forms: dictated accounts that were translated into English from the original French or Creole (often referred to as Louisiana patois), that include entire passages or turns-of-phrase in French or Creole, or that shed new light on the history of French slavery in the United States. This material demonstrates how French colonial slavery overlapped with its American counterpart to produce a Francophone testimonial literature that now exists as a highly compromised—linguistically and contextually—shadow in the archive of slavery in the New World.

In order to begin to understand the massive body of work assembled by the FWP in the first decades of the twentieth century, it is critical to see the WPA narratives as completely distinct from their antebellum antecedents. They are an altogether different beast.⁵ What truly distinguishes the two traditions besides the obvious fact of chronology is the editorial intent of their production.⁶ The antebellum slave narrative—especially in the boom years of 1830 to 1865—was processed largely if not completely through the presses of Anglophone abolitionism.⁷

The WPA narrative, on the other hand, was designed to document and preserve Negro folklore—including folk tales, games, songs, myths and superstitions, spiritual practices, and even the use of language. Indeed, “what most clearly distinguished these [ex-slave testimonies] from earlier efforts was their sociological character,” writes Norman Yetman of the WPA collection. “While ideological factors were never totally eliminated, and indeed, often inspired interest in their collection, the single-minded moralism that had pervaded earlier narratives was substantially diminished. The typical supplanted the dramatic as the primary focus of inquiry” (“The Background” 537). The appearance of the French language and its cognates—Creole or Louisiana patois—in the ex-slave narratives of Louisiana can be credited to the editorial effort to archive and champion vanishing Louisiana Creole cultural and linguistic practices. Ethnography displaced abolitionism.⁸

Exeunt William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips, enter John A. Lomax and Lyle Saxon. Lomax rose to prominence as a folklorist and ethnomusicologist who traveled the American South with phonograph in hand, documenting vernacular American song forms from the cowboy ballad to the blues of the Mississippi Delta. He worked as National Advisor on Folklore and Folkways for the FWP and prepared the initial questionnaire used by field workers to conduct interviews with former slaves.⁹ He “was especially intrigued by the spontaneity and uniqueness of Negro lore” and “was chiefly responsible for the inclusion of this activity as an integral aspect of the FWP program.” Under Lomax’s leadership, the FWP “reflected his experience and zeal as a folklore collector” (Yetman, “The Background” 545, 550).

Saxon was a prominent New Orleans writer and journalist for the *Times-Picayune* who welcomed William Faulkner, Sherwood Anderson, and Edmund Wilson within his professional embrace. He authored several works of literary nonfiction centered on New Orleans, including *Fabulous New Orleans* (1928) and *Old Louisiana* (1929), and a novel of interracial romance, *Children of Strangers* (1937). Saxon was also a devoted folklorist, a renowned booster of Louisiana Creole culture under whose direction the Louisiana Writers’ Project (the state branch of the FWP) dedicated itself almost exclusively to collecting and publishing Louisiana folklore. Saxon, in his published works and private correspondence, lamented the end of the “Golden Age” of Louisiana, brought to an apparently violent and

abrupt conclusion by the Civil War. He espoused a deeply romantic ideal of Louisiana Creole life; for him “The Civil War seemed to be an event too tragic . . . to recall, for it killed his beloved Golden Age.” An ambivalent apologist for the institution of slavery who also resented strict racial divisions, Saxon understood the Federal Writers’ Project as both his opportunity to preserve and champion the last vestiges of the Creole “Golden Age” (Clayton, “History” 314–317).¹⁰

These ex-slave narratives gathered by the WPA could be disregarded as Francophone testimonial sources because they are not, in design or execution, anti-slavery texts. But as we have seen, the American “slave narrative” tradition does not confine itself to such political motives. Indeed, and particularly in Louisiana, the slave narrative collection of the WPA must be understood for its folkloric origins, that the “interviews of former slaves were but one part of the fabric of Louisiana folklore” (Clayton, *Mother Wit* 4).¹¹ At an LWP meeting in New Orleans in 1938 (attended by Lyle Saxon), FWP Folklore Editor Benjamin A. Botkin announced the preparation of a new volume, *American Folk Stuff*, the “first national folklore volume.” He wanted, of course, to include the material collected under Saxon’s directorship. “The book we have in mind will be limited strictly to oral stories—unwritten literature,” Botkin told his colleagues. “When we ask for local stories, we want local anecdotes. I want legendary stories—local stories of real life rather than what we call the supernatural. We are interested in contemporary American life and want realistic material. . . . Don’t omit anything. Send everything to me” (qtd. in Clayton, *Mother Wit* 231–32). Botkin, presumably like Saxon, was interested in documenting Louisiana life as faithfully as possible. Enslaved memory was critical to that mission. And the question of language was a crucial consideration from the beginning. “In taking stories, quote the person,” Botkin directed his team. “I want the flavor of the talk” (232).

