

The political work of narratives

A dialogic analysis of two slave narratives

Owen Whooley

New York University

Tied to meaning-making, narratives are saturated with political relevance. Narratives do political work on both the individual and collective levels. To achieve a comprehensive understanding of the political work performed by a given narrative, both the historical context and local context must be analyzed. This paper uses a comparative dialogic analysis derived from M. M. Bakhtin to illuminate the different types of political work that narratives can accomplish. I compare two slave narratives, each recalling an incident of violence against a slave. Although the narratives describe similar events, their portrayals of slavery differ greatly because of the different political work they perform in their respective contexts. One narrative, produced in conjunction with the abolitionist movement, serves as a piece of political propaganda that frames slavery in an uncompromisingly harsh light. The other narrative, taken from a WPA interview in the 1930s, reveals narrative as a site of political conflict between blacks and whites during the Jim Crow era. (*Slave narratives, Dialogic analysis, Bakhtin, Political work*)

The political relevance of narratives can assume different forms, given the different conditions under which narratives are produced. Narratives often accomplish instrumental, political work through the power of suggestion and emotional identification, framing political issues in ways that foster collective, political responses (Davis, 2002). In addition, narratives can unite a disparate group of individuals into a cohesive, political whole (Fine, 2002). Under other circumstances, narratives serve as sites for political conflict and resistance, as competing voices struggle to dictate the meaning of the narrative. Indeed, because narratives are often produced and contested within politically charged

Requests for further information should be directed to Owen Whooley, New York University, Department of Sociology, E-mail: ow237@nyu.edu

environments, narrative analysis must account for the different ways in which narratives enter the political arena.

To grasp the political relevance of a given narrative, researchers must move beyond the text toward the production of it. Structural approaches to narrative tend to overemphasize the coherence of the narrative, neglecting the struggles embedded within it. A comparative dialogic analysis, however, moves the analysis away from the completed *product* of the narrative toward the communicative act in which the narrative is *produced*, stressing the existence of competing voices. By embedding narratives within the historical context in which they are produced and teasing out their multi-vocality, dialogic analysis facilitates understanding into the political work of narratives. Depending on the historical and political context and the relationship between the voices in the narrative, the political work accomplished by similar narratives can be widely divergent.

This paper applies a dialogic analysis derived from M. M. Bakhtin to two slave narratives to illuminate the different political work that these narratives perform within their particular, historical contexts.¹ While each narrative describes a similar event, their different contexts of production result in very different portrayals of slavery. In turn, as micro manifestations of the larger collective political struggles in which they are immersed, they accomplish different political work. Comparative analysis illuminates these differences. The first narrative, written in 1847 by William Wells Brown in conjunction with an abolitionist editor, served as propaganda for the abolitionist movement and represents the instrumental use of narratives for the framing of a political issue. The other comes from an interview of David Blount that took place in the 1930s as part of the Works Project Administration's (WPA) effort to employ white-collar workers during the Great Depression. Embedded within the tense racial climate of Jim Crow, the Blount narrative itself became a site of political conflict.

1. I acknowledge the debate regarding the authorship of works previously attributed to M.M. Bakhtin, especially the writings with a more obvious Marxist slant. While I recognize the contributions of Medvedev and Voloshinov, for the sake of parsimony I refer to Bakhtin as the author these texts, fully aware of the irony of attributing sole authorship to a thinker who spent his life problematizing the notion of authorship and analyzing discourse as a product of multiple voices.

The political work of narratives

Closely tied with the rise of identity movements and the politics of feminism (Langellier, 2001), narrative analysis is informed by a political effort to reclaim the voices of those often unheard. Indeed, the study of narrative itself has political connotations (Langellier, 1989). Because of this orientation, narrative analysis is particularly attuned to political ramifications of narratives for marginalized individuals. Narratives can be understood as strategic (Patterson, 2002) and potentially transformative (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992). In challenging master narratives through counter-narratives, individuals attempt to carve out an identity and oppose oppressive systems (Andrews, 2002). Researchers have noted a number of different ways individuals use narrative politically: to assert themselves against dehumanizing medical discourse (Young, 1989), to challenge the label of victim (Bell, 1999), to make visible a marginalized identity (Peterson, 2000), and to cultivate an oppositional understanding of mothering (Andrews, 2004). Research inspired by feminism is particularly rich in this area (see for example Bell, 1988; Ginsburg, 1989; Zimmerman, 1984).

While extensive research focuses on the political work for the individual, the role of narrative in collective struggles is less developed (Davis, 2002). Recently, social movement scholars have begun to take up these issues. Collective narratives within movements have been shown to foster solidarity through stories of origins and maintain it through difficult periods by giving meaning to defeats and setbacks (Polletta, 1998). Narratives enact and reinforce internal, movement culture (Fine, 1995), elicit emotions from movement members (Kane, 2001) and even function as social control mechanisms that maintain group identity and solidarity (Benford, 2002). While this research represents a positive start, it remains underdeveloped. Built on a series of unrelated case studies, it lacks comparative insight, and in turn, often takes the context for granted. Additionally, it focuses more on narratives as things or resources, rather than the process of producing narratives.

Methodology

No general theory on the political work of narrative, on both the individual and collective levels, is possible. The political work of narratives is deeply contextual. Only through dialogic analysis that embeds the political operation of a narrative within its local and historical context can one come to understand the strategic work that a given narrative does.

Narrative in context

Researchers have recognized the importance of the context in the production of narratives (Langellier, 1989; Mishler, 1986; Personal Narrative Group, 1989; Peterson & Langellier, 1997; Riessman, 1993). The “context theory” of narrative (Peterson & Langellier, 1997) extends the analysis beyond the text to include the contextual factors affecting its *production*. In doing so, issues of power and conflict, manifest within the text itself, assume a prominent place.

