**Conclusion**

In May of 1939, the Southern Life Histories Project published, *These Are Our Lives*, a collection of 35 life histories. The release of this book came only 10 months after the SLHP began collecting life histories. The book garnered considerable interest and favorable reviews. As a local UNC radio host stated over air, “These [life histories], when taken together, should give a fair picture of the structure and workings of Southern society.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Life histories were beginning to make an intervention in the depiction of the region deemed “the Nation’s No. 1 Economic Problem.” The book also offered a successful example of why the FWP should even exist prompting ideas for other similar books on different industries in the South and even different regions in the U.S. In the works were books on topics such as oil workers, farm labor, and small-town life proposed by FWP administrators and their interlocuters.

State directors reassigned writers from other projects to the SLHP, and life histories flowed into the state offices. While there was great excitement over expanding the life histories project, the larger FWP was under attack by Congress members, especially the Dies committee, with charges from frivolous spending, ineptitude to even the promotion of communistic ideals. These growing charges combined with the imminent threat of war led to the reorganization of the FWP and the end of the SLHP with Couch’s resignation in November 1939. The end of the SLHP highlights both the promise and the problems with the life history documentary form.

Couch mounted a significant campaign before the official release of *These Are Our Lives* to gather reviews for the book by sending preview copies to countless scholars, news outlets, politicians, and other notable community figures. In these letters, he largely began with an explanation of the unique method of life histories, its relevance for understanding the South, and the request for feedback. For example, he wrote the following to Dr. Douglas Freeman of the *Richmond News-Inquirer*:

This book is of an unusual nature. In fact, it is so unusual I am much worried about the kind of reception and attention it may get from reviewers. Most books about the South have been written from other books, from census reports, from conferences with influential people. Whenever tenant farmers and day laborers have been consulted, they have been consulted with questionnaires in hand and with reference to particular problems of one kind or another. No one has ever thought that the great body of the people might have their own ideas about their lives and that their own stories might be worth telling from their own point of view.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Couch’s letter shows the ways in which the method and content were entangled. Spurred by bureaucrats, academics, documentarians, and politicians, the drive to better represent, and therefore understand, the region spurred debates over not only *what* but *how* to document. Couch, like many of his colleagues, cared deeply for the South – as an identity, culture, and society - and its success, while keenly aware of the region’s challenges. Dissatisfied with the current options, Couch argued that understanding the South necessitated a different method and mode of representation.

The SLHP was not only publishing books about a region, but also offering a new way to authentically and accurately document a person’s history that would make space for the person interviewed “to speak, in their essential character,” Couch argued.[[3]](#footnote-3) Life histories were designed to offer a lens into the challenges from the people whose everyday lives shaped, and were shaped by, social forces. The method, they also hoped, solved problems with other forms of social documentary. They did not generalize people into nameless statistics or focus on deviance and maladjustment through case histories like sociologists and social workers. Rather, they wanted to create “human documents” from “a human point of view”. They did not want numerical and theoretical abstractions that categorized people into types and groups but instead “accurate portrayals of individual lives.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Spoken words, not numbers, offered a better way to understand people’s lives. By positioning life histories as offering a new method of documentation distinct from sociology, the SLHP carved at a unique space for itself to exist within the complicated ecosystem of documentary projects in the FWP, most notably distinguishing its mission from Folklore and Social-ethnic Studies.

The SLHP distanced itself from the Folklore project by focusing on the present condition of “typical” Southern workers rather than folklore’s attention to the customs and traditions handed down generation to generation and in danger of loss because of the rapidly growing forces of modernization. Mapping the occupations associated with the life histories reveals a core set of professions that captured by the SLHP. Together there are over 200 farmers, over 80 mill and textile worker and nearly 60 housewives. Along with these most common trades, there are dozens of interviews with cooks, fishermen, and preachers. It is clear from the map that there was an intentional decision to find interviewees that showed the depth and range of occupations across the entire region in order to give insight into the economic conditions of the interviewees rather than evidence of folklore.