Although the folk tales and reminiscences of Negro informants, many of whom were former slaves, were intended for use in *American Folk Stuff*, Saxon was extremely protective of the work collected under his supervision. These materials were instead published by the Louisiana Writer’s Project in *Gumbo Ya-Ya: A Collection of Louisiana Folk Tales* (1945). Ex-slave reminiscences were used in several of the book’s chapters. “The Slaves” is a lengthy section on virtually all aspects of plantation life and culture pieced together from several such interviews. Other chapters—including “Buried Treasure,” “Riverfront Lore,” “Paillet Lane,” and “Songs” (a thorough encyclopedia of songs and games, many in Creole accompanied by English translation)—were also heavily based on ex-slave testimony. *Gumbo Ya-Ya* is a significant volume because it represents the precursor to what would eventually be published almost half a century later as *Mother Wit: The Ex-Slave Narratives of the Louisiana Writers’ Project*. In fact, both collections include interviews with the same former slaves. Thus, the documentary history of enslaved life in Louisiana was always and from the beginning buried beneath—like a palimpsest—Lomax, Saxon, and Botkin’s project of folk ethnography. *Mother Wit* was born out of *Gumbo Ya-Ya*, which was itself born out of earlier volumes like *Louisiana Folk-Tales in French Dialect and English Translation* (1894), collected and edited by Alcée Fortier—a compendium of tales “given first in the Creole dialect, then in a faithful but not literal [English] translation,” with the anonymous “Negro informants” for each entry listed in the book’s notes (v).¹²

This all signals quite definitively that the ex-slave narratives of *Mother Wit* are to be read according to folkloric practice. The implications of this re-contextualization are two-fold.

First, it reveals something about the field methods employed in the project. We know little of the editorial inner workings of the antebellum slave narratives—the circumstances of their production are too often veiled by the “black narrator / white sponsor” paradigm. While the precise editorial processes involved in the collection of ex-slave narratives under the FWP are still difficult to glean, we at least have relevant published and archived documents at our disposal. As Saxon writes in the preface to *Gumbo Ya-Ya*, “In a leisurely collection of the folklore of the various racial groups, we have attempted to have the collecting of material done either by members of the groups themselves or by those long familiar with such groups. . . . Much of the information pertaining to the Negro was collected by Negro workers” (vi–vii). While Saxon defends the research practices of his field researchers, the reality of the process is much more complex. For while “Lomax was a southerner whose experience collecting folk songs in rural areas helped make him sensitive to the dynamic of cross-cultural interaction” (Hill 64), his “personal success in obtaining Negro folklore may have blinded him to the effects that the race of the interviewer might have exerted upon the interview situation” (Yetman, “Background” 551). Any attempt to make sense of the WPA material must wrestle with the thorny social and political dynamics inherent in the interview scenario—a scenario in which ex-slaves were questioned by white men and women (occasionally the descendants of those slaves’ previous owners) about the lived experience of antebellum slavery.¹³ “This imbalance of power, fostered by a bureaucratic hierarchy, would become a significant factor in shaping the slave narratives” (Hill 66). Although the WPA interviews were obviously free of the arguably overwhelming influence of the Anglophone abolitionist agenda, these materials were collected under circumstances that were anything but politically neutral. These circumstances were also deeply ironic: The seeming assimilation of Creole material under titles such as *American Folk Stuff* underlies the impossibility of the attempted erasure of the cultural and linguistic Francophone presence of enslaved reminiscence.

An additional insight gained by this folkloric framework is that the ex-slave collection points even more crucially to the question of language and translation—specifically how the ongoing use of Creole dialect, or Louisiana patois, reveals the intersection of French and American slaveries in the circum-Caribbean from Louisiana to the Antilles. That is, these remnants of enslaved testimony show how Miller’s French Atlantic flows into the Mississippi—and vice versa. Saxon writes:

It may be well to remember that Louisiana was first a French colony. . . . In the plantation sections the Negroes outnumbered the Whites five to one; consequently, their contribution to the folklore of the State has been large. . . . The creoles, those founders of the French colony, contributed their elegance, their customs, and cuisine. They influenced their slaves and, in a sense, their slaves influenced them. (vi)

Alcée Fortier, in his introduction to *Louisiana Folk-Tales*, praised the linguistic invention inherent in the Creole dialect: “It is not merely a corruption of French, that is to say, French badly spoken, it is a real idiom with a morphology and grammar of its own. It is curious to see how the ignorant African slave transformed his master’s language into a speech concise and simple, and at the same time soft and musical” (x). According to John Blassingame’s

survey of the WPA collection, any scholar grappling with these sources “should begin by mastering the skills of the linguist and then systematically examine the internal structure of the interviews, the recurrence of symbols and stereotypes, the sequence of episodes, and the functions they serve” (487).

This historical contiguity of Anglophone and Francophone slaveries produced a linguistically hybridized narrative corpus; any sustained examination of the WPA narratives must wrestle with their inherent linguistic difficulties. Despite the LWP’s administrative and editorial oversight—for example, the questionnaire given to field workers “to get the Negro to thinking and talking about the days of slavery” and precise instructions for the recording of dialect—there is no uniformity whatsoever to their end product (Clayton, *Mother Wit* 239). In addition, as Blassingame writes, “Because of the brevity of the interviews it is often impossible to resolve internal inconsistencies, reconcile tone with ‘facts,’ separate rumor from direct observations, fathom subtle nuances, verify uncertain chronology, or determine the extent of ‘structural amnesia,’ and the manipulation of data to conform to the conditions existing in the 1930s” (487).