The Personal Narratives Group (1989) identifies three different layers of context — the micro level of textual context (intertextuality), the local context (the interaction between a speaker and a listener), and the general, historical context, or historical moment. Different research agendas lead analysts to stress one layer over the others. While narrative analysts have analyzed intertextuality (see for example Polyani, 1985) and the local context successfully (see for example Mishler, 1986; Young, 1989), they have paid less attention to the effects of the general historical context. Too little research has focused on the “historicity” of the narrative (Riessman, 2004); most analysis tends to take the historical context for granted (for exceptions see Bell, 1999; Skultans, 1999). And yet, the role that context plays in the production of narratives cannot be reduced to the local context (DeFina, 2003). Social structure is relevant in understanding “autobiographical occasions” (Zussman, 2000), for systems of inequality like race, gender, and class affect the nature of the interaction between the speaker and his or her audience, shaping the narrative that is produced (Riessman, 1993). Likewise, larger collective political struggles affect the content of narratives indirectly by changing the context of experience (Klawitter, 2004).

The neglect of the general historical context stems in part from two sources. First, a substantial portion of the work on narrative in context is aimed toward methodological issues rather than theoretical developments (see for example Mishler, 1986). Since researchers have little control over the general historical and cultural milieu in which they are embedded, these methodological works focus on those aspects of context that interviewers can affect (i.e. the interviewing process). Second, the historical context can become an invisible in narrative analysis as part of the taken for granted world that the researcher inhabits. Though manifest in the narrative itself, it remains unproblematic in the analysis. Indeed, the general context often only becomes visible in a comparative research model. Because much research on narratives occurs in the present, examining contemporary spoken narratives, the production of the narrative is de-historicized. Some researchers are beginning to re-visit narratives at dif-

ferent time periods in such a way that the historical moment becomes visible (see for example, Riessman, 2004). Others note how larger political changes over time alter the understanding of experiences in narratives (see for example Klawiter, 2004). Yet, these analyses often span only a decade or so — a time span too short to register the type of large historical change that would allow researchers to fully appreciate the effects of the historical context on the production of knowledge. Comparative studies that occur over a greater expanse of time can bring to the fore these effects.

A comparative dialogic analysis

Only by embedding narratives within the different layers of context can we come to understand the form these stories take, and, in turn, the political work they aim to accomplish. A dialogic analysis inspired by the work of M.M. Bakhtin offers a useful methodology. Bakhtin focuses on the dialogic interaction between speakers (the “communicative act”) embedded within a precise historical realization (Bakhtin, 1994). For him, context matters. The meaning that arises out of this temporally- and spatially-situated interaction between actors is both open to the interpretation imposed upon the utterance by the actors and influenced by the historical context and legacy of the word at a given point in history.

For Bakhtin (1994), discourse is ideological conflict writ small. Ideological struggles are manifest in the everyday activity of meaning-making (Gardiner, 1992). The speaker and the listener struggle over meaning in the dialogic interaction from different perspectives, and the meaning created through interaction is negotiated between these two perspectives. Consequently, every individual dialogic interaction is an interaction between two specific ideological horizons of which the individuals are representatives (Bakhtin, 1981).

Thus, dialogic analysis focuses on narratives in a specific way; it reorients the narrative analysis away from structure and content toward its production. Narratives are viewed not as the product of the author, but rather the by-product of competing voices. The dialogic interaction out of which narratives arise is rife with ideological struggle. Macro ideological conflicts become reified in the narrative itself. The meaning and political relevance of a narrative cannot be understood without investigation into the context in which it is produced — both the local context of the interaction and the more general historical moment.

I apply a comparative dialogic analysis to the analysis of two slave narratives in order to illuminate the contextually-specific political work that these

narratives perform. The first narrative is an episode from the biography of William Wells Brown written as part of the program of abolitionist propaganda against slavery. The second narrative is taken from a WPA interview of David Blount with a white woman, Mary Hicks, during the Depression. I chose these narratives for both their eloquence and representativeness. Abolitionist narratives generally were written by escaped, relatively “well-to-do” male slaves (i.e. household servants rather than field hands) from the northernmost slave states, like Brown. Likewise David Blount, a common field hand from North Carolina, who witnessed Emancipation as a young age, is typical of many of the slave narrators in the WPA collection (Escott, 1991; Yetman, 1967, 1970, 1984). The two specific narratives discuss similar incidences of violence against slaves.

First, I analyze the content of the narratives, comparing their differences. I focus on three different aspects of each narrative — 1) the characterization of agency and authority attributed to each actor, 2) the portrayal of violence against the slave, and 3) the praise and blame attributed to different actors. Each narrative is divided into different scenes in which a request is made by an actor and a response is given by another actor. I have transcribed the two narratives into a series of clauses derived from Labov (1981). It is true that the Labovian approach treats the narrative as a text and ignores the context in which it is produced (DeFina, 2003; Riessman, 1993), thus making Labov’s theoretical underpinning contrary to the aims of this paper. Nevertheless, I have chosen to transcribe the narratives using this method for organizational purposes. Despite its defects, the Labovian approach offers a coherent characterization of narrative, a guide to the separate functions of clauses within narrative, and a clear location for disparate elements (DeFina, 2003).

Having established the textual differences between the two narratives, I attempt to recreate both the local and historical contexts of their production. I examine the larger historical context in which the narrative is written in order to achieve an understanding of the political and ideological work of the narrative in its historical moment. For the local context, I attempt to reclaim the joint production and the multi-vocality within each text. Since many details of the local interactions have been lost to history, I have been forced to recreate them by piecing together disparate historical data, drawing tentative conclusions from research on similar interactions. Once the dialogic nature of each of these narratives is established, the difference between the narratives in their framing of the issue of slavery and their resulting political work becomes evident.

Black versus white, good versus evil — the Brown narrative

The Brown narrative describes an incident of violence against a slave, Randall, by a malicious overseer, Cook (Brown, 1979). The conflict throughout the narrative centers around the defiant, proud Randall and Cook, who wants to assert his authority over the slave. Cook gives Randall an impossible task to as a pretense to justify punishing Randall when he fails to complete it. Randall, a man of great physical strength, has never been whipped.

In the first scene (See Appendix 1, lns. 16–29) Cook demands that Randall submit to a whipping, but Randall refuses to acquiesce, citing to the impossibility of the assigned task. Cook, not wanting to test Randall's strength himself, seeks another alternative. In the second scene (lns. 30–41), Cook orders other slaves to restrain Randall, but the slaves, weighing the strengths of the two protagonists, disobey Cook. Frustrated, the overseer abandons his plan. In the final scene (lns. 42–60), Cook returns a week later with two friends. After failing to verbally get Randall to submit to the whipping, Cook's two friends try to make Randall comply physically. Randall repels their efforts, but Cook quickly pulls out a pistol and shoots Randall. The wounded Randall can no longer resist and is brutally beaten. The narrative closes with Randall as a broken man.

