13. Afro-Caribbean Voices: Oral History Projects at Vanderbilt

Paula Covington

The three oral history collections this paper describes are housed in various places in the United States, the last of the three in the Special Collections area of Vanderbilt’s Jean and Alexander Heard Library. That may seem a long way from our conference site in Trinidad and Tobago—some 2,419 miles to be exact—but in reviewing these collections I discovered at least one connection between a Vanderbilt graduate and our host city, Port of Spain. More will be said on that shortly.

I am happy to say that two of the three oral history collections are already digitized and easy to reach with a click of your mouse. The third, a recent acquisition, is still in process and digitizing it will require both time and money, which are in just as short supply at our institution as at many of yours.

The three collections are very different. One focuses on issues of racial identity, primarily in the United States; another includes many interviews with Afro-Caribbean content; the third is concerned with the experience of Afro-Colombians.

Who Speaks for the Negro?

The first of the three, Who Speaks for the Negro?, contains interviews by poet and novelist Robert Penn Warren, with a wide range of individuals who participated in the struggles of African Americans in the United States for equality during the 1950s and early 1960s (http://whospeaks.library.vanderbilt.edu/). Warren had a long-standing interest in racial issues. Born in a little town on the Kentucky-Tennessee line, he graduated summa cum laude from Vanderbilt at the age of twenty, already a published poet and member of the literary group known as the Fugitives. In 1930, he and eleven other youngish Southerners published a set of essays entitled I’ll Take My Stand. Warren’s essay included an endorsement of “separate but equal” education for blacks. It was an essay he came to regret. By the 1940s he was a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and a promoter of civil rights. In 1964 he began tape-recording interviews with prominent and lesser-known activists involved in the US civil rights movement. He lugged his large reel-to-reel tape recorder all over the country and, from these interviews, he produced the book, Who Speaks for the Negro?. Published in 1965, it
consists largely of partial interview transcripts. The transcripts of the tapes and
the tapes themselves somehow came to be divided, one set at the University of
Kentucky, and one at Yale. Mona Frederick, head of the Robert Penn Warren
Center at Vanderbilt, persuaded the two institutions to allow her to digitize
both collections and put them together on a single site. The site includes not
only the full interviews, but also correspondence, notes, and other material.
Additionally, she includes the images of the original documents, with all docu-
ments transcribed and added metadata for keyword searching.

I only have time to mention two items. The first is a letter from Stokely
Carmichael, who was born here in Port of Spain, written to Robert Penn
Warren after Warren had published his book, _Who Speaks for the Negro?_

_Dear Mr. Warren,_

_I hope you are fine. Please excuse this note. I just got out of jail in
Fort Deposit a little town in Lowndes County, Alabama, this is the county
where Mrs. Luaizzo was shot. I did not demonstrate. The “officials” of the
county know who I am. Since they could not arrest me for demonstrating
they arrested me for reckless driving and leaving the scene of an accident.
I wasn’t driving._

_Jails are bad places. Sometimes you can read…most of the time you
can’t. There were about thirty of us in jail. Someone smuggled in two paper-
backs. You read books very slowly in jail because there are never enough
and when you finish a book there is nothing to do. So you are like a kid with
an ice-cream cone, you don’t want to finish your cone. Since there were
only two books and thirty people, after you read five pages you tore them
from the book and passed it on to the next person. The book is usually torn
to pieces._

_One of the books was _Black Boy_, I have already read that, so I was out
of the fight for that one. The other book was _Wilderness_, I was in the fight
for that one._

_Books become more real in jail. Characters become cell-mates, and
the novel takes place within the confines of the steel bars._

_I just wanted to say I read your book while I was in jail._

_Yours for Freedom, Stokely Carmichael._

The other is an interview with a woman probably not known to you,
Clarie Collins Harvey, who provided supplies for imprisoned Freedom Riders
in Mississippi and traveled to Africa in a search to understand her roots. [At
this point a recording of the interview was played.]

