It is an impressive and extensive career in folklore that Professor Ronald L. Baker brings to the enterprise of editing this collection of WPA Indiana narratives of formerly enslaved African Americans. Because of his interests and training he has seen many of the pitfalls that marked the paths of the early interviewers, editors, and collectors of these and similar narratives. Baker separates himself from those who would offer this material in its "original form," arguing with a compelling clarity that no such texts are—or were—ever possible (p. 9). From the time of their compilation, the stories were frequently summarized, smoothed out, retold in less controversial language, and shaped by the dubious practice of recording dialect—a practice challenged by the great WPA editors such as John Lomax and Sterling Brown (pp. 11-12).

Baker offers this collection for the "general reader," an audience that will benefit from the content and format of the book. Even the most sophisticated student of U.S. history, Indiana history, and African American cultural history might be surprised at the wealth of information that has survived in these stories. Baker best serves both the speakers and the increasingly distant readers when he presents both a general summary of what was taken down in interviews and also a first-person version of selected narratives. Teachers, artisans, musicians, ministers, political figures, builders, farmers, day laborers, and house servants sit at the interlocutors' table and add their testimony to the collection that is assembled in Homeless, Friendless, and Penniless.

Most of the informants were in their seventies, eighties, or even nineties when they were interviewed, but their memory of whippings, murders, the selling of children, hypocrisy, and betrayal remains vivid in these accounts. Songs, jokes, sly wit, and irony present a picture of fully realized human beings, still in the process of constructing themselves. The narrative map traces pathways from places in Kentucky, Tennessee, Missouri (and other southern sites), to cities and communities from Evansville to Gary—and all the way to Liberia, and back, in the case of George Washington Buckner (p. 81). Not all old people are wise, but Homeless, Friendless, and Penniless suggests that, by being alert, resourceful, open to the unknown, quick to take risks, and self-determining, the survivors of enslavement and its aftermath can still teach valuable lessons long after their deaths. This collection will be an effective introduction to an immensely usable past.

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