Attribution of Agency

The attribution of agency is crucial to understanding the trajectory of the narrative and its political work. In some sense, the characters serve as representatives of the groups to which they belong. Randall, as “a man of great strength and power” (ln. 7) is defiant, claiming that no man will ever whip him (ln. 12). Given this strength, Randall is character with much agency — agency that is all the more impressive given that the system of slavery aims to break his will. Similarly, the other slaves who refuse to seize Randall (lns. 33–41) are imbued with some agency (albeit more passive) in that they disobey Cook. Cook, on the other hand, is portrayed as cruel and tyrannical. His is an authority granted by his position within the slave system. Despite this authority, Cook is repeatedly defied by Randall, and clearly, lacks the type of power and agency typical of his structural position. Nevertheless, by shooting Randall, Cook reclaims his authority by artificial means of the gun.

Depiction of Violence

Brown describes the resulting scene of violence in graphic detail. He recalls,

The others [Cook's friends] rushed upon him with their clubs, and beat him over the head and face, until they succeeded in tying him. He was then taken to the barn, and tied to a beam. Cook gave him over one hundred lashes with a heavy cowhide, had him washed with salt and water, and left him tied during the day (Ins. 54–60)

Brown richly notes the number of lashes, the specific weapon used, the washing Randall's wounds with salt, and the length of the punishment. The violence is addressed directly, rather than alluded to, and is carried out by specific actors through active verbs.

Allocation of Praise and Blame

The narrative makes a clear delineation between the heroes and villains. Randall emerges as the hero of the narrative, albeit a tragic one. Despite the injustice of the slave system, Randall maintains a degree of dignity, refusing to be degraded by being whipped. Cook, the villain, uses his position of power to carry out his tyrannical agenda, hoping to destroy Randall's dignity. Indeed, the very existence of a proud slave offends Cook's own sense of power. Yet, despite his position, Cook remains relatively weak and only achieves his goals by resorting to the artificial means of the pistol. The resulting portrayal of slavery is a black and white, Manichean system of oppression. The tertiary actors reinforce this. The white master is satisfied with Cook for his defeat of Randall, despite his disobedience. By applauding the outcome, the master is implicated in Randall's demise. Conversely, the other slaves refuse to betray Randall; they avoid implication regardless of their motives for doing so. In his narrative, Brown draws a clear line between the owners and the owned, between black and white, between good and evil.

Shades of gray — the Blount narrative

Blount's narrative, dictated by the questions of the WPA interviewer, is far less linear and comprehensive than the Brown's more consciously created narrative. While Blount also recounts an incident of violence against a slave, the locus of the conflict does not involve the victimized slave at all, but revolves around a "benevolent" master and an overzealous, despotic overseer (Blount in Rawick, 1972: 111–115). In the first scene (see Appendix 2, Ins. 9–14), a slave in Blount's group asks the overseer if he can warm himself by the fire. The overseer refuses this request, and having no recourse to action, nor any real agency, the slave

endures the cold and subsequently develops a “chill”, which the overseer simply dismisses. In the second scene (lns.15–25), the slave’s master has a doctor examine the ill slave. After determining that the slave has pneumonia, the doctor tries to apply ointment. As the doctor removes the slave’s shirt, he discovers wounds on the slave’s back from the overseer. The master becomes appalled by the wounds and sends Blount to retrieve the overseer. In the culminating scene (lns. 26–37), the master confronts the overseer over his violent treatment of the slaves. He asks the overseer to leave, and when the overseer refuses, he loses his temper and literally kicks out the overseer. The narrative ends with the overseer fleeing the plantation.

Allocation of Agency

The Blount narrative distributes agency differently than the Brown narrative. The slave, who becomes ill, possesses no agency whatsoever. His one futile attempt to assert himself is denied. He quickly assumes a wholly passive role. Every other action carried out by a slave is compelled by an authority figure, revealing a lack of agency. The overseer, like Cook in the Brown narrative, has authority over the slaves granted by slave system. The role of the master in this story, however, is the much different. His authority comes from not only his structural position, but from his character as well. Blount’s master represents the ideal of the “benevolent master”, who despite his power over others exercises this power with discretion and justice.

Depiction of Violence

Although Blount’s narrative clearly portrays violence against a slave, the violence is muted and pushed into background. The slave bears the marks of violence on his person, but Blount neither informs us as to when the violence occurred, nor provides details. He simply states, “He (the doctor) tells ‘em to take off de boy’s shirt...and when dey starts to take de shirt off dey finds dat it am stuck. Dey had to grease de shirt to get it off ‘cause de blood where de overseer beat him had stuck de shirt tight to de skin” (lns. 18–20). The reader only knows of the violence from its consequences; the episode itself occurs outside of the narrative.

Attribution of Praise and Blame

Blount's portrayal of slavery is more complicated than the black and white, good versus evil portrayal in the Brown narrative. The protagonist is the master, who ensures the safety of his slaves by providing medical support and firing the malicious overseer. Though his motives remain unclear, the slaves are ultimately satisfied with his actions. Indeed, Blount's use of the pronoun "we" in the final line (ln. 38) indicates a degree of alliance between the slaves and the master. The slaves appear as victims, whose status in regards to praise and blame remains somewhat ambiguous. While the overseer assumes the role of the villain, much like Cook in the Brown narrative, the general depiction is quite different from the one painted by Brown; it is not simply a case of slaves versus owners. This narrative has more ambiguity between good and evil, more shades of gray, with the master, though owning slaves, defending them.

Contextualizing the narratives

To grasp the origin of the differences between the Blount and Brown narratives, we must move the analysis beyond the *product* of the narrative toward its *production*, toward the communicative act. Having established the differences between the narratives, I now turn to a comparative dialogic analysis to illuminate the political work that each narrative performs in its historical moment. The slave narratives and their different depictions originate from the different contexts in which the narratives enter and their ideological role in these political contexts.

