

The Role of Clothing and Textiles in Defining “Family”: A Study of Narratives from the Former Slave Project

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Abstract

In the 1930s the United States Works Progress Administration (WPA) created The Federal Writers’ Project (FWP) to spark economic growth and produce resources about the country. A plan was developed to conduct interviews with formerly enslaved individuals, which became known as the Former Slave Project (FSP), the largest collection of life histories told by people formerly enslaved within the U.S. In recent years, the project’s methodological issues have become a discussion amongst researchers since motives of FSP administration and fieldworks were linked to politics and race. To perpetuate an ideological view of slavery, writers were able to edit in a manner that crafted a story of “family” between enslaved people and plantation owners. Clothing and textiles (C&T), a necessary part of people’s daily routine and family life, were built into the interview questions and discussed frequently in the narratives. This study is a re-examination of C&T’s role within the narratives of nineteen formerly enslaved women from Georgia using critical race methodology. The authors found that C&T discussion reinforces three concepts of family — genetic family, communal family, and the mythological “white family.”

INTRODUCTION

Clothing and textiles (C&T) played a complicated role in the lives of formerly enslaved individuals within the United States. C&T both suppressed the enslaved and liberated them simultaneously (Sanders, 2011). “King cotton” and a quickly evolving textile industry fueled sun-to-sun labor, enslaved people were given little to wear, and provided textiles were rough homespun called Negro cloth (Tortora & Marcketti, 2015, p. 348). If the enslaved were given bedding it was uncomfortable and the most common weapon used by plantation owners, a whip, was made from textiles. Despite these negative roles of C&T during this period, garments were also used as tools of agency to help facilitate escape, allowing individuals to visually manipulate their gender and/or class identity (Sanders, 2011). In addition, several researchers have discussed C&T’s ability to foster autonomy and self-authorship as a form of agency. The enslaved dyed their clothes with indigo, which was likely a technique rooted to their African heritage (Foster, 1997). Durkin (2019) argues that Sally Redoshi Smith, the last living transatlantic slave survivor, used quilting techniques to retain her West African identity. Fry (2002) explains that enslaved individuals used quilting as a survival mechanism to record experiences, literally writing a narrative with fabric. Furthermore, any control that enslaved people were able to acquire over their clothing, especially access to comfort, was an escape from the oppression of plantation owners (Sanders, 2011). Looking at Figure 1, we see in the background of a formerly enslaved woman’s living quarters, a wall of written documentation along with two handmade quilts.

Enslaved individual’s C&T before Emancipation has been researched using image analysis (Bohleke, 2014), newspapers (Hunt, 1996), primary interviews (Foster, 1997; Sanders, 2011), and other documents such as letters, slave notices, and plantation records. Gathering information about the C&T of the enslaved has been problematic since few slave garments exist, daguerreotype of slaves were rarely taken and tend to record white sitters only (Bohleke, 2014), and academic interests of dress historians have traditionally ignored African Americans (Sanders, 2011). For this reason, it is tempting for researchers to use archival materials that are accessible, abundant, and seemingly reliant. During the U.S. Great Depression in the 1930s, the Roosevelt administration created the United States Works Progress Administration (WPA), which had programs to help stimulate the economy.

The Federal Writers' Project (FWP) intended to produce works of culture/history, and one of its profound archival achievements is the Former Slave Project, the largest collection of ex-slave interviews. The Former Slave Project documents the narratives of over 2,300 individuals and has been used by researchers in various fields.

Narrative research is said to be beneficial if it can “provide us with access to people’s identity and personality” (Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 7). Specific events, timelines, people, and ways of being can be recalled through narratives, but this relies on memory and sometimes these are traumatic recollections. Regardless, narratives of the Former Slave Project have been used to gather information on C&T in the lives of enslaved people in the U.S. but as Sanders (2011) notes, this has been infrequent.

