**Introduction**

“The people, all the people, must be known, they must be heard,” proclaimed William T. Couch in 1939 from Chapel Hill. A respected editor turned part-time government bureaucrat, Couch served as director of both the University of North Carolina Press and the Southeast Regional Director of the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP).[[1]](#footnote-1) As economic turmoil engulfed the nation, his concern for the future of the region mounted. Alongside cultural workers across the United States such as writer James Agee and photographer Marion Post Wolcott, he shared a belief in the power of documentary expression to render visible silenced communities. However, with key interlocuters including New Deal liberals in the FWP and sociologists, he troubled over how to “authentically” and “accurately” represent people and their conditions that were honest about the challenges of the region while challenging depictions of southern life as antiquated, depraved, and languid. “Somehow they must be given representation, somehow they must be given voice and allowed to speak, in their essential character,” Couch argued.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The desire to circulate southern voices grew out of Couch’ distress over how intellectuals from academic sociology and literature portrayed the region. While the former risked reducing people to generalizations and nameless statistics further obscured by dense academic prose, the latter often depicted the region as backwards through stereotypical characterizations, a theme that federal bureaucrats drew on to argue that the region could not modernize and move out of the Great Depression. The stakes further heightened as intellectuals moved between the academy and New Deal state to identify and develop solutions. To address these issues, Couch developed the Southern Life History Project (SLHP) as a special initiative in the FWP. Relying on the existing state and local FWP offices, the project employed over 150 of federal writers and editors across the Southeast. This laudatory experiment in social documentary led to the collection of over 1,200 life histories in which Southerners shared their own stories of life during the Great Depression.

*Writing Their Voices: Documentary Evidence and the Southern Life History Project* recovers the history of the SLHP and their efforts to reconfigure the life history method. We employ an interdisciplinary approach that combines close readings of archival material with computational methods that analyze pattern across the collection. The digital platform gives readers an opportunity to explore archival materials and data alongside our argument, which opens up new forms of reading and interaction in the humanities. We address five questions: What were the motivating factors behind the creation of the SLHP? How did the SLHP come into formation? How did the project come to define the form of a life history and who was capable of writing them? Who was represented in the life histories and why? What are the legacies of the SLHP? In addressing these questions, we demonstrate key points in the struggle over what counted as social knowledge, how to accurately represent social conditions, and who could produce such knowledge. Our digital platform is organized into layers that each correspond to a key question motivating our analysis.

The concept of layers reflects our methodology, which brings together the concept of rhetorical ecology with the spatial turn and computational text analysis in digital humanities. The rhetorical ecology approach emerged from rhetoric and composition studies to better understand how types of rhetoric, notably texts, were invented.[[3]](#footnote-3)[[4]](#footnote-4) It calls for a move away from focusing on individual writers towards an analysis of the larger ecosystem in which the writing occurs and the social processes and power structures that shape such systems. Rhetorical ecology places the collection of life histories within a complex ecosystem that includes SLHP administrators, writers, and editors and institutions including the academic fields, higher education, and government agencies. To demonstrate the extent of this ecosystem we draw on the spatial turn and computational text analysis in the digital humanities.[[5]](#footnote-5) While mapping serves as evidence and argument about *who* was represented and by whom, text analysis through topic modeling and document clustering demonstrates *how* people were represented. Along with revealing our interdisciplinary methodological approach, the use of layers instead of chapters or sections demonstrates how the digital modality of our text shaped, and was shaped by, our methods and form of writing.

**The Layers**

Layer 1: Motivation for the SLHP explores the motivation for the creation of life histories by demonstrating how Chapel Hill came to be the center of debates over sociological knowledge production and how to define the South during the early 1900s. As Director UNC Press in Chapel Hill, Couch was immersed in ongoing debates at the time over how to document social conditions most accurately - including what gets counted as evidence, who are legitimate researchers, and how findings should be written. The field of sociology enjoyed prominence as a powerful intellectual arbiter in these debates during the 1920s and 1930s when the social sciences were forging and institutionalizing their methodological toolkit. While certain parts of the discipline such as the Columbia School privileged quantitative data to develop generalized social truths, other parts such as the Chicago School and Chapel Hill School focused on qualitative data of individuals to study specific sociological features. Couch argued that both qualitative and quantitive approaches obscured the voices of the people by relying on faceless statistics or vague abstractions. Instead, he desired to create a new method of documentation that let the people speak for themselves.