The treatment of Creole speech in the Louisiana narratives of *Mother Wit* is thus similarly uneven. The narrative of Francis Doby, for example, begins with a brief editorial exposition—“Francis Doby is one hundred years old. She remembers coming over on a boat and standing on a block with her ma and her grandma” (51)—and then proceeds to a lengthy first-person narration, which is broken into sections: “De Asylum,” “After de War,” “Marriages and Funerals,” and apparently comprises conversations with two interviewers, one of whom refers to the interviewee as “Fannie.” She recalls dancing as a child: “Chile, we dance till midnight. To finish de ball, we say, ‘Balancez, Calinda’ (Turn around, Calinda), and den twist and turn and say again, ‘Balancez, Calinda,’ and just turn around” (52). She also includes a song her grandmother sang for the children to sleep, which is quoted in Creole with an accompanying English translation:¹⁴

<i>Sizette, te ein belle femme</i> <i>Mo chere amie-aie</i> <i>Mo achete ban-ban</i> <i>Ce pou nou marie.</i>	Sizette is a beautiful woman Ah dear one-aie I buy pretty things For us to get married.
(Clayton, <i>Mother Wit</i> 52)	

Doby recounts another song that accompanied a child’s game called “Ti Balai,” or “Little Broom”:

<i>Tringue, Tringue ti balai</i> <i>Ti mouton la queu coupe</i> <i>Cha po ti bam bail</i> <i>Cha po ti bam bail.</i>	I drag, I drag a small broom Lil lam wid its tail cut off Lookin’ for its tail all around Lookin’ for its tail all around.
(Clayton, <i>Mother Wit</i> 53)	

After these two extended excerpts, there are few mentions of Creole except in brief mentions of past conversations. Doby speaks in Creole when recreating dialogue, for instance: “Pere Jean, he say in French, ‘Allez, allez, allez (Go on)’” (59). And later: “Pere Jean, standin’ in

front of ‘em, he says blah, blah, blah; den he stop: ‘Donnez les bagues (Give the rings)’” (59). This narrative in particular is both noteworthy and extremely difficult to decipher because it includes an additional interview tacked on the end, added almost like an appendix with the following description: “[Doby was also interviewed by Mrs. Harriette Michinard and spelled her name Frances rather than Francis]” (60). In this relatively short section, Michinard briefly paraphrases Doby’s life, ending abruptly in a Creole interjection:

She then said in Creole:

“Quand les Yankee remtre [entre] dans les quarters, me tande le cor, tout mounne suivi ye, ye. Di si vous aute oli, vind e’est comme ca. Dans la campagne, ye te tout frer, soeur, cousines. Chacun te gaignain so l’habitation.”

(When the Yankees entered the quarters, we heard the bugle, we all followed. They said if you want to follow, come on. It’s that way in the country, they were all brothers, sisters and cousins. Each one had his plantation). (Clayton, *Mother Wit* 61)

No context is given for this story, nor any explanation for why Doby began speaking suddenly in Creole—or whether any other moments in her conversation with Michinard were also in Creole. While the transcription certainly contains errors, it appears that Michinard (as implied by her name) was comfortable speaking French and Creole. Lyle Saxon mentioned her as an expert on “the Creoles” in his preface to *Gumbo Ya-Ya*. It seems, indeed, that several of the French or Creole narratives from Louisiana fell under her supervision.¹⁵

The narrative of Clorie Turner also contains Creole inflections: “Mr. Reau died on Elysian Fields and Farais Street. . . . One morning he git up, walked to his washstand and suddenly began jumping. His little daughter, hearing the thumping on the floor, said, ‘Qui ca ye di bruit la en haute? Vini voir grandpere a pe saute la pe touffe!’ (What is that noise? Come see grandfather jumping and choking!)” (207). Another narrative, by Mrs. Webb (no first name is given), is printed entirely in English, with an editorial note at the bottom of the entry: “[Project translation from original interview in French]” (Clayton, *Mother Wit* 209). Both Turner’s and Webb’s interviews were conducted by Michinard.

Several other narratives in the collection demonstrate or refer to Creole speech, but the edited transcripts make no effort to standardize or contextualize these sections. For instance, the editorial preface to the narrative of Mother Duffy concludes simply: “She speaks with the Louisiana Creole dialect” (63). This statement would imply that the interview was conducted entirely in Creole, but there is no mention of translation, nor is there any indication of French or Creole language in the narrative itself. The narrative of Anita Fonvergne is presented similarly. The editorial preface concludes: “Anita speaks English with a strong French accent. She speaks a pure French, not the patois” (73). Fonvergne’s narrative is even more difficult to interpret due to her complicated ethnic makeup:

My grandfather Pierre Arnold Fonvergne was educated in France, and that’s where he met Napoleon. He was sent by Napoleon as a messenger to Switzerland. That’s where he met and married my mother[sic], Johanna Haugman. Sure, she was white, she was a Swiss woman. . . . My grandfather was white too. We don’t know how or where we got negro blood. . . . We don’t class ourselves as negroes and we don’t class ourselves as white. (Clayton, *Mother Wit* 75)

After relating her family's history, she adds: "My sister had a book with over a hundred French songs in it. I don't know whether she still has it or not. No, the songs are not Creole, they're French" (75). Here, Fonvergne makes a linguistic and cultural distinction that is not accounted for in the LWP materials or any accompanying documents. Not only does the narrator reject "negro" and "white" as viable racial categorizations, but her claims to French rather than Creole culture also reveal that language carries with it significant ethnic, social, and political considerations. Thus, in the place of the "overwhelming sameness" of the classic slave narrative decried by James Olney we find only overwhelming unevenness (49). The enslaved testimony gathered by the LWP demonstrates no internal coherence whatsoever. The interpretative opacity imposed by this editorial unevenness poses serious challenges to the integrity of any imagined or idealized slave narrative in French. Not only are the WPA narratives a formal contrast to the model set forth by Equiano and his literary heirs, but the representation and translation of Francophone discourses in the WPA collection are also necessarily incomplete, opaque, and potentially inaccurate. Hence the truly palimpsestic nature of this emergent, "unwritten" Francophone literature: Its very Frenchness is omnipresent but never intact. Discernible only by the process of its erasure, Franco-Creole linguistic identity is both obscured and revealed by the contingency of the narratives' production.