In recent years, qualitative researchers and historians have put energy into fully understanding the inner workings of the Former Slave Project. Past C&T studies using the FWP slave narrative collection have paid little regard to ethics and methods that were used to conduct the interviews. Catherine Stewart’s (2016) book *Long Past Slavery* examines the racial politics that motivated the project, how this was built into the research process, and the finished product that resulted in some truth but a lot of what Durkin (2019) calls “inaccuracies” (p. 634). During the time of the interviews (1936–1938) African Americans were moving North and the nation was reminiscing about the Civil War since it was the seventy-fifth anniversary. The agenda behind the



FIGURE 1 TITLE OF ARCHIVED CAPTION CARD: “MULATTO EX-SLAVE IN HER HOUSE NEAR GREENSBORO, ALABAMA.” PHOTOGRAPH BY JACK DELANO FOR THE FEDERAL WRITERS PROJECT MAY 1941. ACCESSED IN LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, 2021, JULY 29TH. SCREENSHOT BY AUTHOR FROM [HTTPS://WWW.LOC.GOV/ITEM/2017794838/](https://www.loc.gov/item/2017794838/).¹

¹ The collection does not contain images of formerly enslaved women from Georgia.

interviews was contradictory as it simultaneously aimed to harness 1) patriotism by acknowledging the need to document African American history in the United States and 2) white dominance through paternalistic action and sentiment. It would be remiss not to recognize the Former Slave Project's good intention, which gave a voice to so many silenced individuals. However, voices of the formerly enslaved were unfortunately manipulated many times by white editors to craft a version of slavery that questioned Emancipation, reinforcing the image of a devoted African American. Federal directors placed few limitations on the editing process — narratives were not limited in the amount of edits that could be made, which allowed FWP employees to “shape the content as well as the form” (Stewart, 2016, p. 64).

Kathryn Roulston (2019) advises qualitative researchers to look at archived data for methodological issues. She reminds us that fieldworkers in the Former Slave Project were mostly white and untrained, therefore they did not practice reflexivity that acknowledged their white privilege. Furthermore, Roulston describes a process that encouraged fieldworkers to gather folkloric stories that would be more publishable. John Lomax, the FWP's first folklore editor, sent instruction to find “colorful” individuals (Stewart, 2016, p. 90), and in some states these individuals had a photograph taken of them as well (see Figure 1). Roulston notes that Lomax sent a list of interview questions, orders to “copy the Negro expressions,” directions how to turn these “expressions” into “negro dialect” (Administrative files, Botkin, 1941, pp. xvii-xviii), and a list of words that could not be used. With so many expectations and limitations, the words of formerly enslaved were always at the mercy of the next person in control of the narrative. As previously mentioned, this unusual editing process was meant to paint an idealistic and paternalistic picture of slavery, or one that appeared less cruel than it was.

THE LOST CAUSE AND FALLACIES OF “FAMILY”

One method to perpetuate this racist ideology of slavery was to position the plantation owners and slaves “like family” (Stewart, 2016, p. 44). This mythological idea of having a “white family” was supposed to prove that slaves were treated in a caring manner and that positive bonds were formed. After the Civil War, southern aristocrats attempted to establish their own unbiased perception of history, by eliminating certain books, silencing teachers, and rewriting their own history (Bailey, 1991). This pseudohistorical interpretation became known as the “Lost Cause” and is referred to as an ideology, a social movement, or a cult of people who popularized the tale. As Brent Staples (2022) notes, it “cast slavery as a benign institution beloved by the enslaved...[and] presented Confederate generals as honorable men...” (para. 5).

Years later during the FWP, the Lost Cause was still an active force and apparent in the way interviewers depicted the formally enslaved interviewees (Stewart, 2016). Since interviewers had a prescribed set of questions, interviewees' answers were meant to be a vehicle to achieve this goal. Despite the occurrence of this mythological "white family" in the interviews, uncertainty remains about the editing techniques that might have been taken to craft this type of narrative.

CRITICAL RACE THEORY AND ARCHIVAL METHODOLOGIES

Enslaved people potentially had two other non-mythical families that helped them survive white oppression — their genetic family and their extended communal family (Blassingame, 1972). Upon capture, Sally Redoshi Smith became partners with Yawith, who was another *Clotilda* survivor, and they became a nuclear or genetic family (Durkin, 2019). They lived alongside Jinnie and Cuffy, also assumed to be *Clotilda* survivors, who became members of their communal family, as the groups shared and benefited from one another. Looking at the FWP narratives for the genetic family, the communal family, and the mythical "white family," researchers are able to analyze the data for its known subjectivities by building a critical race theoretical approach into the methodology. Integrating this framework acknowledges the continued mistreatment of ex-slaves during the FWP, recognizes that their voices were at the mercy of white others, and calls for a deeper examination of the data. John Lomax was interested in C&T of formerly enslaved individuals and required questions that prompted this topic. He asked about bedding, the textile work they performed, and what was done in their quarters after plantation work, which was often more textile work. Other questions inquired about shoes and clothing worn in hot/cold weather, on Sundays, and at weddings (Administrative Files, Botkin, 1941, pp. xx-xxii).