The dialogic production of the Brown narrative

Written in 1848, the Brown narrative was produced amidst a heated political debate over slavery that dominated the political discourse of the U.S. Although the sectional crisis between the North and South had yet to reach its peak, it clearly was revving up. Approximately thirty years prior to the narrative, the country staved off a major crisis between the North and South through the Missouri Compromise, which maintained a tenuous balance between slave and free states in the Senate. The Missouri Compromise, like the other compromises prior to the Civil War, postponed, rather than averted, a crisis over slavery. The period leading up to the Civil War was riddled with conflict between the North and South over issues like the Fugitive Slave Act, the Dred Scott deci-

sion, and the emergence of the Free Soil Party. It was into this tense political environment that the Brown narrative entered.

Adding fervor to the debate was the abolitionist movement. Agitating against slavery in extra-institutional ways, the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS), founded in 1832, adopted radical rhetoric and the uncompromising position of immediate abolition (Matthews, 1972). Abolitionists viewed themselves as “holy warriors” performing God’s work on earth (Stewart, 1976) and framed the issue of slavery in religious terms (Whooley, 2004). To combat slavery, they employed a program of moral suasion. This involved speaking tours throughout the North (in which Brown participated), a number of political tracts and anti-slavery newspapers, and lobbying members of Congress. Their radical rhetoric ensured that the issue of slavery remained foremost in the public consciousness throughout the nineteenth century.

Produced in conjunction with an abolitionist editor, Edmund Quincy, the Brown narrative was consciously directed toward moral suasion. Although the abolitionists placed more emphasis on other forms of propaganda, slave narratives became widely popular in the North (Blassingame, 1977, p. xxix). By personalizing the experience of slavery, narratives sought to educate “right-thinking” Christians on the evils of slavery (Stewart, 1976) by focusing on the violence against slaves (Clark, 1995). They stressed the use of corporal punishment on slaves (Foster, 1979; Starling, 1988) as well as the violent break-up of familial bonds (Foster, 1979).

Specific details of the production of the Brown narrative are lost to history; there is no document which describes the actual interaction in detail. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that the specific interaction between Brown and Quincy in this historical moment is reflected in the explicit political aims the narrative. Influenced by the success of the Frederick Douglass’s narrative, abolitionists began searching for more narratives from escaped slaves. Brown, being in contact with Douglass and an avid abolitionist himself, began to write of his own experiences with slavery (Farrison, 1969). Quincy, an abolitionist editor from the radical New England wing of the movement, welcomed the idea of producing a slave narrative. Thus, from the inception of the project, Brown and Quincy collaborated in a complementary dialogic production of the narrative for political use. Indeed, Quincy, making a direct appeal to right-thinking Christians, claimed, “Few persons have had greater facilities for becoming acquainted with slavery, in all its horrible aspects than William W. Brown,” (in Brown, 1979, p. viii).

In his brief introduction to the book, Quincy claimed to have little influence on the project. This understated assessment of his role should be viewed

with caution. Many abolitionist editors tried to publicly distance themselves from the narratives to make them appear more credible. Trustworthiness was a huge concern for editors; they did not want the efficacy of the narratives to be tainted by accusations of fabrications (Starling, 1988). Even if Quincy was not looking over Brown's shoulder as he wrote, he did not have to be physically present to be dialogically involved in the production of meaning (Gardiner, 1992). An author writing alone is still engaged in a dialogue with the intended audience. Clearly, given Brown's ascending position within the AASS, his writing dialogued with the ideology of the abolitionists, of which Quincy was a representative.

The production of abolitionist slave narratives was not without internal tensions. Brown and Quincy, although on the "same side" of the struggle against slavery, approached the production of the narrative with slightly different goals. The negotiation of these different goals is evident in the end product on the narrative. Slave narrators often used the specific genre of the slave narrative to assert their individual humanity in dehumanizing institution of slavery (Stepito, 1991). Assuming that Brown shared this desire, a major aim of his was to establish his individuality and humanity. This aim was often complimentary to his desire to end slavery, but a potential tension between these slightly different goals often arose. Abolitionist editors, on the other hand, were not as focused in the personal project of the slave. Rather, they sought to portray the *system* of slavery as evil. Slaves' narratives were useful insofar as they provided a comprehensive portrayal of these evils. Editors needed to establish the humanity of the slave narrator, but this goal was sought only to illuminate the degrading effects of slavery. Therefore, whereas the narrator sought to establish his own uniqueness, the editor was interested in portraying the slave as typical whose experiences matched the millions of other slaves (Starling, 1988).

This tension becomes manifest in the narrative itself, leading to the episode describing Randall. Though Brown's experiences with slavery were graphic and telling, as far as slaves go, Brown was fairly well-off. In many ways, Brown's experience with slavery was *atypical* in that he enjoyed an unusual degree of freedom. To support Quincy's claim that Brown's experiences were unusually horrible, the narrative had to move beyond the experiences of a male house servant. Therefore, the entirety of Brown's biography is constructed as a series of episodes. Some episodes discuss Brown's own experiences. However, many episodes (and some of the more powerful ones) discuss occurrences that Brown either only "witnessed" or heard about. These episodes do little to assert the identity of Brown, but go a long way in fulfilling the abolitionist goal of panoramic view of slavery. Significantly, for our purposes, the story of Randall

is repeated almost verbatim in another antebellum slave narrative with only the names changing (Williams, 1838). The final biography fluctuates between Brown's singular experiences and other episodes that are narrative templates common to abolitionist propaganda.

From a dialogic perspective, the inclusion of the Randall episode served the instrumental, political goal of depicting the violence of slavery. Indeed, the graphic description of violence is intentional, consistent with the aims of moral suasion. The narrative intends to disturb its readers. In addition, it intentionally paints a black and white, Manichean vision of slavery. This simple picture of slavery filters a complicated system into a binary framework that serves the interest of the abolitionists and mobilizes followers. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the narrative seeks to humanize the slaves by depicting them as possessing a degree of agency, not just as passive victims. The character of Randall not only possesses some agency; he is an extraordinary person. Imbuing slaves with agency emphasizes their humanity, making their suffering more despicable to readers of the narrative. The moral of the Randall narrative is that the evil system of slavery ultimately breaks even the most extraordinary person. The dialogic production of the narrative that incorporates both the humanizing story of Brown and the overtly political aim of Quincy resulted in an effective piece of political propaganda.