Other narratives, sometimes sprinkled with French vocabulary, lend insight into the history of French slaveholding in the United States. In her narrative, Melinda (no last name given) recalls her grandmother's disdain for the English language:

She only spoke Creole, and occasionally would say a phrase or two in pure French. She hated the English language; said it was good only to speak to mules, and [but] not to be heard in [from] the mouth of folks, colored or white. Of course, in that secluded spot around the bayou, we never heard anyone speak English, and I often wondered where and how my grandma ever heard that language. (Clayton, *Mother Wit* 166)¹⁶

Melinda's is also one of a few narratives that use the word "American" to refer, most likely, to English-speaking people. Henry Reed recounts: "[I] was raised up with the Creoles until 1865. When I got with the 'real' American, I learned how to talk" (185). Although both of these narratives are published in English, their references to "Americans" belie a social and cultural distinction that would have been maintained by French-speaking and French-identifying people (like Saxon himself). The aforementioned interview with Melinda was conducted by Mrs. Jeanne Arguedas, who is also coincidentally mentioned by Lyle Saxon in the preface to *Gumbo Ya-Ya* as an expert on Creoles (along with Michinard). Could it be that Melinda's narrative was conducted entirely in French, hence her reference to "Americans"? Given the complicated provenance of these texts and vastly differing approaches to translation and linguistic faithfulness, it could very well be the case. Throughout these Louisiana narratives, the history of Francophone slavery bubbles beneath the surface.

That certain French or Creole words, phrases, or quotations may have been included in these ex-slave narratives in order to preserve the "flavor of the talk" that Botkin so desired—that is, that longer non-English narratives were published with only sprinklings of

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Creole dialect left intact for the sake of local color—is indicated by additional narratives gathered by the FWP beyond Louisiana. Each WPA interview was filed with an official “Appraisal Sheet,” which included the name of the interviewee, the editor, a summary of the narrative’s content, suggested revisions and corrections, and other editorial commentary.

of C. Project Form - 2	Accession No. 420032
WPA WRITERS' PROGRAM RECORDS Appraisal Sheet	
1. Title: ("They Sang and Whistled in the Fields")	
2. Place and date of origin: Beaumont, Texas. Received at the Washington Office of the Federal Writers' Project on October 2, 1937	
3. Compiler or field worker: Unnamed	
4. Editor: Unnamed. J. Frank Davis, State Director	
5. Description:	
(a) number of pages: 3	
(b) condition of manuscript: Edited at Texas Writers' Project	
(c) purpose: Proposed book of ex-slave narratives based on a questionnaire designed "to get the Negro to thinking and talking about the days of slavery".	
(d) status of the study: Approximately 2000 interviews collected. Dormant since 1938.	
6. Sources: Interview with La San Mire at Beaumont, Texas	
7. Reliability and value of material: A personal history of Creole childhood and youth in Louisiana, in which the informant tells only what he remembers [↑] and remembers what made a vivid impression.	
8. Method of handling material: In first person and order of questioning; direct and business-like.	
9. Style: Translated from the Creole patois into conventional English with a sprinkling of Creole words and traces of French construction.	
10. Suggested revisions and corrections: Ready for publication after checking the Creole spellings (though latitude for variants must be allowed)	
11. Suggested uses or development: The Creole words have linguistic interest.	

Slave Narratives: Appraisal Sheets. Typewritten records prepared by the Library of Congress Project, Works Progress Administration for the District of Columbia under the direction of Benjamin A. Botkin. 1939–1941.

Each Appraisal Sheet provided space for the editor to describe the “reliability and value of the material” collected, as well as its “style.” These WPA Appraisal Sheets not only give us a critical view into the editorial methods of the field workers and administrators who gathered the 4,000-odd ex-slave narratives of *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*, but they also crucially tell us when French or Creole speech appears. Take, for example, the narrative of Olivier Blanchard (Beaumont, Texas), which is titled by the editors as “I Talk More of the French.” It is described as “A personal narrative of Louisiana French life, with two macabre stories of the yellow fever, on the legendary side,” rendered in “Quaint Louisiana French patois.” The interview is “A fresh experience, valuable to the social historian and the folklorist for its data on Louisiana French customs and two local tales” (*Slave Narratives*). Much like several of the WPA transcripts, Blanchard’s transcript exists in two versions—one from the Rare Book Room (RBR) of the Library of Congress, representing copies of the original WPA files deposited there, and an additional and more extensive narrative later retrieved from regional archives. The *Composite Autobiography* thus in many instances includes two distinct reproductions of a single ex-slave’s testimony, further complicating the interpretative task at hand.¹⁷

Both versions of Blanchard’s narrative mention his Francophone inflection: “Olivier Blanchard, 95 years old, was a slave of Clairville La San, who owned a large plantation in Martinville Parish, Louisiana. His father was a Frenchman and Olivier speaks rather haltingly, as though it is difficult for him to express his thoughts in English, for he has talked a species of French all his life” (Rawick 4: 90). The second version is more descriptive, adding that “A rather pugnacious disposition seems to be an outstanding characteristic of Olivier Blanchard, French negro. . . . His speech is not broken but rather halting as if he cannot express his thoughts well in the English tongue.” Both include variations on the sentence, “I talks mo’ French dan I does English ‘cause I comes from St. Martinville Parish over in Lou’siana” (Rawick 2: 324).