C&T has always been a component of family, a possible reason for its inclusion in the ex-slave narratives. The purpose of this study is to critique and rethink the position of C&T in the Former Slave Project, and how it was used to reinforce the story of genetic family, communal family, and/or mythical "white family."

REVIEWING SCHOLARSHIP ON THE CLOTHING AND TEXTILES OF FORMER U.S. SLAVES

Research on C&T of U.S. slaves has included but is not limited to quilting (Cash, 1995), clothing during the Transatlantic passage (Foster, 1997), appearance (Sanders, 2011), construction of garments (Tandberg, 1980), colour and fabric type (Hunt, 1996), and bedding (Brackman, 2010). Many of these studies analyze ex-slave narratives and some have been explicit in using those of the Former Slave Project, however, many papers only mention the source in their references. The few research articles on C&T that incorporate WPA narratives into their data rarely question the trustworthiness of the records themselves. Fields outside of history, African American studies, or qualitative research are less aware of the methodological problems associated with ex-slave interviews and sometimes fail to take the responsibility of secondary analysis seriously. Data from various time periods, locations, and collections are re-used and turned into a unified dataset, allowing researchers to ignore specific concerns from each source. A large mix of sources and word/space limitations should not be an excuse to disregard the data's methodological underpinnings. Foundational early works on C&T of enslaved people should not be judged harshly, though, since methodological debates around these sources were not common. Twenty years later the discussion is anything but silent as we see magazine articles titled, "Is the greatest collection of slave narratives tainted by racism?" (Onion, 2016).

Patricia Hunt's (1996) early work on slave C&T mentions the benefit of using different sources in order to "reveal the distinctions of each area and time period" (p. 202). She addresses problems with using newspaper's runaway slave notices, but the validity and reliability of the notices is not discussed. In her article on kinship and quilting, Floris Cash (1995) reminds researchers to be cautious of the WPA narratives since so much time had lapsed between slavery and the years that interviews were conducted. Similarly, Jacqueline Tobin's (1999) book on quilting and the Underground Railroad says that "the WPA narratives saved some knowledge but the questions asked were often naïve" (p. 13). Both C&T researchers briefly critique only one aspect of the methodology and avoid a deeper discussion of race and power. White & White (1998) obviously used the FWP for their book on African American dress. It says, "Former slaves interviewed for the Federal Writers Project more than seventy years later spoke eloquently of the resentment and shame experienced" (p. 131). This serves as an early perception of how the narratives were expressed. Sanders (2011) narrative inquiry on the appearance of former slaves stresses the positive motives of narrators/protagonists saying that they, "were motivated to celebrate escaping slavery," and briefly mentions its facet of fiction (p. 268). She does not question what might occur when the protagonist is not the only writer. Although FWP narratives were not a part of her data, she mentions the narratives being used in C&T stud-

ies, which could have been used as an opportunity to address its problems and boost the integrity of her own research. In *New Raiments of Self: African American Clothing in the Antebellum South*, Foster (1997) uses the narratives to examine how clothing played a central part in the enslaved people's consciousness of self. Foster spends a great deal of time referencing the WPA narrators' remarks on wearing clothing, which she segments into two insights: 1) the itemization and description of specific articles of dress and 2) additional critiques that illustrate attitudes held about clothing (p. 134), and while she mentions that problems are inherent within the narratives, she relies on them to elucidate "concrete" findings on African American agency.

The FWP Slave Narrative Collection should not be seen as accurate but researchers still agree that the narratives show self-perceptions of formerly enslaved individuals (Musher, 2014), and the extent of the project represents a major feat in the history of archival documentation. Smith (1987) says that ex-slave's individuality serves as the foundation of the narrative. Floris Cash (1995) says that narratives of former slaves show kinship between Black women. The value of the collection lies in the original stories of former slaves that were untouched by FWP employees. Looking at past C&T research, the narratives' value outweighs negative perceptions of the collection's issues, showing an academic refusal to find more of a middle ground. We therefore consider the following research questions: How were clothing and textiles positioned within the narratives of formerly enslaved females to reinforce the concept of the genetic family, the communal family, and the mythical "white family"? How can our methodological understanding of the Former Slave Project be used to analyze C&T in a way that channels the power of formerly enslaved individuals' original thoughts and words?