The SLHP also saw itself as distinct from Social-ethnic Studies, which focused on the acculturation process of immigrant communities in the U.S. Instead, the SLHP captured life histories of “common types of American life,” which came to mean those who could be identified as following within a Black/White binary as seen through the map of interviewees.[[5]](#footnote-5) In total, 891 of the interviews were conducted with White interviewees and 271 with Black interviewees, while there were only a small number of other groups represented, including 9 Cuban interviewees, 50 Greek interviewees, 1 Spaniard, and 1 Chinese interviewee.[[6]](#footnote-6) The emphasis on “common types of American life” signaled and reaffirmed the equation of South with whiteness in which Blackness was visible, but often used as *other* by which to measure whiteness while additional ethnic and indigenous communities were ignored. This racialized understanding of the South also coincided with the expectations of what the SLHP saw as its intended audience – White, middle class newspaper readership.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The response to how people understood the lives represented in *These Are Our Lives* sheds further insight into the intended audience of the life histories. Robert Register of the *Greensboro Daily News* wrote, “In ‘These Are Our Lives’, they speak. Simply, unaffectedly, in their own language, our neighbors, and our neighbors' neighbors, and the folk who crowd the Saturday streets, tell their life histories. Some we recognize as old acquaintances, and some we see for the first time. Having heard their stories, we keep with us an intense awareness of their poignant existence.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Register discusses “our neighbors” as a way to highlight that the people represented in the book are fellow Southerners, but at the same time they are not like him. They are instead neighbors who he would not have otherwise seen, let alone noticed their “poignant existence.” While those from the North did not necessarily position those represented in the *These Are Our Lives* as neighbors there was a similar distancing from their own positionality as *Times* magazine explained, the book “gives the South its most pungent picture of common life.”[[9]](#footnote-9) In both cases, the lives represented in the *These Are Our Lives* were different from the intended readership. Readers and reviewers occupied the White middle class while the majority of the life histories in the book were from “the humbler folk in the South.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

The SLHP also was reconfiguring *who* was a social documentarian. They sought writers who could produce clear and easy-to-read prose. This resulted in expanding who could be a social documentarian, which came to include creative writers, reporters, and secretaries. They did not want people who had been disciplined into the dense and often convoluted prose of academia. The move was often an unwelcomed challenge to notions of expertise, particularly from those with advanced degrees and residing in institutions of higher education. The expansion was also built on another critical assumption about distance and interpersonal connection. As the map in Layer 3 shows, it was the writer’s very proximity to the people they were interviewing rather than distance that facilitated a more human document. Often, the writers were members of the communities they interviewed, not outsiders who were new to the intricacies of southern society. Their intimacy was an asset for they were understood as having unique access to people and attuned to nuances that might be missed by an outsider. In this way, the life histories challenged a core precept of sociological methods. This was not an objective, distanced encounter, but an encounter and document made possible because of their intimacy.

However, it was not just proximity to one’s community that positioned writers as qualified to write life histories, but also their race and gender. The map of writers shows that a small group of White women were responsible for shaping much of the collection, while Black writers, both men and women, were systematically excluded. Though most of the 159 writers involved in the SLHP wrote only one to two life histories, there were 30 writers who wrote 10 or more life histories. Together, those 30 writers wrote 677 life histories, slightly over half of the entire collection. Within this group of the most prolific writers, 11 were men, among which only one was Black, and 19 were White women. These 19 White women wrote nearly 40 percent of those life histories.

This imbalance was due to gendered and raced assumptions that informed SLHP administrators’ ideas of who constituted the most qualified writer. Gendered notions that associated women with the domestic sphere were believed to make them better able to gain access to interviewees within their homes and to make them at ease sharing their stories. Additionally, women were seen as good recorders of information due to their interest in communication and were increasingly favored for stenographer and secretary positions, making them well positioned to record the stories of interviewees.

These gendered assumptions did not extend to Black women, who race was seen as largely disqualifying them as good writers. SLHP administrators, who were exclusively White, systematically excluded Black writers by relying on segregationist logic that stipulated that White and Black writers could not work in the same office space. Because of a lack of funding to create two separate office spaces, SLHP administrators argued that they could not afford to hire Black writers.[[11]](#footnote-11) Additionally, the SLHP also contended that the FWP required that 90 percent of the staff be hired from relief rolls, but there were not enough skilled Black writers who qualified for relief. Those who were skilled writers did not qualify for relief, and the respective state offices were not willing to expend limited resources on hiring non-relief Black writers. The result of this racialized logic positioned White writers as more qualified to document and write life histories, while disqualifying Black writers from working on the project.

The group of writers chosen to work on the SLHP, together with editors and administrators, greatly informed the writing conventions used in producing the life histories. Because the goal was not publications and reports for scholars and government officials, but a more general reading public, the SLHP composed the life histories attuned to writing styles and strategies that captured their desired audience. They needed enough literary flair to be interesting to read and set the scene, while not so overwhelming as to obscure the authorial voice of the interviewee. In order to gain and keep the attention of readers, these “word pictures”, as they were often described, had to entice but not be so complex and dense as to overwhelm and isolate their intended audience.

