

Black Lives Matter, So Do Their Voices:
Centering the Black Experience in Oral History Projects

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Oral History: Women & War
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Oral Tradition as Survival and Knowledge Transfer

History is the art of telling stories that provide a deeper understanding of who we are as a human race. Historians use evidence to comprehend people's past experiences, rendering the use of oral history a valuable source of insight. Unfortunately, in many historical practices, only some stories are told. The preserved and often privileged voices become source material for historical analysis and thereby assume incredible power when writing America's historical narrative. This facet alone has affected generations of African American communities, who are vulnerable to the erasure of their histories from historical documentation, educational curricula, legal policies, and more due to the suppression of Black voice and influence.

African Americans had an oral history before a written one, so oral history traditions have remained the crux of historical preservation for centuries. Black communities have preserved their history by consciously integrating storytelling practices to forgo the systematic silencing of their presence in the American story. As a result, memories of ancient elders have survived from one generation to another, and scholars have since turned to oral history projects to better document the Afro-American experience. Despite these efforts, written documents remain the traditional standard for historical research, leaving scholars to debate what happens when those sources are manipulated or nonexistent, especially in underrepresented communities.

Today, the fight for equal rights and protection continues, a reality harshly reflected in the lack of documentation about the Black past. This case study, therefore, serves as a small glimpse into the nuances of historical preservation by looking at the story of Black female veterans. Unfortunately, some of their military experiences are riddled with racial and gender discrimination, despite their incredible contributions. As a result, many of their efforts remain

without recognition or reward. Yet, from the Revolutionary War beginning in 1775 and onward, Black women were always there.¹

Black female veterans are just one of many groups that suffer from the intentional erasure of Black presence in the American story. Oral history methodologies, however, can help mend this disparity. Looking at the roots of oral history tradition in African culture, we acknowledge their vitalness to historical documentation today. As Rosemary Mullally stated in 2005, “we sing the praises of our ancestors, we tell their stories, we give them their rightful place in history and we are the keepers of their memories.”²

Undeniably, there is no question that slavery has shaped every aspect of American culture. The peculiar institution lasted over two centuries and influenced the culture, politics, and economics we know and practice today. According to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, edited by professors David Eltis and David Richardson, 439,575 captured Africans were forced to migrate to the Americas by the 1860s.³ This statistic, albeit alarming, highlights the enormous wave of an African presence in the New World. Nonetheless, the most crucial element to acknowledge in the broader picture is the agency of Africans in the resistance to slavery and the creation of an African American culture.

Africans were not implicit or passive and did not abandon their rich customs or traditions. Instead, they adopted these practices and used them as a way to resist assimilation and retain elements of their homeland.⁴ Even though these captured Africans came from several different geographical locations, social classes, and religions, they communicated and worked together to preserve and perpetuate a new cultural memory fused with sacred practice in this unknown territory.⁵ Some African customs they retained include spiritual practices, community organization, and successive African name-giving.⁶ However, one of their most prized traditions

was storytelling and oral tradition, which acted as the vehicle for historical remembrance to pass from one generation to another.

The most telling example of this intentional cultural preservation is through a designated “griot.” Traditionally a West African oral concept, griot men and women travel from village to village, singing stories of the past and bringing the latest news.⁷ According to America’s Black Holocaust Museum, griots act “as living newspapers, carrying an incredible store of local history and current events.”⁸ In the broadest definition, a griot is synonymous with culture because “it refers to the collection of stories, genealogies, histories, songs, and rituals only to disseminate them throughout the people so that everyone shares the same history.”⁹

Remnants of these West African customs are present in African American communities today. Black communities continue to value the importance of oral history and testimony and depend on these practices to educate themselves and others. For example, The United States African American Griots website expresses a dedication “to assisting anyone in pursuit of their African-American ancestry by being an archive for African American records of historic proportion.”¹⁰ This website houses a surname registry, military documents up to 1945, land records, death certificates, slave sales, and so much more. They also assist anyone who submits a request, helping those unfamiliar with digital archives navigate through their offerings.¹¹ This website, amongst a few others, demonstrates the will and commitment African Americans have to obtaining and perpetuating knowledge about themselves and their ancestors.