APPROACHING THE ARCHIVES

A critical race methodology was built into the study's qualitative framework to re-examine C&T in the narratives of female Former Slave Project participants located in the U.S. state of Georgia. *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938*, located in the Library of Congress (LoC), is also referred to as the Former Slave Project. C&T was a gendered responsibility since female slaves took care of almost all clothing construction before the war (Tandberg, 1980) even though both male and female slaves often worked for the fiber. Thus, our study includes only the narratives of former female slaves interviewed in Georgia, even though there is an obvious need to study the narratives of former male slaves to understand C&T in their lives. In total, nineteen narratives were analyzed, accounting for much of "Part 1" and a portion of "Part 2" within Volume 4, Georgia's four-part representation in the collection (see Figure 2). Narratives were searched for any mention of C&T, and data was

collected and organized using Redman's (2013) guide to historical research in archives. Descriptions of the women's appearance at the time of the interview and C&T after Emancipation were not included in the final data set, since this described C&T from time periods outside of slavery. It should be noted that these descriptions are racist and patronizing, early attempts by many FWP employees to portray the women in a derogatory manner.

Figure 2. Women in Georgia whose narratives were analyzed for clothing and textiles

Rachel Adams	Nancy Boudry	Julia Bunch	Minnie Davis
Hannah Austin	Alice Bradley	Sarah Byrd	Annie Huff
Celestia Avery	Della Briscoe	Mariah Callaway	Amanda Jackson
Georgia Baker	Easter Brown	Susan Castle	Camilla Jackson
Alice Battle	Julia Brown	Martha Colquitt	

FIGURE 2 LIST OF WOMEN IN GEORGIA WHOSE NARRATIVES WERE ANALYZED FOR CLOTHING AND TEXTILES.

Our critical race methodology comes from Critical Race Theory, which recognizes racism as an ever-present part of U.S. society, supporting a system that gives white individuals material and psychic gains over Black individuals (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Although CRT has both developed from and been applied to the critical analysis of how America's racial history has shaped the law, its tenets are applicable across disciplines. The core belief of CRT lies in the motive to demonstrate agency, ultimately seeking to demolish injustices of the system.

It is employed through a series of dynamic engagements situated within specific institutions (Crenshaw, 2010). Injustices of the Former Slave Project, as an institution, create the inherent goal to resist what is presented and find ways to channel the power of ex-slave's original thoughts and words. The methodological inaccuracies of the project are built into the conceptual framework, rather than a

trustworthy reliance on the archival material presented, intending to create what Solórzano & Yosso (2002) call a critical race methodology. Data analysis was thematic and categorical since it revolved around the three concepts of “family” and C&T interview question topics. It was, however, approached inductively to allow the opportunity for truths to emerge at will. Neely (2015) reminds us that archivists of the FWP held power “to determine what is remembered and what is forgotten,” and discusses recent problems with the collection’s online presence. Similarly, the current study recognizes its own power to remember what should not be forgotten and utilizes a loose form of counter-storytelling.

CLOTHING & TEXTILES OF FORMER SLAVES: NARRATIVE ROLES AND HIDDEN REALITIES

Women’s narratives reveal that C&T were used to describe three situations of “family” to varying degrees. Overall, formerly enslaved females and FWP staff were aware and vocal about the divisive aspects of C&T, and ways that it suppressed the enslaved. Often though, this suppression was not expressed as a fault of the slave owners, but rather as a normalized, matter-of-fact discussion and sometimes appreciation for being provided minimal essentials. Direct discussion about C&T and the women’s genetic or communal families was more prevalent since they often had to provide for each other. Reinforcing the concept of the mythical “white family” through C&T occurred much less frequently and when it did enslaved people were still framed as being owned or a paternalistic tone was used. An interesting finding was the discussion of C&T that did not result directly from questions asked by the fieldworkers. These moments allowed C&T to play a role within the context of situations, giving us and other researchers an opportunity to make meaning from “off the script” data. The analysis opened discussion for differences and similarities between Georgia plantations, but also the similarities and differences between writers’ portrayal of them.