Layer 2: The Formation of the SLHP details how the project formed within the Federal Writers’ Project. As a New Deal agency, the FWP was part employment project and part laudatory experiment in federal support of cultural work.[[6]](#footnote-6) Shaped by emerging documentary practices that privileged folkways as well as institutional possibilities made possible by the vast bureaucratic infrastructure of the FWP, the documentation of “life histories” was Couch’s answer to the debate between sociologists over how to best capture the real nature of Southern life.[[7]](#footnote-7) To accomplish this project, Couch sent unemployed white-collar workers, hired as federal writers, across the Southeast region to interview fellow Southerners about their lives. The ability to hear from Southerners in their words, Couch argued, lent authority and authenticity to their claims about their conditions.

Through visual and textual forms of argument, Layer 3: Defining Life Histories and Qualified Writers turns to mapping the topology of interlocuters that shaped the purpose and possibilities of the SLHP. Writers, editors, and administrators negotiated and forged a new method of social documentation that they believed could provide a mechanism to understand the challenges of the American South as articulated by those actually grappling with the effects of industrialization and systems of economic and racial inequality. The experiment led to the development of what Couch framed as a “new device” of documentary expression called a “life history,” oral interviews of everyday people’s life experiences from their viewpoint captured in words by writers.

Yet, the SLHP emerged among a crowded landscape of documentary projects in the FWP and beyond, which shaped who was and was *not* represented. They focused on what they labeled as the “typical” southerner, who they defined on the Black/White racial binary and by occupation. SLHP positioned southern laborers as perceptive about their conditions and shaped by the past as well as the present to disrupt stereotypes about the region as uneducated, lazy, and backwards. In the process, the audience for the life histories comes into focus. By centering the hardships of the White working class through first person narrative stories that emphasized the emotional realities of the everyday experience, they became the voices of the South for middle- and upper-class White readers primarily residing on the east coast. These stories complicated problematic regional stereotypes, they simultaneously erased the brutality of segregation and the effects of slavery by omitting stories that addressed such important issues, thereby reifying cultural and structural racism.

The layer then turns to how assumptions about race, gender, expertise, and proximity shaped who could be a writer. Rather than seeking highly disciplined academics, the SLHP sought writers who they believed could access the desired communities, listen, and effectively write the history recounted for a more general audience. White women writers dominated because of their positionality in southern society, which was shaped by gendered and racialized ideas that White women were better equipped to put interviewees at ease, record information and access the domestic spaces in which the interviews occurred. The hiring practices constituted an opening for White women to hold a key position in gathering social knowledge. However, both African American women and men were systematically denied such opportunities due to racist hiring practices that disqualified Black candidates and segregationist beliefs that African American and White writers could not work in the same office space.

In Layer 4: Rhetorical Strategies and Representation, we identify the rhetorical strategies used in the life histories that were developed to persuade the reader that they were hearing the person interviewed by using text analysis methods. Writers, editors and administrators negotiated a form of the life history designed to reduce the presence of the writer and center the voice of the individual, yet with enough literary flourish to maintain their primary audience – White affluent readers who enjoyed cultural, social and political power in US society. Centering the voice of the interviewee also including using written dialect to help readers ‘hear’ while they read. However, our analysis reveals that such practices were used unevenly as written dialect dominated life histories of African Americans, but was used more sparingly among White interviewees. Such stark differences demonstrate how a nearly all white writing staff relied on Jim Crow sensibilities to create images of African American interviewees that conformed to the expectations of White middle-class intended readership.