Much like African tradition, various other parts of the world utilized spoken word passed down through successive generations to memorialize recollections of past events. These forms of oral tradition varied, but all served to preserve cultural heritage. Since the turn of the century, collective memory has received increased attention as a primary tool for understanding cultural

norms and how practices survive. However, this was not always the case. As recently as the mid-twentieth century, trained historians often rejected and challenged the use of memory as primary sources, instead rendering oral accounts suspicious and unreliable.

As a result, an explicit academic distinction between oral traditions and oral history emerged, and the subject of history transformed into an accepted discipline over time. Still, historical memory is considered less sophisticated and trustworthy in many academic circles.¹² On the contrary, according to renowned oral historian Alessandro Portelli, oral history is “a powerful tool for discovering, exploring, and evaluating...how people make sense of their past, how they connect individual experience and its social context, how the past becomes part of the present, and how people use it to interpret their lives and the world around them.”¹³

These challenges and apprehensions took greater shape as the quest for Black recognition emerged more profoundly through Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Although the pursuit of representation remains in Black communities today, intentional efforts are present in hopes of mending this rupture between Black history and the American story. Oral history methodologies are part of this healing process and have remained instrumental in uncovering the past, especially in such a marginalized and silenced community. As Nathan Huggins states, “altering American history to account fully for the nation’s black voices would change the tone and shape – the frame and substance – of the entire story.”¹⁴ Oral history, therefore, can situate African Americans in their rightful place, among other trailblazers, initiative makers, and innovative thinkers.

WPA Slave Narrative Collection: A Triumph or Hinderance?

Before developing oral history as an academic phenomenon, private attempts to gather the life histories of freed African American men and women began during the late 1920s and

1930s.¹⁵ Created in response to the Great Depression, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) employed writers, artists, and musicians, and launched a massive oral history project. In 1938, the WPA employed more than 3.3 million Americans.¹⁶ African Americans made up 15 percent of the total workforce, with nearly 350,000 Black men and women employed.¹⁷

On the surface, the WPA made outstanding contributions to preserving African American culture and history with the Federal Writers' Project. This program "collected interviews, articles and notes on African American life in the South, including oral histories of former slaves."¹⁸ Although white and Black Americans were mutually involved in collecting these histories, African Americans were forced to conduct these interviews in segregated units. These interviewers made up the Negro Writers' Unit in Virginia, Louisiana, and Florida and "interviewed a substantial number of former slaves as an integral part of their quest for indigenous African-American folk materials."¹⁹ Black members worked incredibly hard to document the legacy of slavery and anti-Black racism that continued to plague their communities.

Black interviewers were "the last hired and usually first to be fired when budget cuts occurred."²⁰ Therefore, their presence in this Federal program did not guarantee recognition of their voice in this large-scale oral history project. Still, oral historians have since turned to these narratives to glean further insight into the transition from slavery to freedom. Fortunately, few scholars, such as Catherine A. Stewart and Rebecca Onion, have investigated how African Americans perpetually struggled to have their stories heard, respected, and documented, despite efforts made by the WPA Slave Narrative Collection.

In Stewart's monograph titled *Long Past Slavery: Representing Race in the Federal Writer's Project*, evidence suggests how white interviewers opposed asking questions about

slavery, attempting to ignore the detriment slavery had on the psyche and livelihood of African Americans. *Long Past Slavery* also illustrates the role of racist biases and how this often led to the misrepresentation of narrators.²¹ This misrepresentation not only discredits the validity of this project but creates a sense of mistrust in the African American community.

In the Jim Crow South, as one could imagine, the presence of any white interviewer could make a Black narrator rightfully skeptical or apprehensive.²² Interview records show “that some interviewers didn’t explain their presence, leaving the people whose houses they were visiting to arrive at their own conclusions about their visitor’s intentions.”²³ Stewart’s work emphasizes how white stereotypes of Southern African Americans as “rural, humble, superstitious, and uneducated” influenced the majority of the WPA Slave Narrative Collection.²⁴ African Americans were incredibly aware of this and often declined or limited their involvement in this project. In the words of the great Lucille Clifton, “They ask me to remember but they want me to remember their memories and I keep on remembering mine.”²⁵

Likewise, Rebecca Onion analyzes the toll positionality has on the formation of this collection in a 2016 article titled “Is the Greatest Collection of Slave Narratives Tainted by Racism?” Onion’s work emphasizes the involvement of the United Daughters Confederacy, for example, whose goals were to memorialize the Old South instead of the lived Black experience.²⁶ Onion begs the question: “In the 1930s, the federal government sent (mostly white) interviewers to learn about slavery from formerly enslaved people. Can we trust the stories they brought back?”²⁷ Onion’s article, hopefully, provokes thought for historians who may utilize this collection in forthcoming works.