The dialogic production of the Blount narrative

Unlike the Brown narrative, Blount's narrative originated from an interaction between antagonistic voices, making it a site of political struggle. Consequently, the resulting depiction of slavery is much different than that of the Brown narrative. By re-creating this interaction through what we know of the WPA narratives and embedding it within the context Great Depression and the Jim Crow South, the narrative's political work as a site of struggle comes to the fore.

The Blount narrative arose amidst the hostile environment of Jim Crow and the Depression. After the tumult of Reconstruction, elites in the South sought to unify whites against the rising political influence of the African-Americans by appealing to white supremacy (Woodward, 2001). Racial identification became paramount in the reconciliation of the nation (Hale, 1999). By the 1930s, a rigid system of segregation solidified in the South through the Jim Crow laws and encouraged violence against African Americans. Indeed, the 1930s was one of the deadliest decades for African-Americans in the South. Lynchings surged from 8 in 1932 to 28 in 1933, and the five year period from

1930 to 1935 witnessed an unprecedented 70 lynchings (Blassingame, 1991, p. 85; McElvaine, 1993, p. 187). These lynchings symbolically reasserted white control over blacks' bodies, turning violence into spectacle (Hale, 1999).

Compounding this situation were the harsh economic realities of the Depression. While the Depression affected all of the U.S., African-Americans were hit the hardest (McElvaine, 1993). Even prior to the Depression, most African-Americans living in the South lived closed to subsistence levels (Woodward, 1991). The Depression aggravated the situation. Blacks were the first to lose their jobs as whites began to covet jobs traditionally associated with blacks (McElvaine, 1993). By 1932, 50% of African Americans were unemployed (McElvaine, 1993), and unemployment rates were higher for blacks than whites in both the North and the South (Sundstrom, 1992). Disaffected whites in the South turned to the Ku Klux Klan, intensifying the violence against blacks. Blacks also found it more difficult to attain a comparable level of relief, due to government administrators' racism (Gordon, 1979).

The WPA interviews to which Blount's narrative belongs began as a New Deal program to employ jobless white-collar workers. Beyond this economic goal, the agenda of the interviews remained ambiguous; in fact, little thought was put into what would be done with the resulting information (Yetman, 1967, 1970, 1984). Originally, the aim of the WPA interviews was to provide a panoramic guide to the U.S. folk life. As vivid life histories of slavery began to accumulate, blacks within the New Deal administration pushed for a supplementary project of gathering slave narratives (Yetman, 1967). Yet, collecting slave narratives remained an afterthought in the general WPA project. Nevertheless, a remarkably diverse sample was gathered. In just two years, slave narratives were compiled in 17 different states with over 2000 respondents (Yetman, 1970).

In the charged historical moment of Jim Crow and the Depression, David Blount sat down for an interview with Mary Hicks, a white woman. While the ex-slaves interviewed were black, most of the interviewers were white, introducing complex racial tensions into the interview. Occurring within a historical context of segregation, these tension became manifest in different ways throughout the interviews. But Hicks was an outsider in terms of *both* race and gender, further complicating the interaction. Southern etiquette of Jim Crow encouraged many blacks to assume a deferential posture when encountering whites. In encountering a white woman, during a period of lynchings and stereotypes of black male predatoriness, a posture of deference and respect was even more important.

While the effect of gender on the interview is less clear, historians have noted the complications introduced to the WPA interviews because of race. Blacks remained guarded and less candid about themselves out of fear of retribution. Given the hostility of many of the interviewers, this fear seemed justified. Many interviewers asserted their dominance over the ex-slaves by openly referring to them as “darkies”, “niggers,” and “uncles” (Davis & Gates, 1991). For many blacks, therefore, it was wiser to give the interviewers what they wanted to hear, rather than be candid about their experiences (Escott, 1991, p. 42). Compounding matters, many ex-slaves mistook the WPA interviewers to be New Deal officials, and therefore, avoided any negative impression in fear that they might lose much needed federal assistance. They hoped that flattery within the interview would help them in their precarious economic position (Yetman, 1984). The statistics bear witness to this guardedness; only 26% of those interviewed by whites described negative experiences during slavery, compared to 39% interviewed by blacks (Yetman, 1984). For many of those interviewed, painting a rosy picture of slavery made more sense in terms of survival than being candid.

Mary Hicks’ views of African Americans are essentially unknown, but the historical record does leaves some clues. On one hand, her interview transcripts contain no explicit references to blacks as “niggers”, “darkies”, etc. On the other, an analysis I performed on her 73 interviews reveals that only a quarter of those interviewed portrayed slavery in a negative light. Despite the paucity of specific evidence, the fact that Hicks was white allows for the assumption that at least some racial tension permeated the interview. This assumption is supported by the interview itself. One of the strategies commonly employed by ex-slaves was to provide a general statement that was favorable of slavery, and subsequently, allow the negative aspects to emerge more subtly in the details of the narrative (Escott, 1991, p. 44). In the beginning of his narrative, Blount declares that his days in slavery were the best of his life (Blount in Rawick, 1972, p. 111.). However, the incident of violence that the narrative describes seems to directly contradict this introductory statement. This contradiction does not necessarily reflect a mistake by Blount. More likely, it represents a conscious attempt at negotiating the difficult terrain of the situation in which Blount was immersed. The initial positive comment alleviated tension and offered an explicit testament of acquiescence, carving a space for resistance in the remainder of the interview.