**Enduring Legacies**

The SLHP together with other regional units of the FWP produced nearly 10,000 interviews nationwide, constituting one of the nation's large first-person narrative collections. However, nearly 80 years later, few have ever heard of the Southern Life History Project’s groundbreaking project or the significant effect it had on shaping ideas of what counted as social documentation, collective memory, and regional identity. For two brief years, the SLHP offered a different direction for social documentary. They attempted to reconfigure what counted as data and evidence about social conditions. Numbers and percentages could only tell part of the story. The richness of individual stories, as told from their point of view, offered another lens into society. They were “human” in a way that statistics could not capture. As we look today to numbers and big data as a privileged form of knowledge about our world, looking back to the SLHP offers an earlier moment where there were animated debates about how, and if, numbers could *really* help us understand each other during a time of great economic, cultural, and social turmoil. Looking back, we can see that our debates are not new, but rather a part of a long history about *how* was know *what* we know and the role of data, statistics, and point-of-view in shaping how we understood pressing social issues.

In aggregate, *Writing Their Voices* demonstrates an entangled story about: how the life histories, as a new form of documentary evidence concerned with capturing authenticity, contested existing approaches to producing sociological knowledge and public memory; the role that gender, class, and race played in negotiating these new methods; and, how this genre of social documentary helped to shape notions of what it meant to be an American and a Southerner during a time of political, social and economic unrest. While we address these themes, there are many exciting directions to take to understand these SLHP, which the reader can see by moving through exploratory interfaces or by analyzing the *List Histories Data Set*. We invite the reader to pose and answer questions of your own. We hope that by moving through this digital text, the reader sees how our argument unfolds in new ways made possible by combining innovations in methods with new affordances of the digital medium.

1. Rubenstein DeMasi, Susan (2016). *Henry Alsberg: The Driving Force of the New Deal's Federal Writer's Project.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co. pp. 200–202. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [William Terry Couch, ed., *These Are Our Lives* (University of North Carolina Press, 1939), x–xi.](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?LKNlrW) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Marilyn M. Cooper, “The Ecology of Writing,” *College English* 48, no. 4 (1986): 364–75; Nathan Shepley, “Rhetorical-Ecological Links in Composition History | Enculturation,” *Enculturation: A Journal of Rhetoric, Writing, and Culture*, February 28, 2013, http://enculturation.net/rhetorical-ecological-links; Jenny Edbauer, “Unframing Models of Public Distribution: From Rhetorical Situation to Rhetorical Ecologies,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (2005): 5–24. Rachel C. Jackson, “Locating Oklahoma: Critical Regionalism and Transrhetorical Analysis in the Composition Classroom,” *College Composition and Communication*, 2014, 301. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For examples, see David J. Bodenhamer, John Corrigan, and Trevor M. Harris.,*Deep Maps and Spatial Narratives.* (Indiana University Press, 2015); Todd Pressner, David Shepard, and Yoh Kawano*. Hypercities Thick Mapping in the Digital Humanities* (Harvard University Press, 2014); Richard White, “What is Spatial History?” Spatial History Lab: Working Paper. February 1, 2010; Ted Underwood, “A Genealogy of Distant Reading”, *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 11 no.2 2017. For more about the role of the digital humanities, see the Methods Layer. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Jerrold Hirsch, *Portrait of America: A Cultural History of the Federal Writers’ Project* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 2004); Wendy Griswold and Wendy Griswold, *American Guides: The Federal Writers’ Project and the Casting of American Culture* (Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016); Jerre Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writers’ Project, 1935-1943* (Syracuse University Press, 1996); Catherine A. Stewart, *Long Past Slavery: Representing Race in the Federal Writers’ Project* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016); Monty Noam Penkower, *The Federal Writers’ Project ; a Study in Government Patronage of the Arts* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Lynn Moss Sanders, *Howard W. Odum’s Folklore Odyssey: Transformation to Tolerance Through African American Folk Studies* (University of Georgia Press, 2003); Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary*; Retman, *Real Folks*; Stewart, *Long Past Slavery*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)