The narrative of Donaville Broussard (Beaumont, Texas) in the “Quaint Louisiana French patois” also exists in two versions—or, rather, two translations (*Slave Narratives*). The editorial preface to the extended interview describes Broussard as “a polished gentleman of his race” who “seated himself in the swing on his porch and gave the story of his life in the patois of the Louisiana French, which, in translation, follows” (Rawick 2: 454). The original narrative’s introduction also states that, “he gave the story of his life in the French patois spoken by Louisiana French Negroes, which has been translated into English” (Rawick 4: 151). The linguistic faithfulness of other entries is even less certain. That of Victor Duhon (Beaumont, Texas) is a “compromise with the Creole patois, as a result of interpreter’s efforts” (*Slave Narratives*). Gabriel Gilbert’s testimony (Beaumont, Texas) shows “Expressive dialect, mixed Negro and Creole” (*Slave Narratives*). Perhaps most tellingly, the interview with La San Mire (Beaumont, Texas) is “Translated from the Creole patois into conventional English with a sprinkling of Creole words and traces of French construction.” As such, “The Creole words have linguistic interest” (*Slave Narratives*). According to the unnamed translator, “La San’s patois is superior to that of the average French Negro” (Rawick 5: 107). As Mire recalls, “My parents were slaves. My father was a Spaniard, who spoke Spanish and French. My mother spoke French, the old master too, all Creoles. I, as all the other slaves, spoke French” (5: 105). His narrative is, indeed, sprinkled with Creole vocabulary: “coups de dault” (beatings), “chahintes” (coons), “rat

bois" (possum), "vincaire" (an herb), "la chaspare" (sarsaparilla), "la pedecha" (an herb), "des regulateurs" (patent medicines), and "traiteurs" ("a charm-doctor, always a Negro") (5: 108–109). In fact, the second version of La San Mire's account in Rawick's collection is the only narrative I have found that is first reproduced entirely in French followed by an English translation (Rawick 7: 2702–09).

There are, at the very least, several dozen ex-slave narratives dispersed throughout the WPA collection—both in the *Composite Autobiography* and in smaller collections like *Mother Wit*—that contain French or Creole language, were translated into English from some form of French or Creole, or mention in some way the presence of French slavery in the United States (see Appendix A). The idiosyncrasy of their collection and presentation presents serious analytical problems, not the least because the critical framework developed around the antebellum slave narrative does not account for the central practical and theoretical questions posed by these sources: namely, those of multilingualism and translation.¹⁸ Furthermore, the sociological-ethnographic impulse and folkloric foundation underlying the publication of enslaved testimony under the FWP—especially in Louisiana, but elsewhere, too—make these narratives essentially incoherent and illegible according to the historical rubric of abolitionist discourse that has largely guided the interpretation of American slave narratives. We might consider how the LWP interviews—the so-called "other" slave narratives—have been overlooked or discarded for their generic and historical non-conformity to the antebellum tradition. Stylistically and contextually—and linguistically—distinct from their nineteenth-century (and earlier) antecedents, the FWP folk tales are still legitimate testimonial sources. The internal linguistic and stylistic fragmentation of the FWP narratives indicates, more broadly, the generic multiplicity of the slave narrative tradition in its entirety—thus attempts to uncover Francophone testimony must attend to the variability and contingency of the centuries-long discourse of which Equiano (if he is the guiding model) is but a single instance. The preceding analysis is an attempt to outline in broad strokes the ideological and methodological difficulties of that very task, while also suggesting that this internal incoherence should not be taken as a problem to be solved, but rather as a necessary condition of enslaved testimonial literature in America.

These texts significantly enrich the study of slavery in the United States and the history of Francophone slavery in the Americas. The WPA narratives reveal the confluence of the Francophone diaspora and the history of the United States. Indeed, as some recent scholarship has urged, we must begin to conceptualize and theorize the formerly French territories of the United States, especially Louisiana, as an extension of circum-Caribbean networks of cultural exchange and shared memory.¹⁹ Numerous ex-slave interviews from Louisiana and Texas, for instance, recount family histories dating back to the Haitian Revolution. The histories of enslavement, freedom, diaspora, and language in the Caribbean and Francophone America must be mutually embedded. They also, perhaps most crucially, reveal the dynamic cultural production of a region necessarily hybridized by the history of its conquest. Belonging at once to the United States and France, situated at the nexus of the Caribbean basin and its inland diaspora, rooted in the convergence of two expanding slave plantation regimes—one descending upon it from the Upper South, the other reaching it from the West Indies—Louisiana's enslaved and formerly enslaved population must have necessarily produced creolized forms. The "unwritten" literary culture of Francophone Louisiana thereby demands that the social, cultural, and histori-

cal dynamics of American plantation slavery be understood with respect to translation, multilingualism, and the “creole.” Last, the hazy provenance of these narratives might indicate that there is material yet to discover. If Harriette Michinard and Jeanne Arguedas translated ex-slave interviews from the French, might these original manuscripts remain? The LWP’s seemingly elusive paper trail—compounded by the glaring fact that these narratives were presumed not to exist until several decades after the fact—should encourage further archival inquiry into the collection and production of these tales.