With this knowingness, African Americans persisted, spearheading large-scale oral history projects of their own in the culminating years. For example, the Black Women Oral

History Project interviewed 72 women between 1976 and 1981 to document their significant contributions to American society.²⁸ Many narrators had professions in education, government, the arts, business, medicine, law, and social work.²⁹ This collection is instrumental in the way it offered African American women the agency to represent themselves in their most accurate form, despite racist misconceptions and stereotypes. This collection is accessible today through the Harvard Radcliffe Institute's Schlesinger Library website.

Similarly, perhaps most notably, nonprofit research and educational institution known as The HistoryMakers continues to record African American oral histories. According to the website's mission statement, they are "committed to preserving and making widely accessible the untold personal stories of well-known and unsung African Americans."³⁰ With these oral testimonies, The HistoryMakers continue refashioning a more inclusive American history while educating and enlightening millions of people. In a world where European history is part of the educational core curriculum, but students can only learn Black history through an elective, the need for Black stories to be integrated into American history is at its highest. The HistoryMakers project continues to mend this disparity through publicly accessible oral testimony and memory.

There is a moderate amount of research surrounding oral history methodologies and their usefulness to Black history. Still, some African Americans express reservations about oral history as a means to investigate the Black past. Many carry the sentiment that non-Black interviewers will misuse and misrepresent their life stories, leaving scholars to question whether "outsiders" can accurately document and preserve Black history. Unfortunately, there is still a sense of distrust, a feeling that traces back to the WPA Slave Narrative Collection.

Distrust and apprehension within the African American community are vital to acknowledge because they reveal an opportunity for growth and change in the history field. Oral

history methodologies can defy stereotypes and racist silences about Black lives, but without their involvement and comfortability, the chance to hear their stories decreases, leaving others to speak for them. Nonetheless, utilizing oral history to situate Black Americans in our nation's narrative can potentially fill some of the most resounding gaps, as demonstrated by The Black Women Oral History Project and The HistoryMakers.

The Value of Black Female Veteran Voices

African American women have played a role in all war efforts in United States history. They not only offered their support on the battlefield and home front, acting as nurses and providing spiritual comfort, but they also offered their intellect, leadership, and physical ability. This trend continued through 2010 when demographic data collected by the U.S. Department of Defense revealed that Black women constitute nearly one-third, 31 percent, of all 167,000 enlisted military women.³¹ Yet, despite this, their stories remain invisible in most historical narratives.

When you look at history textbooks, it is uncommon to read about women, especially Black women, and their achievements in society. Although we learn about Harriett Tubman, for example, and her pioneering efforts during the underground railroad, her contributions as a union spy and the first Black woman to ever lead an American mission during the American Civil War go unnoticed. Likewise, Cathay Williams, the first known African American woman to serve as a Buffalo Soldier, suffers from a similar fate.³² Still, these prominent women, amongst many others, paved the way for generations of Black servicewomen to follow.

The importance of representation, especially in historical documentation, is exemplified upon a class trip to the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) Special Collections. This archive is a nationally recognized repository “documenting the diverse histories and

development of San Antonio and South Texas.”³³ This university houses a plethora of research materials chronicling the lives of several groups, such as LGBTQ communities, Mexican Americans, and African Americans. To uncover the historical importance of women in the military, Professor Kirsten Gardner’s Spring 2022 “Oral History: Women and War” graduate class took a field trip to look at an impressive collection created for the Women’s Overseas Service League (WOSL.) This organization, founded in 1921, is characterized by one student as “made for women, by women.”³⁴ According to the organization’s website, “a strong sense of obligation to one another, to community, state and nation prevails through WOSL.”³⁵

As Professor Gardner’s class looked through the selected artifacts, however, it is clear that this pathbreaking organization forgot to acknowledge one thing – women of color. Amid hundreds of photographs, personal family scrapbooks, art, articles, and more, no single woman of color is shown. Reading through the organization’s website, one may feel that this group helped all servicewomen and ex-servicewomen. Unfortunately, the documentation provided to UTSA Special Collections expresses otherwise, leaving visitors questioning what and whom this organization stood for. As the class’s visit came to a close, the phrase “representation matters” could not ring more true.