C&T AND THE MYTHICAL “WHITE FAMILY”

During the course Archival Research Methods in Special Collections at a major Southeastern university, one of the authors selected the FWP narrative of Amanda Jackson and the following discussion of C&T caught her attention.

De white folks clothes an’ all o’ de slaves clothes wuz all made on de plantation. De marster’s wife could sew an’ she an’ her mother an’ some of de slaves done all o’ de spinning an’ weaving on de place. I’ve worked many a day in de house where dey made de cloth at. To color de clothes dey made dyes out o’ all kinds o’ barks. If they wanted yellow stripes dey used dye made out o’ hickory bark. Dere wuz always plenty o’ clothes fer everybody ‘cause dey give two complete outfits two times a year --- one in de summer an’ one in de winter (Amanda Jackson, LoC, p. 290).

First, the clothing of white and enslaved individuals is described as equal since both are made on the plantation. Second, the scene describes women on the plantation working together to make the cloth. Third, the narrator describes four outfits a year as being plentiful. This sort of positive illustration of owners treating the enslaved like “family” by giving them enough C&T, items that are presumed to be the same as those worn by the plantation owners, through a collaboration between female owners and female slaves, raises questions. Upon further investigation this type of description was rare compared to most former slave narratives that described a lack of clothing and division between C&T for white plantation owners and that of those they enslaved. If wives and family members of slave owners contributed to C&T production, it was often because she was using tools that were quick and advanced such as a spinning wheel or sewing machine.

The narrative of Mariah Callaway (LoC, p. 176) describes a similar situation of seemingly communal work. The selection of words used to describe the activities (e.g., different, group, many, our) leave any division between white and black women ambiguous.

When the war broke out my mistress' home became a sewing center and different women in the neighborhood would come there every day to make clothes for the soldiers. On each bed was placed the vests, coats, shirts, pants, and caps(,./) One group did all the cutting, one the stitching, and one the fitting. Many women cried while they served heart-broken because their husbands and sons had to go to the war. One day the Yanks came to our plantation and took all of the best horses.²

Plantation owners were often described as giving, “his slave families good clothes” (Sarah Byrd, LoC, p. 169), making sure that slaves were being “kept supplied with Sunday clothes and shoes” (Mariah Callaway, LoC, p. 173). Georgia Baker states, “Us had pretty white dresses for Sunday. Marse Alec wanted evvybody on his place dressed up dat day” (LoC, p. 42).³ Based on these comments and underlined words (see Figure 3), it seems that interview questions about religious clothing were meant to provide an opportunity to make the slave owner appear more family-like. Interview questions about higher quality garments such as wedding attire and Sunday clothing were unusual since slaves were hardly given any clothing at all.

² Underline denotes handwritten edits in original document and parentheses indicate a mismatch between punctuation in the original and re-typed version of the document.

³ Emphasis in original.

As we know from previous research, religious indoctrination of slaves was a common, paternalistic practice that meant to withhold slaves' autonomy to practice their African beliefs. It seems apparent that C&T were used by FWP employees to boost the image of white slave owner as a family man. In cases that these garments were provided by slave owners, many were praised for kindness. However, women frequently voiced concern about the discomfort of the clothing, altering the image of owner as gift giver. For instance, brogan shoes were made for several of the women and they were described as "course and rough" [Rachel Adams], so much that, "you couldn' hardly walk in 'em" [Nancy Boudry]. Amanda Jackson describes the stiff shoes being cut from thick cow hide saying, "you had to grease em' to wear em' an after you done dat you could do pretty well" (p. 291). Rachel Adams describes the clothing given to her as degrading by stating, "Summertime, us jus' wore homespun dresses made lak de slips dey use for underwear now" (p. 4). This should be viewed as a direct statement that the clothing made her body feel violated.

C&T in women's narratives helped to expose the myth of being treated like "family."