And further: Such peculiar folk artifacts may surely help us excavate and attend to the Francophone inflections of American—or at least Southern—literature more generally. The linguistic collisions, erasures, and echoes presented herein resonate not just with the folkloristic and fictional accounts of writers like Lyle Saxon who directly oversaw the Louisiana Writers’ Project, but with others, too. Consider George Washington Cable, whose *Old Creole Days* (1883) and *The Grandissimes: A Story of Creole Life* (1880) face linguistic difference head-on, as in the extended monologue in the latter novel by the old slave woman Clemence “pleading, excusing, apologizing, warning, threatening, in Black English, in Creole, in Louisiana Standard French” (Rosenwald 78). The creole tongue of Louisiana’s enslaved thus provided multilingual contours to the works of both Francophone and Anglophone authors in the Southern tradition.²⁰ Cable was also an active collector of folk material, publishing “Creole Slave Songs” in *The Century Magazine* in 1886.²¹ As an amateur translator of Louisiana patois, Cable quite eerily anticipated the linguistic fragmentation of the FWP collection: “As a translator Cable is an improviser, a protean opportunist, undeterred by the hobgoblin of inconsistency, in love with the range of possibility that the translator’s task presents,” writes Lawrence Rosenwald. “In ‘Creole Slave Songs’ we encounter that range in full: translation as absence . . . translation as annihilation . . . scholarly translations . . . literary translations” (68). Cable’s idiosyncratic treatment of creole folklore in both nonfiction and novelistic accounts aptly describes ex-slave testimony in the twentieth century.²²

William Faulkner, too, heard the reverberations—as when Ellen Coldfied and Thomas Sutpen are wedded, their carriage besieged by hurled “clods of dirt and vegetable refuse” (57): “She turned and saw one of the negroes, his torch raised and in the act of springing toward the crowd, the faces, when Sutpen spoke to him in that tongue which even now a good part of the country did not know was a civilized language” (56). Faulkner’s evocation of “that tongue” always emphasizes its inscrutability. It seems Sutpen’s demoniac grit is expressed equally by his readiness to wrestle bare-skinned and bloody with his Negro slaves as by his ability to communicate in their language—to speak on those lower frequencies almost inaudible to others, especially the novel’s narrators. It is this unspoken “sort of French and not some dark and fatal tongue of their own” that spookily articulates the primal underbelly of the bombast of Sutpen’s Hundred (36). It is also the linguistic matrix of Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County, where the French Architect “had come all the way from Martinique” to build Sutpen’s castle, where “a swarthy man resembling a creature out of an old woodcut of the French Revolution erupts . . . speaking to Bon in French which Henry does not understand” (35, 112). A French not understood: This may be fitting paraphrase for the condition of enslaved testimony in Louisiana and its sprawl.

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NOTES

1. The exact number of extant slave narratives is open to debate; the final calculation is of course determined by the functioning definition of the “slave narrative.” Marion Wilson Starling, whose generic framework is most expansive, sets the number at exactly 6,006 (xviii). Deborah Jensen also claims more than 6,000 texts (perhaps following Starling’s lead) (Jensen 2). Henry Louis Gates has written that the number is far fewer at 204, with exactly half that number published before and after the Civil War, respectively (his number is based on William L. Andrews’s online North American Slave Narrative Collection). See Gates and Andrews.
2. Miller here does not intend to imply that there is no Francophone abolitionist literary tradition. Indeed, France gave birth to a large and diverse abolitionist tradition, which Miller himself discusses. Moreover, there were several Francophone novels produced by Louisiana writers that modeled themselves after *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—notably, Charles Testut’s radical anti-slavery novel *Le Vieux Salomon* (1872) and Alfred Mercier’s plantation novel *L’Habitation Saint-Ybars* (1881). On Testut, see Abel. On French abolitionist literature, see especially Kadish and Massardier-Kenney *Translating Slavery*, Vol. 1 and *Translating Slavery*, Vol. 2.
3. For the treatment of ex-slave narratives in historical scholarship, see Yetman, “Ex-Slave Interviews and the Historiography of Slavery.”
4. This is actually an oversimplification. The American slave narrative tradition can be subdivided into four larger waves. The first group includes early Black Atlantic authors John Marrant (1760), Ukawsaw Gronniosaw (1770), Ottobah Cugoana (1787), Olaudah Equiano (1789), and John Jea (1811), all of whose works combined the captivity narrative, spiritual autobiography, and early anti-slavery rhetoric. The second group represents the “boom years” or “golden age” of the slave narrative from 1830–1865, during which the works of Charles Ball (1837), Frederick Douglass (1845), William Wells Brown (1847), Henry Bibb (1849), Solomon Northup (1853), and Harriet Jacobs (1861) bore official imprimatur of Anglophone abolitionism. The third group comprises postbellum ex-slave autobiographies, best typified by Booker T. Washington’s *Up from Slavery* (1901). The final and fourth group consists of ex-slave interviews conducted by the Federal Writers’ Project during the 1930s.
5. As Norman Yetman notes, the slave narrative collection of the WPA represents a far better sampling of the ex-slave population than the antebellum narratives, as “The major categories of slave occupations were all adequately represented.” As a result, the WPA archive is devoid of the “sample bias that characterized the universe of the antebellum slave narrative” and the “selective biases encountered in historical research” based on those sources (“The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection” 535). On the WPA narratives as historical sources, see Schwartz.
6. Where the WPA narrative tradition diverges from historical precedent is not, as one might assume, in their interview format. The dictation of enslaved testimony was a common practice in the antebellum context. Such renowned sources as those attributed to Briton Hammon, John Marrant, Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, Mary Prince, Sojourner Truth, Nat Turner, and even the literate Solomon Northup were produced with the aid of an amanuensis-editor. Any distinction between the antebellum and WPA narratives based on the supposition that one is a form of written testimony and the other a form of oral testimony is baseless.
7. John Blassingame cautions against over-emphasizing the alleged influence of professional abolitionists on the development of the slave narrative in the antebellum era: “Generally, the editors of the antebellum narratives were an impressive group of people noted for their integrity. Most of those for whom biographical data were available were engaged in professions (lawyers, scientists, teachers, historians, journalists, ministers, and physicians) and businesses where they had gained a great deal of prior experience in separating truth from fiction, applying rules of evidence, and accurately portraying men and events. Many of them were either antagonistic to or had little connection with professional abolitionists” (474).