Additionally, the elements of the Blount narrative described above arose in response to the historical context of the dialogic encounter between Blount and Hicks. First, the ambiguous depiction of slavery in the Blount narrative in

contrast to the Brown narrative reflects the tension between an ex-slave and a white interviewer. Not wanting to place himself in a precarious situation, Blount did not portray slavery in an overly negative light. Instead of whites and blacks aligned solidly against each other, the boundaries between the heroes and villains are more blurred. It is the white master, not the slave himself, who avenges the wrong perpetrated by the overseer. By employing the stereotype of the benevolent master, Blount may have been appealing directly to the white community of which Hicks is a representative. Second, by alluding to the violence against the slave, rather than discussing it outright, Blount acknowledged the violence of slavery in a more subtle manner. By only implying the violence, Blount remained true to his experience, while simultaneously creating some distance from it, avoiding the possible repercussions from being too candid. Finally, the allocation of agency also betrays the context in which the dialogic interaction occurs. The slaves in the Blount narrative, unlike in the Brown narrative, possess no agency whatsoever. The white actors monopolize the agency. This allocation of agency may represent the imbalanced interaction between Hicks and Blount. It may also reflect the sense of impotence of a black man amidst Jim Crow and the Great Depression. Blount's experiences, first with slavery and then with Jim Crow, undoubtedly limited his view of his own efficacy.

Blount's narrative, therefore, arose within a hostile historical moment for Southern blacks in an interview that reflected the tense racial conflict of the South during Jim Crow. Blount, finding himself immersed in this precarious position, sought to negotiate it in a way that allowed him to tell his story while ensuring he would not face any repercussions. Hicks may or may not have been consciously aware of her status and power over her interview subject, but her position influenced the interaction and the production of the narrative nonetheless. Blount's narrative thus represents a site of political struggle between the conflicting ideological forces of the Jim Crow South.

Conclusion

As these two narratives illustrate, the political work accomplished by similar narratives can assume different forms depending on the context under which they are produced. In this paper, I explored only two manifestation of this political work, but undoubtedly there are many others that require further examination. Because of the varied political work that a narrative can accomplish, it is not enough to simply assert that narratives are political. Nor

is it justified to solely examine the political relevance for the assertion of an individual's identity. As the Brown and Blount narratives illustrate, narratives not only have ramifications for collective political action, but, more significantly, narratives of *individuals* can be implicated in collective political action. This is most readily apparent in the Brown narrative in which an individual's story becomes associated with a political movement. The Blount narrative also is related to collective political struggles; the narrative itself becomes a site of conflict between two racial groups. Consequently, even though both narratives represent a political assertion of individuality, their relevance extends beyond the individual to the collective. For this reason, narrative analysis possesses some fruitful insights for subfields that study collective action and social movement theory (Davis, 2002).

Dialogic analysis of narratives yields insight into the political work of narratives. Narrative analyses that focus solely on the narrative as a product overstate its coherence and tend to divorce the narrative from the historical and political context into which it enters. These approaches present narratives as univocal, obscuring the existence of multiple voices (sometimes conflicting) that shape the narrative. With its focus on the production of the narrative as a communicative act between competing voices, dialogic analysis can overcome these oversights to bring to the fore the political work of narratives. Some narratives are inherently more political than others, but without embedding the narrative within the context of its production — both locally and historically — some political work performed by the narrative undoubtedly is missed.

This paper has represented a first start in examining the complex role narratives assume in collective political struggles; it has limitations requiring further research. First, there are limits to the theoretical implications drawn from only two narratives. Narratives do political work in a variety of other ways that cannot be discerned from two narratives. Second, a fuller dialogic analysis would take into account the reception of the narratives. However, it is difficult to derive this information from the historical record. Brown's narrative was viewed as a success by abolitionists and numerous editions were published, but we lack any specific information regarding the reader's interpretation of it. The data on the reception of the Blount narrative is even more limited. For decades, the slave narratives sat in the national archives. It was only in 1972 that the collection became widely accessible. Finally, it must be acknowledged the researchers bring meanings to these narratives from their own context. This interpretation itself has political ramifications; using these narratives as objects of study is a form of political work. This paper has not explored this issue, but it is also relevant in understanding the political work of narratives.

Both Brown and Blount suffered the indignities of slavery and describe in their narratives an example of the harsh oppression that slaves faced. Yet, their depiction of this oppressive system is very different. This difference cannot be explained solely by the idiosyncrasies of their individual biographies, for these differences are repeated throughout the two different groups of slave narratives. Only by comparing the dialogic production of the narratives can we locate the source of these differences. Brown and Blount may have shared similar experiences with slavery, but their stories have very different strategic political gains. Their stories speak not just to the past; they are also directed toward the political context of the present in which they are told.

Appendix 1 — The Brown Narrative

Abstract

- 1 My master being a political demagogue, soon found those who were ready to put him into office, for the favors he could render them;
- 2 and a few years after his arrival in Missouri, he was elected to a seat in the Legislature.
- 3 In his absence from home, everything was left in charge of Mr. Cook, the overseer,
- 4 and he soon became more tyrannical and cruel.

Orientation

- 5 Among the slaves on the plantation, was one by the name of Randall.
- 6 He was a man about six feet high, and well-proportioned,
- 7 and known as a man of great strength and power.
- 8 He was considered the most valuable and able-bodied slave on the plantation;
- 9 but no matter how good or useful a slave may be, he seldom escapes the lash.
- 10 But it was not so with Randall. He had been on the plantation since my earliest recollection, and I had never known of his being flogged.
- 11 No thanks were due to the master or overseer for this.
- 12 I have often heard him declare, that no white man should ever whip him — that he would die first.
- 13 Cook, from the time that he came upon the plantation, had frequently declared, that he could and would flog any nigger that was put into the field to work under him.
- 14 My master had repeatedly told him not to attempt to whip Randall,
- 15 but he was determined to try it.

Scene 1

- 16 As soon as he was left sole dictator, he thought the time had come to put his threats into execution.
- 17 He soon began to find fault with Randall,
- 18 and threatened to whip him, if he did not do better.

- 19 One day he gave him a very hard task, — more than he could possibly do;
 20 and at night, the task not being performed, he told Randall that he should remember
 him the next morning.
 21 On the following morning, after the hands had taken breakfast, Cook called out to
 Randall,
 22 and told him that he intended to whip him,
 23 and ordered him to cross his hands and be tied.
 24 Randall asked why he wished to whip him.
 25 He answered, because he had not finished his task the day before.
 26 Randall said that the task was too great, or he should have done it.
 27 Cook said it made no difference, — he should whip him.
 28 Randall stood silent for a moment,
 29 and then said, “Mr. Cook, I have always tried to please you since you have been on the
 plantation, and I find you are determined not to be satisfied with my work, let me do
 as well as I may. No man has laid hands on me, to whip me, for the last ten years, and I
 have long since come to the conclusion not to be whipped by any man living.”