Women described situations when C&T were offered to some slaves based on what they provided for the owner's family, for example being a wet nurse or cook. In Easter Brown's narrative she says, "Louisa had on a white dress; de white folkses sho fixed Louisa up, 'cause she wuz deir cook" (p. 139). Following this, Brown's narrative jumps to a different story of her own wedding dress: "Jus' lemme tell you 'bout my weddin' I buyed myself a dress and had it laid out on de bed, den some triflin', no 'count Nigger wench tuk and stole it 'fore I had a chance to git married in it. I had done buyed dat dress for two pupposes; fust to git married in it, and second to be buried in" (LoC, p. 139).⁴ Again, the underlined words call into question potential edits made to change or emphasize former slaves' stories (see Figure 4). Ladson-Billings (2009) reminds us that popular culture constructions have portrayed Black women as morally suspect. Taking this into consideration, it raises the question of whether Brown specified that a Black woman stole her dress. Her statement about using the wedding dress for burial could be viewed in different ways. It could provide an argument that she was poor, or it could be seen as resourceful, but it could also perpetuate the idea of slaves not requiring many C&T. Speculation here lies not in the exact wording, but how fieldworkers

⁴ Emphasis in original.

might have carefully selected stories/information to craft an image. Clothing and textiles appear to be used by some FWP employees to continue the myth of the plantation “family” and by others to expose it. This is an important find because slavery in itself was anti-family. White slaveowners tore African, and later African American, families apart in the pursuit of enslaved humans for profit-driven motives such as cotton cultivation and textile production. The use of C&T in slavery and by FWP employees elucidates the warped ideology that reconstructed the term “family” to include a white, mythical, and paternalistic relationship.

*Us had pretty white dresses for Sunday. Marse Alec wanted evvybody on his place dressed up dat day. He sont

FIGURE 3 SCREENSHOT OF GEORGIA BAKER'S INTERVIEW MANUSCRIPT. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, FEDERAL WRITERS' PROJECT, SLAVE NARRATIVE PROJECT, P. 42.

"Jus' lemme tell you 'bout my weddin' I buyed myself a dress and had it laid out on de bed, den some triflin', no 'count Nigger wench tuk and stole it 'fore I had a chance to git married in it. I had done buyed dat dress for two pupposes; fust to git married in it, and second to be buried in. I stayed on wid Old Miss 'til I got 'bout grown and den I drifted to Athens. When I married my fust

FIGURE 4 SCREENSHOT OF EASTER BROWN'S INTERVIEW MANUSCRIPT. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, FEDERAL WRITERS' PROJECT, SLAVE NARRATIVE PROJECT, P. 139.

C&T & THE GENETIC FAMILY

C&T's earliest roles in our lives are generally the result of one's genetic or nuclear family using them to provide protection, to make things function, or for decoration. Looking at the life of Sally “Redoshi” Smith, the last living Middle Passage survivor, we define genetic family as one's partner or any individuals within one's family tree. In this study C&T contributions to the genetic family were defined as those that start as early as courtship or even thoughts about having a family of one's own. In the narrative of Annie Huff, she says that enslaved men would illegally smuggle in handkerchiefs and earrings as gifts for women they were trying to court (p. 234, Part 2). More commonly though, women mention situations

where C&T were used for the survival of their genetic family, as a result of abuse or neglect of slave owners. In the narratives of Celestia Avery and Julia Brown both describe their grandmother's escape into the woods to have babies as well as the clothing that they had to use. Celestia was told by her grandmother that the owner "pulled her clothes from her [pregnant] body" before tying her to a tree to be whipped (p. 24). Hiding and going into labor with twins, "she tore her petticoat into two pieces and wrapped each baby" (p. 25). Several of the narratives described situations where slaves had to use artistic skill and business savviness to provide their families or loved ones with C&T. In many of the narratives, former slaves' mothers had to "weave all de' cloth" (Rachel Adams, p. 3). Arrie Binns said, "Ma made our clothes an' we had pretty dresses too. She dyed some blue and brown striped" (p. 75). Some slaves were able to make money for their family through the sale of C&T. Mariah Callaway said, "My grandfather owned a cotton patch and the master would loan him a mule so he could plow it at night. Two boys would each hold a light for him to work by."

Looking at this situation one might argue that all three "families" are written into the narrative. Camilla Jackson says that, "her grandmother was very thrifty and managed to earn a little money. This was done by collecting all the rags she could find and then carrying them to town in an oxcart to sell them" (p. 297). This supports the finding of Sanders (2011) that enslaved individuals were resourceful in ways of using C&T to escape slavery (p. 276). John Lomax included the question "What games did you play as a child?" Easter Brown's narrative says, "De onliest game I ever played wuz to take my doll made out of a stick wid a rag on it and play under a tree." By using her textile as a makeshift garment for her envisioned baby, it could be viewed as an early example of providing C&T for her future genetic family.