8. Yetman writes that the WPA slave narrative collection was inspired by growing interest in Negro folklore starting in the 1920s: "The fascination with Negro folklore, which extended back to the nineteenth century, increased significantly during the twenties and was enlivened by innovations such as the unique brand of folk sociology pioneered by Howard W. Odum at the University of North Carolina. This burgeoning interest in the Negro was enhanced immeasurably by the attention given by the rapidly expanding disciplines of anthropology and sociology" ("The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection" 539).
9. For more on the development of WPA questionnaires, see Musher.
10. Saxon's oversight of the Louisiana Writers' Project also importantly reveals the unique, if not troubled, history of the LWP narratives. If one were to go to a library—for example, the National Archives in Washington, DC—one would most likely find the entire 41-volume *American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* edited by George P. Rawick and published initially in 1972, three decades after the work of the FWP concluded. If one were to peruse just the bindings of this collection, one might notice the absence of the Louisiana narratives and presume they simply do not exist. Saxon, as if to mark his territory, retained all materials gathered by the LWP in Louisiana depositories, including local colleges and universities. He kept the ex-slave interviews for himself, stowing them at his Melrose Plantation for personal use. After Saxon's death in 1946, his papers were archived at Northwestern State University of Louisiana and the State Library of Louisiana. Hence when Rawick began to collect and ultimately published the WPA narratives, he was missing all material from Louisiana. It was previously believed that Louisiana did not take part in the collection of ex-slave narratives under the Federal Writers' Program. Yetman adds in a footnote: "Louisiana was the sole southern state that did not participate in the Writers' Project ex-slave study. Narratives were collected in Louisiana after the termination of the Writers' Project and were employed in the writing of the Louisiana Writers' Program's Gumbo Ya-Ya (Boston, 1945), a miscellany of Louisiana folklore. Carbon typescripts of the original narratives are deposited in the Louisiana State Library, Baton Rouge" ("The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection" 553).
11. Yetman explains that the collection of enslaved testimony was not among the primary goals of the Federal Writers' Project at its inception: "Preliminary plans for the Writers' Project made no provision for collecting slave autobiographies and reminiscences. Interviews with former slaves were undertaken spontaneously after the inception of the FWP and were included among the activities of several southern Writers' Projects for almost a year before these largely desultory efforts were transformed into a concerted regional project co-ordinated by the Washington office" ("The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection" 548).
12. Nowhere is it mentioned whether these "informants" were ex-slaves or free people of color (*gens du couleur libres*).
13. On the interview scenario, Blassingame writes: "Social scientists have pinpointed several problems in interpreting orallore which are especially evident in the WPA interviews. The first and most important question one must raise about these sources is whether the interview situation was conducive to the accurate communication and recording of what the informants remembered of slavery" (481). For a discussion of the WPA texts along three rubrics (authenticity, bias, and candor) see Musher. For a more in-depth consideration of memory in the WPA sources see Spindel.
14. Unfortunately, I do not have the competency in Creole to assess the accuracy or fidelity of these translations. The collection of Works Progress Administration files held at the State Library of Louisiana includes a manuscript copy (object file name "wp002608") of Alfred Mercier's "Study on the Creole Language in Louisiana" (1880), apparently an English translation of his work *Étude sur la langue créole en Louisiane* of the same year. Mercier concludes his study of Creole grammar and syntax with a "Negro account," a folk tale called, "The Marriage of Miss Calinda." The translator writes of Mercier's text: "The story is given first in Creole, then in good French. I am translating it only into good English" (15). According to Mercier's explanations, it seems that the cited LWP translations represent at least a somewhat accurate rendering of the Creole. It may very well be the case that Mercier's text—especially its English translation housed in the LWP archives—was used by fieldworkers or interviewers as a guide to the Creole language and its translation.
15. Among the LWP papers in the Louisiana State Library is a short document by Michinard (object file name "wp004225") containing three English translations of Creole songs and games.
16. A draft of Arguedas's translation of Melinda's account is held in the Louisiana Writers' Program archives at the State Library of Louisiana. The typeset manuscript (object file name "wp003448") includes a short epigraph to Melinda's tale not included in *Mother Wit*: "Do you know why my Grandma had only one arm? Well, I will tell you, but you must keep it a secret, I am telling this in a whisper, and you must not repeat it to anyone" (1). The manuscript also includes additional Creole

passages, for example: "I was sittin' on the front steps shuckin' corn, the grinding season was at its height, we could hear the songs of the negroes cutting canes in the field: 'Moulin grille di cane . . . shakes, shakes, les couteaux.' (Sharpen the knives, sharpen the knives, the mill is grinding the cane.)" (2). The manuscript also contains minor editorial notes, including possible English translations of French terms and question marks over unclear phrases.