Reviewers were largely impressed by the methods used to create these “word pictures” noting that the language and form of the life history demonstrated its authenticity. The *Arkansas Democrat* wrote, “‘These Are Our Lives’ is a new adventure in literature...Here are true stories of whites and negroes of sharecroppers, farm laborers, landowners, mill and factory workers, persons engaged in service occupations, persons on relief. These are their own stories because they are related in their own language, a language so faithfully transcribed that as you read you feel you are listening as the subjects narrate their experiences, their successes and failures, their hopes and ambitions, their fears and sorrows.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Writers, editors and SLHP administrators were pleased with such reviews as there was great debate among them about exactly how to create such a sense of authenticity given the fact the life histories were not direct transcriptions of interviews. Instead, writers and editors employed a number of rhetorical strategies to create this sense that the reader is listening to a real narration. Such strategies are revealed through text analysis methods used in Layer 4.

The first strategy involved setting the scene of interview by beginning the life history with a description of the home space noting the presence of the writer as they entered the interviewee’s home, while also describing the conditions of the home quickly situating the class positionality of the interviewee for the reader. After the scene was set the writer moved to the background allowing the interviewee’s life to take center stage through the use of a continuation of long, block quotes written in the first person from the perspective of the interviewee.

While these block quotes seemingly indicate the precise and accurate words of the interviewee, they were in fact much more mediated. Writers did not have recording equipment and instead relied on shorthand notes they took during the interview, though they were encouraged to limit such notes in order to put the interviewee at ease. As a result, the writer would often run home and write down everything to capture the essence of the interview.[[13]](#footnote-13) Such a practice often allowed writers to express judgment concerning the conditions and behavior of the interviewee, but by positioning such ideas as coming from the interviewee themselves. The use of long block quotes then obscured the sometimes heavy hand of the writer in shaping the life history.

Additionally, writers often implemented written dialect to demonstrate that the words in the life history were the *actual voice* of the interviewee. However, this rhetorical device was used unevenly. It dominated the life histories of Black interviewees, but was implemented much more selectively for White interviewees as seen in the document clustering models 25-32. Such uneven use of written dialect demonstrates the way in which it was used to signal the otherness and inferiority of Black interviewees, thereby conforming to the racist ideologies of segregation and white supremacy.

The issues of representation and authenticity at the heart of decisions that led to the form of life histories are ones that did not come easy. Debates over these issues were never higher than when the SLHP staff had to decide whether to allow photographs of interviewees to accompany excerpts of the life histories in a special article *Life* magazine proposed to publish in the run up to the release of *These Are Our Lives*. *Life* magazine editors agreed to publish a sizable story on the life histories, but only if they could photograph interviewees from the project. A number of SLHP administrators felt that photographs posed a danger to the project.

First, photographs undermined the very premise of life histories. As SLHP editor Walter Cutter wrote, the purpose was “that the stories have desirable qualities of universality. But the minute pictures appear and concrete particularization is given, this quality of universality to some extent disappears. Whereas with the written account alone people are impelled to think of the larger group represented by the subject, with pictures they may think simply of individuals who are interesting, but numerically unimportant.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Therefore, the “word pictures” produced by the life histories only worked because readers could imagine so many different faces to represent the life in the story. However, an actual photograph would nullify that possibility and thereby the emotional force of the life history.

Additionally, others worried that the anonymity of the interviews would be undone. Editors had decided to change the real names of the interviewees in the book to protect their identity, and “some stories [were] obtained without the subjects knowing the stories would be printed and as others were assured that they would receive no publicity.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Therefore, taking photographs of these interviewees might cause them to protest the use of their stories or prevent others from giving their life histories as they knew they might be published with their portrait. Such outcomes would endanger the possibility of acquiring accurate life histories in the future as interviewees might change their stories knowing they would be read by a national readership. These points of concern among SLHP staff bring up questions about how to collect accurate and impactful stories. Should subjects be told that their story will be published or promised anonymity? Would subjects change their accounts if they knew their identity and story would be published? Does identifying a single ‘real’ person change a reader’s understanding of the applicability of their story to a larger public? Such questions resonate with documentary and scholarly efforts today.