Despite WOSL’s silences, the presence of African American women in the military is undeniable. The only way to ensure their presence is visible is to continue maintaining the heritage of African American women who have served and continue to serve. Black female self-image, like any other, “is complex and cannot be reduced to a single experience.”³⁶ Therefore, one Black woman cannot speak for all Black women. For this reason, using oral history testimony and memory is paramount. The best way to fully depict Black female veterans legitimately is to show the variety of experiences and self-perceptions they embody.³⁷ Oral

history, and all its benefits, has the potential to illuminate the “multilayered texture of black women’s lives.”³⁸

Be the Change

The Women and War Oral History Project seeks to collect all women’s oral histories in the military, a representation not as prevalent in some existing oral history projects. UTSA received an award of \$100,000 from the National Endowment for the Humanities to comprise these testimonies into a digital archive publicly accessible through the UTSA library website.³⁹ With the leadership of Kirsten Gardner and Valerie Martinez, history professors and co-directors of this project, students from UTSA and Our Lady of the Lake University (OLLU) have worked to conduct interviews with women from all over the country.

Over the semester, I had the opportunity to be involved in this project, dialoguing and interviewing Black women from different branches of the military and all different walks of life. These interviews have expanded my understanding of Black women in the military and the importance of giving underrepresented communities the platform to write the record straight. All the women I spoke to eagerly wanted the chance to be involved, expressing gratitude and excitement. Most importantly, they felt relief to know the Women and War Oral History Project made special efforts to capture their voices. This experience led me to reflect on a quote by Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis, “it is not necessarily education but rather opportunity that determined whether or not a black American’s story was printed.”⁴⁰

With an understanding of the misrepresentations of Black lives in historical documentation and media and some of the apprehensions surrounding the authentic preservation of their voices, I attempted to utilize my “insider” status to establish rapport with my narrators. Some women vocalized how my identity as a Black woman made for a more comfortable and

trustworthy experience. When I asked one woman to elaborate on this sentiment, she expressed how I would understand her dialogue and, more importantly, her silence and trusted me to portray her in the best light.

When I began working on this project, I had no idea how much of an impact my presence could make. I rarely saw other African American students in my history program, which felt lonely, but ultimately fueled my drive to keep going. Looking at history textbooks and library archives can be a harsh reality, one that I have struggled to accept during my academic career. To know your ancestors were instrumental in the evolvment of American society, but to see a blatant erasure of their presence, is disappointing and defeating. Still, I always understood that the only way to fix this is to be the change. By being involved in historical documentation and preservation, I hold the ability to influence transformation in the field.

My work as a graduate history student focuses mainly on African American history. However, after learning more about oral history, it is evident this field plays an essential role in the lived and documented Black experience. Moreover, it gives African Americans a sense of agency to authentically portray themselves. For this reason, I proposed creating a dedicated section for African American voices in the Women and War Oral History Project to my professor, who graciously supported and motivated my pursuit. Collectively we understood the obstacles African Americans face, especially with ongoing debates surrounding Critical Race Theory and other recent developments that threaten Black history in Texas. Therefore, we believed we could incorporate Black female veterans into history on their terms.

As an emerging historian, I am honored to highlight the efforts of pioneering African Americans. My goal is to situate African Americans at the forefront of history so that other students of color can see a reflection of themselves when they look to the Women and War Oral

History Project for their work. I also take pride in knowing my intentions act as a resistance to the erasure of African Americans in historical documentation. To study Black history is to pay homage to my family and to our ancestors, which fills me with a sense of pride and hope.

¹ “History of Black Women in the Military,” National Association of Black Military Women, accessed May 10, 2022, <https://www.nabmw.org/history-of-black-women-in-the-milit>.

² Ibid.

³ “Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade – Estimates,” Slave Voyages. Accessed June 8, 2021, <https://www.slavevoyages.org/assessment/estimates>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 113.