17. The collection of narratives contained in the Rare Book Room (RBR) of the Library of Congress was gathered and organized by Benjamin Botkin at the conclusion of the Federal Writers' Project's activities. When George P. Rawick assembled the *Composite Autobiography*, he included both the versions originally deposited in the RBR as well as the often longer, unedited manuscripts of narratives available in local or regional archives nationwide. The RBR collection not only contained abbreviated versions of some 275 narratives, but it also lacked significant numbers of narratives—pages in the thousands—from several states. Rawick writes: "The major important characteristic of these newly discovered versions of the RBR collection is that they are, with rare exception, considerably longer. In addition, they provide the names of the interviewers and information about where the interviews were held, information that had been deleted from the RBR versions. . . . Thus, these narratives as a group are closer to the original spoken narratives than the previously unpublished group" (*The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* xxix). In the case of the Louisiana narratives, these multiple versions of identical texts differed not only in length but also—where French or Creole speech is concerned—in translation and treatment of language.
18. On the methodological problems posed by language: "Acknowledging that language's imprecision is not a shortcoming eliminates the need to classify the narratives as either history, folklore, literature, or social science, while making it possible to see them as adjuncts of various disciplines that can in turn benefit from exchanging insights on how to read and re-read them. In this sense, they go beyond being texts, per se, and are discourses that refer to broad ideological issues" (Hill 70).
19. For Louisiana's place in circum-Caribbean history and culture, see Bell; Bond; Hall; Johnson; Loichot; Munro and Britton; and Vidal. For a study of Louisiana creole literature, see Brosman. For studies of the Francophone literature of Louisiana, see O'Neill; Pratt; and Shapiro.
20. For more on American multilingual literature, see Øverland; Shell; Sollors; and Shell and Sollors.
21. Cable's "Creole Slave Songs" is equal parts folklore, ethnography, musicology (including notation of song melodies), and linguistics, including several pen and ink sketches of scenes from the tales. In the article, Cable himself raises the question of translation by providing the original Creole text and followed by rough English translation: "Shall we translate literally?" (811). Cable writes of the language: "The patois in which these songs are found is common, with broad local variations, wherever the black man and the French language are met in the mainland or island regions that border the Gulf and the Caribbean Sea. It approaches probably nearer to good French in Louisiana than anywhere in the Antilles. Yet it is not merely bad or broken French; it is the natural result from the effort of a savage people to take up the language of an old and highly refined civilization, and is much more than a jargon. The humble conditions and great numbers of the slave-caste promoted the evolution of an African-Creole dialect" (807).
22. For more on George Washington Cable and his treatment of Louisiana French Creole, see Jones.

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APPENDIX A

Partial list of WPA narratives containing French or Creole, or mentioning French slavery.

A.B, X-Y = Volume A, Part B, p. X-Y

SQ A.B, X-Y = Supplement, Series Q, Volume A, Part B, p. X-Y

MW = *Mother Wit: The Ex-Slave Narratives of the Louisiana Writers' Project*

Subject	Interviewer	Source 1	Source 2	Record #
Pierre Auquin	N/A	MW 20-23	N/A	N/A
Marie Brown	N/A	MW 33-36	N/A	N/A
Francis Doby	Harriette Michinard	MW 51-61	N/A	N/A
Anita Fonvergne	N/A	MW 73-82	N/A	N/A
Marry Harris	N/A	MW 94-95	N/A	N/A
Elizabeth Ross Hite	N/A	MW 98-110	N/A	N/A
Melinda	Jeanne Arguedas	MW 165-172	N/A	N/A
Charity Parker	N/A	MW 176-178	N/A	N/A
Albert Patterson	N/A	MW 178-180	N/A	N/A
Henry Reed	N/A	MW 185-186	N/A	N/A
Clorie Turner	Harriette Michinard	MW 207	N/A	N/A
Mrs. Webb	Harriette Michinard	MW 209	N/A	N/A
Julia Woodrich	N/A	MW 217	N/A	N/A
Olivier Blanchard	Fred Dibble	4.1, 90-92	S2 2.1, 324-29	420142
Donaville Broussard	Fred Dibble	4.1, 151-53	S2 2.1, 454-59	420014
Victor Duhon	Fred Dibble	4.1, 307-08	S2 4.3, 1238-41	420131
Orelia Alexia Franks	Fred Dibble	4.2, 60-62	S2 4.3, 1422-26	420062
Gabriel Gilbert	Fred Dibble	4.2, 68-70	S2 5.4, 1477-82	420303
La San Mire	Velma Saroy	5.3, 107-09	S2 7.6, 2702-09	420032
Frank Bell	B.E. Davis	4.1, 59-61	S2 2.1, 237-43	N/A
Pauline Johnson and				
Felice Bourdreaux	Fred Dibble	4.2, 225-27	S2 6.5 2035-42	N/A
M.S. Fayman	Rogers	16.3, 10-13	N/A	N/A

C A L L A L O O

Subject	Interviewer	Source 1	Source 2	Record #
Henri Necaïse	C.E. Wells	7.2, 119-24	S1 9.4, 1622-35	N/A
Silvia King	Mrs. Wade Davis	4.2, 290-95	S2 6.5, 2224-39	N/A
Sylvester Sostan Wickliffe	Fred Dibble	5.4, 155-59	S2 10.9, 4037-45	N/A
Hannah Travis	Samuel Taylor	10.6, 346-52	N/A	N/A
Sneed Teague	Irene Robertson	10.6 280-81	N/A	N/A
Louis Lucas	Samuel Taylor	9.4, 297-303	N/A	N/A
Isabella Duke	Irene Robertson	8.2 214-16	N/A	N/A
Isaac Crawford	Irene Robertson	8.2 57-58	N/A	N/A
Mary Kincheon Edwards	Alfred Menn	4.2 15-16	S2 4.3 1278-81	N/A
Julia Blanks	N/A	4.1, 83-105	N/A	N/A
Allen V. Manning	N/A	7.1, 215-220	N/A	N/A