Scene 2

- 30 Cook, finding by Randall’s determined look and gestures, that he would resist, called
 three of the hands from their work,
 31 and commanded them to seize Randall,
 32 and tie him.
 33 The hands stood still;
 34 — they knew Randall —
 35 and they also knew him to be a powerful man,
 36 and were afraid to grapple with him.
 37 As soon as Cook had ordered the men to seize him, Randall turned to them,
 38 and said — “Boys, you all know me; you know that I can handle any three of you, and
 the man that lays hands on me shall die. This white man can’t whip me himself, and
 therefore he has called you to help him.”
 39 The overseer was unable to prevail upon them to seize
 40 and secure Randall,
 41 and finally ordered them all to go to their work together.

Scene 3

- 42 Nothing was said to Randall by the overseer, for more than a week.
 43 One morning, however, while the hands were at work in the field, he came into it, ac-
 companied by three friends of his, Thompson, Woodbridge and Jones.
 44 They came up to where Randall was at work,
 45 and Cook ordered him to leave his work,
 46 and go with them to the barn.
 47 He refused to go;
 48 whereupon he was attacked by the overseer and his companions,
 49 when he turned upon them,
 50 and laid them, one after another, prostrate on the ground.

51 Woodbridge drew out his pistol,
52 and fired at him,
53 and brought him to the ground by a pistol ball.
54 The others rushed upon him with their clubs,
55 and beat him over the head and face, until they succeeded in tying him.
56 He was then taken to the barn,
57 and tied to a beam.
58 Cook gave him over one hundred lashes with a heavy cowhide,
59 had him washed with salt and water,
60 and left him tied during the day.

Resolution — Coda

61 The next day he was untied,
62 and taken to a blacksmith's shop,
63 and had a ball and chain attached to his leg.
64 He was compelled to labor in the field,
65 and perform the same amount of work that the other hands did.
66 When his master returned home, he was much pleased to find that Randall had been subdued in his absence.

Appendix 2 — The Blount Narrative

Abstract

1 I 'members once de marster had a overseer dere
2 dat was meaner dan a mean nigger.
3 He always hired good overseers
4 and a whole lot of times he let some Negro slave oversee.
5 Well, dis overseer beat some fo de half grown boys till be blood run down dere heels
6 and he told de rest of us dat if we told on him dat he'd kill us.
7 We don't dare ask de marster to get rid of de man
8 so dis went on for a long time.

Scene 1

9 It was as cold as de devil one day
10 and dis overseer had a gang of us a-clearin' a new ground,
11 one boy ask if he could warm by de brush heap.
12 De overseer said no,
13 and after awhile de boy had a chill.
14 De overseer don't care,

Scene 2

15 but dat night de boy am a sick nigger.
16 De next mornin' de marster gets de doctor,

- 17 and de doctor say dat de boy has got pneumonia.
 18 He tells 'em to take off de boy's shirt and grease him with some tar, turpentine, and kerosene,
 19 and when dey starts to take de shirt off dey finds dat it am stuck.
 20 Dey had to grease de shirt to get it off 'cause de blood where de overseer beat him had stuck de shirt tight to de skin.
 21 De marster was in de room
 22 and he asked de boy how come it,
 23 and de boy told him.
 24 De marster sortas turns white
 25 and he says to me, "will you go and ask de overseer to stop here a minute, please?"

Scene 3

- 26 When de overseer comes up de steps he asks sorta sassy-like, "What you want?"
 27 De marster says, "Pack you things and get off'en my place as fast as you can, you pesky varmint."
 28 De overseer sasses de marster some more,
 29 and den I sees de marster fairly lose his temper for de first time.
 30 He don't say a word,
 31 but he walks over,
 32 grabs de overseer by de shoulder,
 33 sets his boot right hard 'gainst the seat of his pants
 34 and sends him, all drawed up, out in de yard on his face.
 35 He close up like an umbrella for a minute,
 36 den he pulls hisself all together
 37 and he limpsouten dat yard

Resolution

- 38 and we aint's never seen him no more.

References

- Andrews, M. (2002). Introduction: Counter-narratives and the power to oppose. *Narrative Inquiry*, 12(1), 1–6.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1994). *The Bakhtin reader*. P. Morris (Ed.). New York: Edward Arnold.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). *Dialogic imagination: Four essays*. M. Holquist & V. Liapunov (Eds.). Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Bell, S. E. (1988). Becoming a political woman: The reconstruction and interpretation of experience through stories. In A.D. Todd & S. Fisher (Eds.), *Gender and discourse: The power of talk* (pp. 97–123). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Bell, S. E. (1999). Narratives and lives: Women's health politics and the diagnoses of cancer in DES daughters. *Narrative inquiry*, 9(2), 347–389.