**Voices from Our America**

The second digital collection, _Voices from Our America_, is a project
begun by Ifeoma Nwankwo, an Associate Professor of English at Vanderbilt
(http://voicesamerica.library.vanderbilt.edu/home.php). Her research centers
on encounters among African American, Latin American, and West Indian
peoples in the areas of culture, identity, and ideology. With the collaboration of
The principal focus of the project has been to capture the experiences of Panamanians of West Indian descent. Over one hundred interviews have been conducted with community members in Panama City, Bocas del Toro, and Colón, discussing everything from the original building and ongoing work on the canal and the railroad, to racial discrimination and identity issues, to West Indian music and culture. A favorite of mine is the lively voice of Cecil Haynes (1913–), a West Indian canal worker from Barbados, who worked on the canal for seventy-three years. He does not particularly want to focus on discrimination but he does mention that North American workers were paid on a different standard from West Indian laborers—“gold” instead of “silver”—because it was felt that it was a hardship for the US workers to be in the jungle, as if it were not so for Jamaicans as well! Reggie Boyce, a well-known musician of West Indian heritage, talks about being forbidden to speak English while in school in Panama. Pauline Bushell, whose parents were from Trinidad and Barbados, discusses her heritage and the making of cou cou, a national Barbadian dish of African ancestry that consists of cornmeal and okra. Another sings “Island in the Sun” and discusses calypso. Some interviewees use three languages in their interviews. Carlos Russell, a retired professor and poet, discusses the relationship between language and identity in Panama. Most of the interviews are actually one to three hours long, although only the clips have been added so far. The intention was to have seventy complete videos and transcripts mounted by December 2012; the other thirty interviews will comprise a book. There are lesson plans and a blog designed to help schools at all levels use these interviews for teaching and learning about Afro-Panamanian history and culture and the African Diaspora.

The third collection is the personal one of Manuel Zapata Olivella, Afro-Colombian writer, anthropologist, and physician. The acquisition of the collection took several years to complete and had support from our University Librarian, Paul Gherman, who—fortunately for us—had served in the Peace Corps in Colombia. Also fortunately for us, Pablo Gómez, now on the faculty of the University of Wisconsin, was a Vanderbilt graduate student. He was willing to meet with Zapata Olivella’s daughter, Edelma, a number of times when he was in Bogotá to help facilitate the process. The collection is not yet processed but has already attracted a good deal of interest. We hope to gain funding to process and digitize this large collection, a commitment we made to the Colombian Ministry of Culture.

Manuel Zapata Olivella was known as the “Dean of Black Latin American Literature.” He was also an anthropologist and greatly interested in recovering the memory of what he called the abuelos (the older generation he wished to interview), especially those of African descent. Zapata Olivella developed a program throughout Colombia he called the Voz de los abuelos project, which
consisted of interviews of unlettered elderly, primarily focusing on those aged eighty or more. I noticed, however, that some of these he called ancianos were about my age! Some of those interviewed were descendants of slaves.

Zapata Olivella was zealous about teaching students to preserve and revere their Afro-Colombian history. His project involved students from all over Colombia. As part of their school requirement, they interviewed illiterate elderly (or abuelos) and asked them a set series of questions relating to their history, beliefs, traditions, any memories they had of their ancestors, either slave or indigenous. The students recorded these interviews on tape and in writing, in the various regions throughout Colombia, and sent them to the Fundación Colombiana de Investigaciones Folclóricas, of which Zapata Olivella was director. We have these tapes and transcriptions and thousands of corresponding photographs documenting traditions, festivals, ethnicity, and all aspects of rural life.

The questions elicited information about rural housing; occupations such as pottery making; customs and celebrations; religious beliefs and practices; festivals, such as one in Quibdó; and cultural traditions, including music and instruments from every region in Colombia.

This is a tremendously rich collection for many different reasons, and the above is only one segment of it. I anticipate that we will discover more exciting finds, such as the letters from Langston Hughes we recently uncovered.

At present, and for the near future, use of the Zapata Olivella collection will require a visit to Nashville. It came to us in a somewhat confused state, and sorting through it has proved a challenge. However, we continue to apply for grant funds that will permit its digitization, and hope that it, too, will soon be available to scholars throughout the world working at their own locations.  

NOTES


BIBLIOGRAPHY


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