C&T & THE COMMUNAL FAMILY

In this study, we define one's communal family as any African descendant who is not genetically related but acts as family through their support. Again, looking back to Redoshi's life, we see that she and Yawith lived alongside fellow *Clotilda* survivors Jinnie and Cuffy, who are members of their African family (Durkin, 2019). Many slave families were given little to nothing from plantation owners, and after long days of abuse, lacked the energy and resources required to provide for family needs. Women's narratives often describe a system of working together that served to provide communal families with C&T that were needed. Camilla Jackson's narrative describes a system found in other's stories:

One of the most enjoyable affairs in those days was the quilting party. Every night they would assemble at some particular house and help that person to finish her quilts. The next night, a visit would be made to some one else's home and so on, until everyone had a sufficient amount of bed-clothing made for the winter. (LoC, p. 296)

In Celestia Avery's narrative she says that "any slave from another plantation, desiring to attend these frolics, could do so after securing a pass from their master" (p. 23). It is interesting that in both narratives the work is described as an entertaining and enjoyable party. Since many of the narratives describe the difficulty of continuing C&T work after long days of plantation work, it does raise the question of how these "parties" are described. Another of Lomax's interview questions unexpectedly resulted in descriptions of C&T in asking former slaves about medicine and care during times of sickness. In the narratives, the wording does not call out the color of the caretaker, but it seems to be inferred through content and tone. Arrie Binns narrative said,

De old folks doctored us jest fer little ailments. Dey give us lye tea fer colds. This was made by taking a few clean ashes from the fire place, putting them in a little thin bag and pouring boiling water over them and let set for a few minutes. This had to be given very weak or else it would be harmful, Aunt Arrie explained. (LoC, p. 76)

Many of the women's narratives discussed herbal remedies used for tea, but it was her narrative that reminded of cloth's role in the process. In the narrative of Julia Brown, she discusses a method that was used to ease the pains of childbirth. Her narrative says, "The granny put a ax under my mattress once. This wuz to cut off the after-pains and it sho did too, honey" (p. 143). C&T's presence in the narratives illustrate many situations when it played a role in the lives of former slaves when they wanted/needed to help fellow Black family members.

SUMMARIZING THE FINDINGS AND REFLECTING ON THE FUTURE

A significant portion of the Former Slave Project narratives revolve around C&T, evidence of the important role that they played in the lives of enslaved people. John Lomax's intentions to include the C&T related questions that he did might remain unknown. What we do see in the narratives are C&T described in a way that seemingly intended to tie the plantation owner's family to the slave families. The linear process required to produce C&T acted as an opportunity for FWP employees to show white and African American families making contributions toward a single material. It also supported previous research that recognizes a paternalistic effort to make slave owners appear as parents who provide clothing to his "families." The implications of C&T acting as a vehicle for motives of others calls into question and complicates generalizations about slave clothing from previous studies. Future research in any field should be careful to use and report data from the narratives in a manner that is up to date with current research and methodological practice.

The critical race methodology aided us in better reading the narratives from an informed perspective. We learned that such a critical and analytical approach helped identify and raise social and professional consciousness of implicit racist bias in the FSP.

The paper demonstrates the potential of a critical race methodology and how it might be applied to archival practice. The methodology also contributed to a richer reading of C&T in the familial configurations of the formerly enslaved, which ultimately can mean a broader understanding of the development of their individual and collective identities.

Throughout the study, we tried to remain reflexive and attentive to our own sensitivities regarding the topic of slavery. Reading stories of being abused or abuse to one's family was a deeply emotional process as the archives were approached and explored. Reading Stewart's (2016) book prior to starting the study encouraged a pointed search for evidence of counter narratives that were overshadowed by FWP employees' edits. Unfortunately, we will never know what was originally said by the women, or even the race of characters in their narratives. Knowing that these were also limitations, we tried to remain cognizant not to overlook what was not there. Hopefully this study and these reflections provide an example of ways in which researchers can build in alternative methodological foundations when using this unique collection.

As stated previously, this study evaluated a small portion of the archive. Future research should use a critical race methodology to evaluate the narrative of every formerly enslaved person in the collection, including men and women from each of the seventeen states represented.

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Author Bios



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Author Bios



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