Ultimately, Couch and Alsberg decided that the possibility of getting so much publicity outweighed any negative outcomes. However, in many ways the debate became moot as a few months after the *Life* story was published the FWP began to unravel. Cries of communism and government overspending became too loud. Alsberg was dismissed from his post in August of 1939, which meant the end of support for the SLHP. Under new leadership, the FWP reorganized. The project was no longer led by the federal government, but state driven. Each state needed to decide if they wanted a Writers’ Project and procure state-level sponsors for the office such as the governor of the state or president of a state university. The office was also responsible for procuring at least 25% of their budget from local contributions. The role of positions such as Regional Director of the FWP was in flux as power and authority was redistributed to the state-level.

With increased state-level control, regional and national initiatives were increasingly difficult to coordinate. State offices turned their attention to procuring support or disbanded. The change also came as the federal government retooled for world war. The fight against fascism meant millions of new jobs, and post war capitalism meant the economy roared, at least for a burgeoning and quickly growing White middle class.[[16]](#footnote-16) Couch remained for a few more months but was increasingly mired in administrative obstacles as the FWP reorganized making it impossible for him to get any substantive work done, ultimately leading to his resignation. The SLHP came to a halt by the end of 1939. The documentary decade was ending.

While the project as an institutionalized effort would shutter, the aspirations continued. Efforts to capture a person’s life in their own words would lead to the development of the oral history method in which the SLHP can be seen as an antecedent. At the heart of the debate over how to let people speak for themselves is a debate over how best to document, analyze, and communicate the complexities of social life. The debates outlined also concern the struggle over what counts as data, evidence, and ways of knowing. As we look to our current moment, where debates ensure about the opportunities and limits of quantification and the nature of data, the questions and answers posed by social documentarians in the 1930s have a renewed prescience. The history of the Southern Life History Project can shed light on the debates over the documentary modes of today. The SLHP promised a new method of documentation that centered the voice of the people, but did so without fully interrogating how it produced problematic issues of representation that revealed how racialized, gendered and classed lens filter whose story was worthy of collection and who was most qualified to capture it. The problems and promises that shaped the SLHP still shape how we capture and share stories today.

1. Transcript of radio show on UNC Press part of Extension Division of UNC, no date. Folder 1166 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Digital version will include documents: 3709, 1166, IMG\_5390. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Letter to Dr. Douglass Freeman from W.T. Couch, March 25, 1939. Folder 1128 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Digital version will include documents: 3709, 1098, IMG\_3625. For other letters see Folders 1128-1136 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. William Terry Couch, ed., *These Are Our Lives* (University of North Carolina Press, 1939). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. William Terry Couch, ed., *These Are Our Lives* (University of North Carolina Press, 1939). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “Memorandum on Project Work,” from Edwin Bjorkman, November 15, 1938. Folder 1101 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Digital version will include documents: 3709, 1101, IMG\_1284. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. These numbers are based on the SLHP’s recorded metadata. As described in the Methods section, we also include an additional ethnic category that identifies slightly more interviewees of Cuban and Greek descent. The extra counts are small compared to the official counts; there are 10 Cuban interviewees and 56 Greek interviews using this ethnic category. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Letter to Henry Alsberg from W.T. Couch, May 3, 1939, Folder 1135 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Digital version will include documents: 3709, 1135, IMG\_3862. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. “Comment of Reviewers of ‘These Are Our Lives,’” May 21, 1939, Folder 1140 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Digital version will include documents: 3709, 1140, IMG\_4076. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Copy of review, “Voice of the People,” May 1, 1939, Folder 1135 in in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Digital version will include documents: 3709, 1135, IMG\_3854. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Letter to W.T. Couch from T.J. Woofter, Jr., no date, Folder 1135 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Digital version will include documents: 3709, 1135, IMG\_3861. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. “Report on the Status of the Negro in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, and Tennessee,” October 19, 1938, Folder 1096 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Digital version will include documents: 3709, 1096, IMG\_1135. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Copy of “Run of the News” in the Arkansas Democrat, May 23, 1939, Folder 1141 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Digital version will include documents: 3709, 1141, IMG\_4125. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Letter to Mary S. Venable from Eudora Richardson, November 2, 1938, Folder 1098 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Digital version will include documents: 3709, 1098, IMG\_1228. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Letter to W.T. Couch from Walter Cutter, May 11, 1939, Folder 1137 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Digital version will include documents: 3709, 1137, IMG\_3944. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Letter to Walter Cutter from George Andrews, May 11, 1939, Folder 1137 in the Federal Writers' Project papers #3709, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Digital version will include documents: 3709, 1137, IMG\_3941. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic* (Vintage Books, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)