⁷ “What Is A Griot?,” America’s Black Holocaust Museum, accessed April 18, 2022, <https://www.abhmuseum.org/about/what-is-griot/>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ “Telling Our Story Through History and Genealogical Data,” U.S. African American Griots, accessed April 25, 2022, <https://sites.rootsweb.com/~aagriots/#:~:text=African%20American%20Griots.%20West%20African%20Griots%20are%20historians%2C,Guinea%2C%20Senegal%2C%20Ivory%20Coast%2C%20Mali%20and%20The%20Gambia>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Genevieve Fabre and Robert O’Meally, *History and Memory in African-American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 5.

¹³ Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader* (London: Routledge, 2016), 4.

¹⁴ Genevieve Fabre and Robert O’Meally, *History and Memory in African-American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 4.

¹⁵ “The WPA and the Slave Narrative Collection,” Library of Congress, accessed March 5, 2022, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/articles-and-essays/introduction-to-the-wpa-slave-narratives/wpa-and-the-slave-narrative-collection/>

¹⁶ “Work Progress Administration (WPA),” HISTORY, accessed August 31, 2022, <https://www.history.com/topics/great-depression/works-progress-administration>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Rebecca Onion, “Is the Greatest Collection of Slave Narratives Tainted by the Racism of Its Collectors?,” SLATE, accessed April 25, 2022, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/history/2016/07/can_wpa_slave_narratives_be_trusted_or_are_the_y_tainted_by_depression_era.html.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Catherine A. Stewart, *Long Past Slavery: Representing Race in the Federal Writers' Project* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), muse.jhu.edu/book/44784.

²⁵ “Poetry: Lucille Clifton – why some people be mad at me sometimes,” The Dewdrop, <https://thedewdrop.org/2020/06/10/lucille-clifton-why-some-people-be-mad-at-me-sometimes/>.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Rebecca Onion, “Is the Greatest Collection of Slave Narratives Tainted by the Racism of Its Collectors?,” SLATE, accessed April 25, 2022,

http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/history/2016/07/can_wpa_slave_narratives_be_trusted_or_are_they_tainted_by_depression_era.html.

²⁸ “Harvard & The Legacy of Slavery,” Harvard Radcliffe Institute, accessed April 21, 2022, <https://www.radcliffe.harvard.edu/about-the-institute/our-work/harvard-and-the-legacy-of-slavery-2#:~:text=The%20Black%20Women%20Oral%20History%20Project%20interviewed%2072,the%20arts%2C%20business%2C%20medicine%2C%20law%2C%20and%20social%20work.>

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ “Mission,” The HistoryMakers, accessed April 15, 2022, <https://www.thehistorymakers.org/about-us>

³¹ Julia Melin, “Desperate Choices: Why Black Women Join the U.S. Military at Higher Rates than Men and All Other Racial and Ethnic Groups,” *New England Journal of Public Policy* 28, no. 8 (2016), page 2, [https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol28/iss2/8/?utm_source=scholarworks.umb.edu%2Fnejpp%2Fvol28%2Fiss2%2F8&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages.](https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol28/iss2/8/?utm_source=scholarworks.umb.edu%2Fnejpp%2Fvol28%2Fiss2%2F8&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages)

³² “History of Black Women in the Military,” National Association of Black Military Women, accessed May 10, 2022, <https://www.nabmw.org/history-of-black-women-in-the-milit>.

³³ UTSA Libraries Special Collections, <https://lib.utsa.edu/specialcollections/>

³⁴ “History,” Women’s Overseas Service League, <http://wosl.org/>.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid, 52.

³⁷ Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis, “Black Women’s Life Stories: Reclaiming Self in Narrative Texts” in *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, ed. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York: Routledge, 2016), 43.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Carson Frame, “UTSA Awarded Grant To Collect Oral Histories From Women In The Military,” Texas Public Radio, accessed April 4, 2022, <https://www.tpr.org/military-veterans-issues/2018-12-24/utsa-awarded-grant-to-collect-oral-histories-from-women-in-the-military>.

⁴⁰ Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis, “Black Women’s Life Stories: Reclaiming Self in Narrative Texts” in *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, ed. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York: Routledge, 2016), 45.