- Benford, R. (2002). Controlling narratives and narratives as control within social movements. In J. Davis (Ed.), *Stories of change: Narratives and social movements* (pp. 53–75). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Blassingame, J. W. (1991). Using the testimony of ex-slaves: Approaches and problems. In C. T. Davis & H. L. Gates, Jr. (Eds.), *The slave's narrative* (p. 78–97). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Blassingame, J. W. (1977). *Slave testimony: Two centuries of letters, speeches, interviews, and autobiographies*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press.
- Brown, W. W. (1979). *Narrative of William Wells Brown, a fugitive slave*. New York: Johnson Reprint Corp.
- Clark, E. B. (1995). The sacred rights of the weak: Pain, sympathy, and the culture of individual rights in antebellum America. *The journal of American history* 82(2), 463–493.
- Davis, C. T., & Gates Jr., H. L. (Eds.). (1991). *The slave's narrative*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Davis, J. (Ed.). (2002). *Stories of change: Narratives and social movements*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- DeFina, A. (2003). *Identity in narrative: A study of immigrant discourse*. Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Publishing Company
- Escott, P. D. (1991). The art and science of reading WPA slave narratives. In C. T. Davis & H. L. Gates, Jr. (Eds.), *The slave's narrative* (pp. 40–47). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Farrison, W. E. (1969). *William Wells Brown: Author and reformer*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fine, G. A.. (1995). Public narration and group culture: Discerning discourse in social movements. In H. Johnston & B. Klandermans (Eds.), *Social movements and culture* (pp. 127–143). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Fine, G. A.. (2002). The storied group: Social movements as “bundles of narratives.” In J. Davis (Ed.), *Stories of change* (pp. 229–247). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Foster, F. S. (1979). *Witnessing slavery: The development of antebellum slave narratives*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Gardiner, M. (1992). *Dialogics of critique: M.M. Bakhtin and the theory of ideology*. New York: Routledge.
- Gates, Jr., H. L. (Ed.) (1987). *Classic slave narratives*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Ginsburg, F. (1989). Dissonance and harmony: The symbolic function of abortion in activists' life stories. In Personal Narratives Group (Eds.), *Interpreting women's lives: Feminist theory and personal narratives* (pp. 85–96). Bloomington, ID: Indiana University Press.
- Gordon, L. (1979). A brief look at blacks in Depression Mississippi, 1929–1934: Eyewitness accounts. *The Journal of Negro History*, 64(4), 377–390.
- Hale, G. E. (1999). *Making whiteness: The culture of segregation in the South, 1890- 1940*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Kane, A. (2001). Finding emotions in social movement processes. In J. Goodwin, J. Jasper, & F. Polletta (Eds.), *Passionate politics* (pp. 251–267). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Klawiter, M. (2004). Breast cancer in two regimes: The impact of social movements on illness experience. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 26(6), 845–874.
- Labov, W. (1981). Speech actions and reactions in personal narrative. In D. Tannen (Ed.), *Analyzing discourse: Text and talk* (pp. 219–247). Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Langellier, K. M. (2001). Personal narrative. In M. Jolly (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of life writing: autobiographical and biographical forms, vol. 2* (pp. 699–701). London: Fitzroy Dearborn.
- Langellier, K.M. (1989). Personal narratives: Perspectives on theory and research. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 9(4), 243–276.
- Mathews, D. G. (1972). The abolitionists on slavery: The critique behind the social movement. *Journal of Southern history*, 22(2), 163–182.
- McElvaine, R. S. (1993). *The Great Depression: America 1921–1941*. New York: Times Books.
- Mishler, E. (1986). *Research interviewing: Context and narrative*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press
- Patterson, W. (2002). *Strategic narrative: New perspectives on the power of personal and cultural stories*. New York: Lexington Books.
- Peterson, E. E. (2000). Narrative identity in a solo performance: Craig Gingrich-Philbrook's "The first time". *Narrative Inquiry*, 10(1), 229–251.
- Peterson, E. E., & Langellier, K. M. (1997). The politics of personal narrative methodology. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 17(2), 135–152.
- Personal Narratives Group. (1989). *Interpreting women's lives: Feminist theory and personal narratives*. Bloomington, ID: Indiana University Press.
- Polletta, F. (1998). Contending stories: Narratives and social movements. *Qualitative Sociology* 21, 419–446.
- Polyani, L. (1985). *Telling the American story: A structural and cultural analysis of conversational storytelling*. Norwood, NJ: Albex.
- Rawick, G. P. (Ed). (1972). *The American slave: A composite autobiography, vol. 14: North Carolina narratives, part 1* (pp. 111–115). Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Co.
- Riessman, C. K. (1993). *Narrative analysis*. London: Sage Publications.
- Riessman, C. K. (2004a). Accidental cases: Extending the concept of positioning in narrative studies. In M. Bamberg & M. Andrews (Eds.), *Considering counter-narratives: Narrating, resisting, making sense* (pp. 33–38) Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Riessman, C. K. (2004b). A thrice told tale: New readings of an old story. In B. Hurwitz, T. Greenhalgh, & V. Skultans (Eds.), *Narrative research in health and illness* (pp. 309–324) London: Blackwell.
- Rosenwald, G. C., & Ochberg, R. L. (1992). *Storied lives: The cultural politics of self-understanding*. Hartford, CT: Yale University Press.
- Skultans, V. (1999). Narratives of the body and history: Illness in judgment on the Soviet past. *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 21, 310–328.
- Starling, M. W. (1988). *The slave narrative: Its place in American history*. Washington, DC: Howard University Press.

- Stepto, R. B. (1991). I rose and found my voice: Narration, authentication, and authorial control in four slave narratives. In C. T. Davis & H. L. Gates, Jr. (Eds.), *The slave's narrative* (pp. 225–241). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sundstrom, W. A. (1992). Last hired, first fired? Unemployment and urban black workers during the Great Depression. *The Journal of Economic History*, 52(2), 415–429.
- Stewart, J. B. (1976). *Holy warriors: Abolitionists and American slavery*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Williams, J. (1838). *Narrative of James Williams, an American slave, who was for several years a driver on a cotton plantation in Alabama*. New York: American Anti-Slavery Society.
- Whooley, O. (2004). Locating masterframes in history: An analysis of the religious masterframe of the abolition movement and its influence on movement trajectory. *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 17(4), 490–516.
- Woodward, C. V. (1991). History from slave sources. In C. T. Davis & H. L. Gates, Jr. (Eds.), *The slave's narrative* (pp. 48–58). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Woodward, C. V. (2001). *The strange career of Jim Crow, commemorative edition*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Yetman, N. R. (1967). The background of the slave narrative collection. *American Quarterly*, 19(3), 534–553.
- Yetman, N. R. (Ed). (1970). *Voices from slavery*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- Yetman, N. R. (1984). Ex-slave interviews and the historiography of slavery. *American Quarterly*, 36(2), 181–210.
- Young, K. (1989). Narrative embodiments: Enclaves of the self in the realm of medicine. In J. Shooter & K. J. Gergen (Eds.), *Texts of Identity* (pp. 152–165). London: Sage Press.
- Zimmerman, B. (1984). The politics of transliteration: Lesbian personal narratives. *Signs*, 9(4), 663–682.
- Zussman, R. (2000). Autobiographical occasions, *Qualitative Sociology*, 23(1), 5–8.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Cathy Riessman for her invaluable insights and support of this project.

Copyright of Narrative Inquiry is the property of John Benjamins Publishing Co. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.